

New World 281

Chapter 281: Wielder of Monsters

-Daniel-

I peered at Torix out of the corner of my eye while keeping my concerns to myself. The lich seemed overeager for this experimentation with the crystals, though that made sense given his chosen profession. He turned himself into a lich after all, so this was just an everyday thing.

Reaching the elevator at the center of Mt. Verner, Torix took us down towards the old tunnel leading to Springfield. Our guild used it a long time ago to escape from Yawm's influence without him knowing where we were. Now it was left abandoned, or so I thought. As we got to the aged, dusty place, I found signs of new construction there.

Glancing at new metal doorways and added lights, I turned to Torix,

"So you built new rooms here, eh?"

Torix smiled, "You're not the only one with access to credits. I simply use mine in other ways aside from dungeon cores."

We paced up through the tunnel before reaching the thick, plated doorways. Torix raised a palm. A blot of his premier, dark mana bobbed over a scanner of sorts. It checked his mana signature, and the door's locks popped open. Stepping through a damp tunnel lit by some strange kind of fungus, I looked around.

Vines grew in this place, a flow of air present here. Aside from that, this place reeked of death and decay. Torix worked on his necromancy here by the looks of it, and he did so in secret. I understood why, but I still spoke out,

"I guess you're still someone who likes keeping a few secrets here or there."

Torix interlocked his hands behind himself, "Not necessarily secrets per se, but yes, I do enjoy a mystery at times. For this, however, I simply am applying a bit of my

knowledge for our gain. I always assumed you'd rather not be bothered by this nastiness."

The thick smell of rot and putrid flesh filled my nose as I frowned,

"Eh, true."

Torix opened one of the doorways here, solid concrete walls keeping this place bunkered down. Within the cell, human skeletons hung from walls, each splayed out by chains. Oddly enough, it actually smelled better here than the other rooms, this place having dried out. They were still human skeletons, so I eyed the lich with suspicion. He raised a hand,

"I assure you, this was done post mortem. I'm not torturing humans here. I'm merely reviving corpses to use them after death, and with their permission when they were once living. In this situation, they've prevented us from risking ourselves, and so they've done a great service here."

I raised my eyebrows but said no more. Torix stepped up to one of the skeletons while hovering the magenta-colored crystals towards the structure. As the gemstone made contact with the bone, its formation shifted instantly like the jaws of a shark. The crystals sunk into the bones using needles. Spreading like wildfire, the jewel thinned into a near translucent coating over the arm of its host.

It left a magenta hue, turning into sharpened apparatuses at the end of the skeleton's hand. We stared for a moment, but the crystal did no more than that. I put my hands on my hips,

"This stuff is definitely alive."

Torix leaned forward, "In all honesty, I doubt it."

I raised an eyebrow, and the lich answered my unspoken question,

"It's strange, but this seems more like a crystallized contagion of sorts designed to react to organic matter. Now how this came about, I've no idea. Given the rapid metabolization of its body, it would appear eldritch in nature."

Torix shook his head, “But that simply doesn’t explain why it hasn’t eaten the skeleton left here. If it were eldritch, it would’ve devoured it to strengthen itself...Hmm, where did you discover this?”

“Along the outskirts of Saphigia. It rested at the bottom of the trenches surrounding the city.”

“Well then, I’m honestly at a loss here.”

I raised a hand, “Wait a minute, that’s not all I found there. I discovered the largest rift I’d ever seen, and it leaked in water from a dead world in a dying universe. I think that these crystals might’ve come from somewhere on that world. The creatures were strange, after all. There’s no telling what they would’ve evolved into just to survive.”

I gestured at the viral formations, “This might be something adapted to a world with no food.”

Torix tilted his head, “Ah, that’s interesting. Very interesting. Were eldritch located there?”

“Not directly eldritch creatures, no, but they might as well have been. I wouldn’t want them touching anyone here, that’s for sure.”

“Ah, they operated like Endless Fleshes then?”

“Yeah. They just spread like a...well, virus...Huh.”

Torix shrugged, “That could be what this is – a virus. Viral creatures can be crystalline such as this, and they require a host. They lie between life and death as well, making them difficult to discern. At least from a cursory glance.”

I put my hands on my hips, “Well, this could be a kind of symbiotic, uhm, thing? I mean, that world was starving for millions of years. This crystal or virus might have evolved to combine with nearby creatures and give them an edge. By the time I found

them though, these crystals might be all that was left from, I don't know, an evolutionary war?"

Torix leaned back, "Huh, interesting hypothesis. I do suppose that symbiotic relations do occur."

Torix paused, and we both dove into deep thought. This thing reminded me of the eldritch that Obolis controlled when we first met. Checking my status, I analyzed that eldritch virus and brought back up its status screen. Plaga Ustus showed up, and it could strengthen its users before causing them to combust. This might do something similar. I pointed at it, making my status visible to Torix,

"This sounds familiar?"

After reading the documentation, Torix nodded, "Indeed, it does. Unlike the Empire's scientists, we lack the same equipment to study this disease. At least on hand. I'll get a team of biologists here and see if I can't uncover this thing's secrets. For now--"

Torix raised a hand, and his eyes flared while he granted life to the skeleton,

"Let us see if the crystal reacts to a living mind."

The skeleton animated itself, peering up at us. Turning to the crystal, the body looked back at its shackles. The magenta gem expanded towards the handcuffs before touching the metal. As it did, it infected the metal, racing up the iron chains. Having expanded, the crystal regrouped with its central mass, covering more of the skeleton.

After finishing the next shackle, the skeleton fell from its restraints. Two sharpened, magenta spines covered its arms, making the otherwise frail and useless minion appear quite dangerous. I whistled at it before grinning,

"Now that...that's pretty nifty. It looks like it eats metal."

Torix's eyes flared red, "Indeed."

The skeleton ran towards me before reaching a hand backward. Using the sharpened, glass-like spines at the ends of its arms, it smashed its arm against my chest. As it made contact, it snapped into several pieces. The broken shards hissed and shook on the ground before the bright, violet hue left their crystalline forms. The leftovers looked like long shards of broken glass now.

I lifted a broken piece with gravity, the skeleton drove back by the rebounding force of its blow. Using the now clear shards, I flicked a finger at the minion, using a gravitational well to lob the crystal at the thing. It blocked the sharpened piece with skill, and the broken piece snapped against the still charged crystal on its arm. I turned to Torix,

“So this stuff is harder and stronger when it’s still...alive, I guess.”

“I would suppose so. It also seems that once shattered off the main body, it dies. Of course, we’ll verify, but if that is so, this is quite a useful property to have. We could convert Hybrids into glass using this.”

I crossed my arms, my mind racing with possibilities, “Some parts of them, that’s for sure. I think it would be useful against the silver’s territories.”

Torix nodded, “Good point. Good point.”

The skeleton charged forward once more, undeterred by its ineffectual attack. It swung its crystal-coated arm once more, but I grabbed the limb and redirecting the force of its swing. Using that force, I palmed its ribs. The living bones evaporated into a fine powder at my touch. The bit of skeleton left was held in my hand.

Holding the crystal, it attempted to eat my skin. That didn’t pan out, so it retreated. Regrouping into a glowing gemstone, it shifted into a central mass indistinguishable from the other crystals. Once collected together, it smacked onto the concrete ground, leaving a bit of crushed dust under its impact.

I leaned back, “Alright, I think I have a few ideas with this.”

Torix rubbed his hands together, “As do I.”

I picked up the gemstone, and it shivered on contact with me. I pointed at Torix, “I need to know if this stuff reacts to my disconnected fabric the same way as it does me. Do you mind touching it?”

Torix nodded, “I, in fact, do. This would be a rather anticlimactic end for this body you crafted.”

“Eh, alright.” I opened my dimensional storage and pulled out a bit of my dimensional fabric. After condensing it, I generated a different block of iron in front of me. Testing if it ate all metal on contact, I tossed the gemstone onto the metal. In an anticlimax, the magenta mass clanked off the iron without any reaction. I raised my eyebrows before using the skeleton arm in my hand to prod the gemstone.

It jolted back onto the organic matter, crystalline needles centering themselves in the bone. By now, the aged arm was cracked beyond all reasoning, but the living gem held it together. After reacclimatizing to the limb, I dropped it back into the metal. This time it engulfed the steel in seconds, eating the metal with hunger. The same hunger that the old creatures of that dying world had.

The crystal used the extra mass it gained to its advantage. It molded into a walking platform for the hand. Lifeless and cold, it protected the limb as I flicked stones at its host. Walking back up, I took the hardened piece of my dimensional fabric and tossed it at the gemstone. On contact, the jewel shivered in fear. It abandoned the arm, reverting back into its previous, gemstone form.

To be fair, it was bigger than last time. I turned to Torix, “Mind touching it now?”

Torix tilted his head, “It does seem rather safer now, doesn’t it? Even just a piece of your skin sent it reeling. I suppose I will. Do save me if it decides I’m not quite as intimidating as the real thing.”

I smirked, “Of course, of course.”

Torix deadpanned, “Very funny.”

The lich paced over before picking up the gemstone. It shivered at his touch as it had mine, and it showed no signs of trying to eat him. Torix sighed before bringing the crystal close to his eyes and inspecting it closely,

“It carries a few unique characteristics. Let’s see what it does with something actually alive.”

I followed Torix as we walked out of this chamber. Passing into the glowing fungus hallway once more, Torix showed me the way to the next room. As he opened the doorway, a birdcage of sorts showed itself. The opening proved more than large enough for many of our native avian species. The lights in the concrete room offered plenty of luminescence to inspect each animal, even midflight. The variety of hanging branches built for the birds kept them comfortable and let them live like normal.

Torix admired the creatures, his hands behind himself,

“Aren’t they simply stunning?”

I raised an eyebrow, “I wonder if old people always watch birds? Maybe I’ll end up watching them too one day.”

Torix’s fire eyes narrowed at me, “Old, am I? Perhaps I’ve merely a more refined appreciation for nature.”

I nudged him with an elbow, “Have you gotten the urge to sit on rocking chairs lately? Maybe put plastic over your furniture.”

Torix scoffed, “Plastic would prevent dust from getting on the furniture, and that would save me time cleaning...If I presumed it was worth doing so.”

I laughed when I picked his line of logic apart. The whole point of furniture was to look good and be comfortable. Covering it with a thin film of plastic ruined both its aesthetics and any warmth they offered. It made houses feel more like hospitals, and that kind of defeated the purpose, in my opinion.

Torix eyed me closely before waving off my laugh, “Regardless, one of these creatures should prove an exemplary specimen.” Torix lifted a hand and a finger, a red robin perching itself on his outstretched limb. Torix eyed the beauty, giving it a pet along the top of its feathered head. Torix sighed,

“Ah, I hope you’re ready for a bit of pain, little one. I’m sorry.”

Torix pulled out his other hand, and I placed the crystal on it. I winced as Torix put the bird in contact with the gemstone. It flooded around the bird, forming a cocoon of sorts. Instead of piercing every bone, the gem inspected the creature with tiny needle prods. As it found the spine, it impaled the beast.

This magenta mass reconfigured itself into three rib-like semicircles around the creature. The poor thing squawked the entire time, but it didn’t resist. Torix suppressed the panicking bird while it served as our guinea pig. Within a few seconds, the bird returned to normal, not hampered by the crystal whatsoever. It was a definite, positive outcome so far since I was sure it would get eaten by now.

Torix let the bird fly off, and it soared through the containment unit. The crystal on its back formed magenta-colored wings, and they aided its ascent. Once over towards a makeshift branch, the gemstone wrapped itself around the wood, stopping the bird from falling. The bird looked around unperturbed, and the crystal remained behind it. I lifted my brow,

“Well, I’ll be damned...that’s...smoother than I expected.”

Torix scoffed, “I anticipated more blood and screaming as well. Interestingly enough, the crystal hasn’t affected the mind of the bird whatsoever. How that is...I’ve no idea. It’s merely augmented its nervous system to include proprioception of the newly added, crystalline limbs. That and a moderate hunger for metal.”

Torix shook his head, “Marvelous, I must say. I’ve never seen anything quite like this. It’s as if this crystal is a symbiotic lifeform designed to enhance creatures it attaches to.”

I crossed my arms, “Let’s see what it can do.”

I lifted a hand, generating an iron spike from below the bird. On route to pierce it, the spine reached within a foot of the bird before the crystal lurched in place. Four prongs stopped the metal in its tracks before assimilating the metal. Once it finished eating, the gemstone condensed into its previous form, no larger but denser than before.

I crossed my arms, “So there’s a limit to the size of the crystal bearer. Maybe it has to do with brain size or something?”

Torix pointed at the bird, “Would you mind feeding it more iron? I’m left wondering how much it can eat.”

A few more spikes later, and we learned that the crystal definitely hit a saturation point. It could only absorb about ten times its host’s mass in metal based on the birds. After that, the sheen of the gemstone maximized, and it could no longer feed. I took out a bit of my dimensional fabric and tossed it at the bird. The crystal shifted to the bird’s defense, but after making contact with my dimensional material, it retreated back into crystal form after making contact with my armor.

I grinned at Torix, “This is going to help against the Hybrids, eh?”

The lich cackled before steepling his fingers, “Oh, I’m brimming with ideas, all of them unpleasant.”

We brainstormed for a few hours, trying out a variety of gemstones I had on hand. Each one absorbed different amounts of metal and took on different shapes when put on various birds. These shifting forms resulted in many different incarnations of the crystals. Some operated like ribs surrounding the birds, each one acting as an extra limb. Other birds gained a flowing tendril of crystal, giving it extraordinary single target abilities.

One of the crystals created an armor protected and molded around the bird as I attempted hitting it. That was the strongest incarnation of the crystals so far, acting as an extension of the bird’s body. It also became evident that each crystal varied in its impact on a bird’s mind. The stronger the crystal’s effect, the stronger it affected a bird’s mind. No matter what kind of addition it had, it beefed up the birds quite a bit.

I couldn’t help but think of the eldritch while seeing these things in action. We didn’t know the long term effects of the crystal on animals yet either, but they seemed beneficial so far. That might not be the case long term, but I left that studying to Torix. He engaged with this kind of research far better than I did, after all. I looked away when he put crystals on birds. The old necromancer didn’t so much as flinch while a bird screamed.

Either way, I left Torix's hidden research labs with a feeling of resounding success. The crystals rested at the bottom of the trenches in Blegara, and I didn't think Obolis knew about them. For the first time, I might be able to understand more about something than he does. Thinking of that and the struggling forces in Saphigia, I sent the Emperor a message to see if he could meet with me soon. I wanted to renegotiate our deal, and I made that clear.

Well, it turns out he could meet, and a bit too soon, actually.

Obolis Novas(Iv ??,??? | Finder of Secrets, The Carnage of Olstatia, The Emperor... | Guildleader: The Empire |...) – As I understand it, there's been much discourse and results from your battles on Blegara. The position since our initial charge has changed most certainly, and I agree, we should discuss further details regarding the planet's future.

If you are able, I'd enjoy a meeting immediately. I've found an inkling of downtime, and making it purposeful would please me greatly.

I look forward to your reply.

I put my hands on my hips, thinking for a moment. Yeah, I could meet up right now. We sent a few messages back and forth before Obolis gave me the coordinates for one of his private chambers in Olstatia. With that in tow, I let Ophelia and Chrona know I'd be late. Finishing the planning required, I walked towards the warp outside of Mt.Verner.

Stepping out of the white mist leftover from warping, I turned to look at my surroundings. I was already here, Obolis approving my travel to this place. I found myself surrounded by torches and stylish stone from all sides. It was a kind of red marble littered with gold streaks, the strands showcasing the same color pallet I expected from Olstatia by now. If anything, this marble probably inspired the look Olstatia went for.

Above me, a pillar extended upwards via an ancient, well-worn spiral staircase. This spiral staircase carried many walkways leading to other tunnels in this underground labyrinth. The number of resources required for this place dwarfed even a planetary scale, several colonies worth of marble, gold, and gemstones needed in a hideaway of this size. The many walkways here, no doubt, hid away an innumerable number of treasures, maps, and personal chambers for Obolis.

Speaking of which, I followed the directions he sent. I paced up the spiral staircase several flights worth before walking down the twenty-seventh walkway. After recounting several times to make sure I wasn't going down the wrong walkway, I explored a hallway littered with low-lit torches. The orange lighting cast the displayed treasures here in dramatic luminescence.

A flask of Plaga Ustus was here, the glowing and white virus swirling in its containment. Several other vials showed themselves as I walked past, each brilliant different colors. Peeking at a few of the descriptions, they showcased other unique varieties of eldritch. A few weren't even monstrous in nature, holding mostly positive effects on those infected. The Empire might be using them on their forces already.

On the other side of this viral showcase, a few captured Hybrids stayed suspended in stasis. There was an enormous exhibit of a blighted one, the gialgathen's body distorted into its new, abominable form. Cords reached out from its throat mid-bite, and orange pustules glowed over its frame.

The nanomachines fluid gave the monsters their tenacious recovery, and suppressing one of these creatures was no easy feat. The standard Hybrids also exposed themselves here, having been captured at some point by the Empire's forces. Past that, rare varieties of eldritch existed within preserved tubes. All of these monsters were volatile, dangerous, and majestic, their ferocity both horrifying and praiseworthy.

Hiveminds, endless walls of flesh, glistening miasmas, living suits of armor, even converted albony exposed their forms for curious eyes here. Armors, knives, swords, guns, shields, ores, gemstones, jewels, stones, teeth, horns, skulls, plants, and elemental furnaces lined up in perfect, preserved spaces. The sheer variety overwhelmed the senses, each piece valuable and rare in their own right. In this kind of lineup, they all looked familiar, however.

The sheer wealth and prominence on display here boggled the mind. It left me floored as usual, but I collected myself before meeting the Emperor. He had used this tactic several times, showing off before we talked to put me off my game. It was an attempt to leave me startled before we spoke, so he was at an advantage. In this case, awareness alone canceled out this tactic.

Using that knowledge, I silenced my awe and surprise. This was an inevitable amount of wealth he accumulated over centuries. By comparison, my guild hadn't existed for even a decade, and when we hit our hundredth year, we'd dwarf this fortune a hundred times over.

I mean, probably...

Finding a bit of solace in those thoughts, I paced into Obolis's chambers. I cursed under my breath as I walked in. He did it again, and the displays took my breath away. The ceiling rose over a hundred feet above the generously spaced hallway behind me. Obolis's greatest treasures showed themselves here, only the rarest of his collection on display now.

On the left, a horde of insects swarmed with a lesser Ruhl at its center. It reminded me of Baldag-Ruhl, but nowhere near as ancient and worn down. This was a younger Ruhl, one fresh out of being formed. Panels beside the Ruhl showcased a variety of rare gemstones that glowed different colors.

On Obolis's right, many vials of blood were lined up, each with a remnant family inscribed beneath them. He harvested remnant DNA to reverse engineer their secrets. Considering how powerful individual remnant families were, the idea was sound, albeit illegal. At its top piece, he lacked a few families of remnants. The rarest of which was the Adairs, of course.

Behind Obolis stood a tan tree by spotlights. It had a white trunk with black stripes, like a birch with orange fronds acting as branches. These fronds ranged in color from yellow to red to orange. Its fallen leaves created an elegant walking space right behind Obolis, who stared at the plant with adoration.

I pointed at it as I walked in,

"Is that the tree you guys use for masks?"

Obolis turned in his chair, the cushion space supported by some gravitational instruments,

"Indeed. When cut and preserved, the wood turns different shades depending on the age of the tree. The older the tree, the darker its coloration. As you may have imagined, orange masks are the younger ones, red some of the oldest. Only the most ancient trees gain the charcoal coloration you'll see worn by the elite albony."

Obolis gestured at his prime specimen, “This tree is one of the most ancient of its kind found in a dark forest. I brought it here after exploring one of the oldest and most worshipped woods on my home planet of Olstatia. It creates a natural ambiance I find...calming.”

Obolis turned to me, “It also reminds me of the ways of my ancestors. They forged the path I now walk, leading the albony into the future. Unfortunately, a grim one at that.”

Obolis stood up, his form imposing as always. He walked from behind a desk of black wood, dozens of hidden electronics lying beneath its surface. It was no doubt the same charcoal wood he used for the elite masks. Walking along his marble floor towards me, Obolis spread his arms wide,

“And now our future is in a darker place than I imagined. You’ve no doubt noticed that our support on Blegara, it’s been ineffectual. It is the planet I value the least, yet it is the most contested of all my planets. I believe that Elysium wishes for that planet since its easily obtained territory relative to the other places under my rule.”

Obolis gripped his hands into fists, “Yet, I find myself in a precarious position. On the one hand, I don’t wish to lose the territory I’ve invested in. There are resources on Blegara I wish to retain, and my Empire’s reputation is on the line here. On the other hand, Blegara is still a relatively underdeveloped territory.”

Obolis stared at the swarming hivemind trapped in a stasis pod of sorts,

“That planet was considered a worthwhile risk due to the rarity of aquatic resources. Its water is shallow across most of the world, meaning it carries much more usable, aquatic territory than is normally possible. The organic resources there are tremendous because of that. It carries enough water to terraform a few planets as well.”

I frowned, “But now you’re wondering if it’s worth holding onto?”

Obolis winced, “That is precisely correct. You’ve been fighting there for several days now, on the ground. You understand as well as I – the planet is doomed to be taken. Whatever we conquer, it is retaken during the night. I do not wish to be trapped in a perpetual war with the Hybrids where I alone carry the tools to destroy them.”

I raised a hand, “That’s what I was going to talk to you about. We won’t be able to hold the capital for long. Even if I reconquered the entirety of Saphigia in a day, the Hybrids would retake it overnight. I won’t be able to hold it down unless I stay there permanently, and I’m not willing to do that.”

“Neither am I.”

“That’s my point. We won’t be able to retake Blegara at this rate without a hard push from your end. From what you just said, you’re not willing to do that.”

Obolis raised his eyebrows, “I find the matter settled by basic economic theory. Blegara is simply too little gain for too much loss. From an opportunity cost perspective, it’s by far the worst investment left at my disposal, and I’m tempted to rally my resources for preservation elsewhere. That is the position I find myself in.”

Obolis glared at the Adair’s missing vial of blood, “I...I put my bets on Schema and lost. Now I must suffer the consequences for my failure, and I believe that by trying to keep all of my territories, in the end, I will keep none. At this rate, I’ll be losing several planets because of this rebellion, and that is a loss of several centuries of work, time, and diligence.”

Obolis’s face grew grim, “Yet more may be taken if I cannot cut my losses here. Elysium may not be as large as Schema, but militarily speaking, they are a similar force. As is, my Empire is akin to a solar system in scale. These enemies of mine, they are galactic in nature, and I cannot compare. You’ve noticed that difference in military might. That’s why you called this meeting.”

Obolis closed his eyes, “I understand if you need to call off your involvement on Blegara. I will not pursue your involvement further, either; I know a lost battle when I see one. Shameful as it is, I believe we should move forward with the plan to kill Plazia-Ruhl. While I’m not willing to lose this many troops in this war, the Ahcorous are. Those bloodthirsty creatures should prove perfect for our needs.”

I shook my head, “That isn’t necessary. I think we can still win, and quick too. Hasn’t Florence told you about our plan for subjugating the Vagni?”

Obolis’s eyes darkened, “No. He did not.”

“Oh...Well, we’re going to show the eldritch on Blegara worshipping me. Since the Vagni worship the eldritch, they will hopefully worship me after that. Once we get the Vagni on our side, the Adairs will lose the locals’ support. Holding the planet should be much easier after that.”

Obolis steepled his fingers, “I still believe holding Blegara will prove impossible even with the locals’ support. They aren’t a powerful military force, and they are primitive. That shouldn’t make enough of a difference.”

I raised three fingers, “There are three reasons we’ll be able to hold Blegara. The Vagni and the eldritch will help us more than you’d think since both will be involved in this. The second reason is we can use super golems to hold down certain districts of towns.”

Obolis nodded, “Ah yes, Alpha, was it? That was a powerful soldier, and it was designed with killing Hybrids in mind. They would assist us greatly in controlling the territory. That wouldn’t give us the ability to control more rural areas, however. You simply cannot produce enough of the super golems to do so.”

I pointed at him, remembering the magenta crystals we found, “That may be true, but I think we’ve found something recently that will give us an edge against those monsters.”

Obolis’s eyes lit up as he detected a secret, “Ah, you’ve uncovered something that could be a dagger in the Elysium’s side...interesting.”

Obolis’s eyes dampened, “But that does not change the economics of controlling Blegara. I could buy your super golems, certainly. I could also purchase this new means of defeating Hybrids from you as well. I would never, not even over centuries, be able to earn that money back from Blegara. It offers pearls, corals, and beach resorts. That does not equate to trillions of credits, unfortunately.”

I stood tall, “I think Blegara is worth saving.”

Obolis peered down, “Hm, so you’ve grown attached, have you? Hmm.” Obolis bit his tongue for a moment, appearing peeved, “You know...I expect some conniving plots from my children. To have it occur from Florence, however...that’s unexpected and disappointing. I expected loyalty from him, given the opportunities I’ve allowed him to have.”

I scoffed, “None of you, not a single Novas, understands the guy. Florence is more than just useful. He’s a serious asset worth keeping.”

Obolis raised his eyebrows, “Hm, perhaps that is so. I’ve seen the talent in him, and yet I could not give him what he needed to succeed. On the other hand, you’ve weaned more use out of him than we have in years. If you have done so with Florence, you may be able to wean more use out of other resources as well.”

Obolis turned a hand to me, “I’ve read through reports from Victoria that you’ve enjoyed your stay at Blegara. Is that true?”

I nodded, “Eh, yeah. It’s a cool place.”

Obolis grinned, “How would you like to own the planet?”

My eyes widened,

“Uh...What?”

Chapter 282: Beasts of Burden

-Althea-

Past the guarded doors, we entered a hallway lined with orichalcum on all sides. The smell leaking in from another room was of acid and burning hair, the stench sharp and unpleasant. The wailing, however, made my stomach sink like an anvil in the ocean. The howling sound echoed into this place, resonating from all sides. Dozens of voices joined into a singular, absolute lamentation, one that made me both sad and afraid.

I ignored those parts of me screaming to run away, and I followed the remnant guards. They carried the unconscious individual through the hallway and into a room with a sliding doorway. As the metal shutters opened, the agonizing cries intensified in volume. That’s where it came from.

Before the doorway shut, I skulked my way through even as the room repulsed me. Staring around, my instincts were right all along; this was a hellhole. Elysium

fashioned together a massive pit at the center of this building. Dim lights hid most of the carnage in that abyss, but what I could see wore at my nerves.

Eyes, mouths, horns, bodies, blood, silvers, and nanomachine slop pooled together in a wasteland. I turned around, vomiting out my guts. I opened my dimensional storage, unable to contain myself. As I unloaded my lunch, I stored my puke so it wouldn't be found. It cost blood and bone. Stinging like fire, it added to my discomfort. I wished I had a little dimension of my own like Daniel, but we all had our unique abilities. Mine oriented around killing instead of other stuff, and that kind of sucked.

Either way, I wiped my mouth off and regenerated. As I did, I gazed upon the horror. In the distance, two espens walked out of a shutter leading to the silvers reserve. Using Hybrids to wrangle silvers from the wildlife exhibit, they pulled one in as it writhed in their grip.

It was a merject, and it peered around with its single eye. It gawked at the pool, and the merject howled out in anguish. One espen walked in front of the silver while the other walked behind. The Hybrids held its arms and legs down. The espen in front pulled out a stake of metal. The other had the silver's head, stopping it from moving.

With a steady series of strikes, the front espen hammered a spine just under the silver's eyelid. Once deep in the brain of the silver, the espen twisted the stake a few times. It repeated this process one more time, and the silver grew more docile afterward. Once subdued, they tossed the silver into the muck, the monster's instincts coming to life. It wrangled in the mud, struggling to escape. It was too late. The silver was pulled in.

That slop was alive, and it grasped at the tormented creature like thick, living mud. The ooze drenched into the eyes, ears, and entire body of the silver. It flooded under its skin before pulling the merject under, making the monster swollen and bulbous.

One of the espens murmured, "I hate this place."

The other chimed in right after, "Tell me about it."

Yeah, I agreed with them both. Further in the pit, several mouths of silvers exposed themselves to the surface. In those places, the wailing began, and it didn't stop until the silver's mind was shattered beyond all repair. Their mouths grafted shut after a while, the need to eat taken from them. Further still in the sludge pit, the other signs of Hybridization showed themselves.

Nanomachine slop built up into pustules across their bodies, the orange fluid keeping them alive as they transformed. The silvers' bodies molded with the soup, giving them strength at the cost of their minds. On the other side of this abyss, I followed the two remnant guards as they walked up past a line of newly made Hybrids.

They paced up to a Hybrid matching the picture showcased above the person's chosen vial. One of the remnants reached out a hand, and they channeled mana into the unconscious person and Hybrid. After a while, the Hybrid sprung to life from its stasis, no longer ensnared with mind magic. It soaked in the slop over its skin, absorbing it with ease before the remnants checked the Hybrid's mind.

A quick scan later, and they found no problems. Sending them off, I followed to find a ward full of beds and Hybrids. People awoke every now and again, looking around. Their Hybrid bowed to them as they regained consciousness. A remnant doctor walked around, explaining the situation, calming patients down, and giving them tips for managing their Hybrid.

I left them, going back into the pit room. Once again, the unearthly wailing grated at my nerves, but I got through it. We needed this info, and discomfort wasn't an excuse here. Taking footage and photos as I went, I documented details I noticed with a note-taking app on my status. I left no stone unturned, this being the first time someone saw any massive Hybridization pits.

I learned a few things as I documented more about the Hybrids. The most important part was the vials. They took some type of serum from the silver's heads before throwing them in the pit. I overlooked the needling the first time while watching them. The lobotomy overwhelmed everything else they did.

I also uncovered how they adjusted their Hybrids. Along the back of the room, they took different eldritch and flooded them in the nanomachine fluids. In these tubes, other chemicals soaked in too, and they melted the eldritch. Once again, the nanomachines kept them alive.

These cocktails of eldritch and chemicals were called DNA elixirs. I figured that out by sneaking into a back room where a remnant scientist tinkered with the formula. Once finished, the eldritch mush was drained into the slop, fusing with the enormous super organism. As that scientist toiled about, a different team of espens brought them different kinds of forest roaming eldritch.

These were relatively benign varieties of monsters designed for moving around nearby terrains. Only those kinds of eldritch were brought in here. Now I wasn't a genius by any stretch, but even I could tell they did all this for a reason. My educated guess was that they wanted a certain kind of Hybrid to come out of this process. Given we were in the middle of a forest, they made Hybrids that could run and maneuver around trees.

This kept them useful and not too volatile. Along those same lines, they threw in varieties of silvers able to handle trees and thick underbrush. For the most part, they used merjects like the first. Those things could crawl up trees on all fours and in an eerie, unnatural sort of way at that. Every now and again, they brought different kinds of silvers to mix things up too. I didn't know why, but I noted that all the same.

After getting a fair bit of info, a message popped up in my status. The three dungeoneers got accepted and just reached their first dungeon. I waited a bit before sneaking out of the facility. I got out of that hellhole and took my first breath of fresh air since getting out of there. Since I popped back up, I kept myself in a hidden alleyway. After a few deep gulps of air, I held my breath once more while collecting myself.

That was something beyond my wildest nightmares. I never felt pity for eldritch or silvers, but somehow, somehow, the Adair family brought it out of me. Seeing all that left me sick to my stomach, and I waited a few minutes for the trembling in my hands to stop. As I waited, my mind wandered onto what I'd seen.

It reminded me of what Yawm wanted to do. He always talked about some world where eldritch and sentient were considered one and the same. The idea in isolation sounded like a convenient solution to an inconvenient problem. In practice, it was something more like that pit of slop.

Gruesome.

I let out a shiver as I remembered the labs I was raised in. I grinned to myself as a weird little thought came into my head. Yawm's labs sure beat the one I just saw. In reality, my situation could've been so much worse. And here I thought I had it bad. Compared to those poor silvers and eldritch, I might as well have been raised in one of the royal academies with Caprika.

I laughed a bit at my own joke. After using humor to cope with my nerves, I stood upright and looked at my messages. Once I got a grip on the coordinates, I ran towards their dungeon location. A few minutes later, I found myself staring down at a mossy tunnel. Aesthetic as it was, I didn't have time to inspect the vines overhanging the cave.

I unzipped two pieces of my jumpsuit running along my back. Wings spawned out of those two openings, and I flew down into the dark. This place reminded me of BloodHollow, the site where I overcame my eldritch half. I still heard those voices, and sometimes they scared me. I wasn't about to let a little fear get to me, though, so I pressed on.

I shifted my eyes, making my irises larger. The retinas along the back of my eyes shifted, and more light leaked into them. A dark vision of sorts came over me, and monsters popped up in the distance. I unzipped another part of my jumpsuit and pulled up my sleeve. Putting my arm along my back, I unhinged a partially made harpoon cannon.

Pulling it in front of me, my arm's bone and skin shifted into place. It filled the missing pieces of the cannon before I took aim. Using thin spears of bone, I impaled each creature and killed them as I went along. Isa and Lester passed here already, but I figured eldritch would still be here. They mentioned never killing all the eldritch, and the dungeoneers preferred focusing on the boss.

I could get behind that idea. The boss gave the most experience, a pricey dungeon core, and it was easy to make a plan around. I found it fun using these little tykes as target practice, so I vented some steam by taking out a couple of bats, creatures, and crawly things. A girl had to find her me-time somewhere after all. I happened to get it in by killing bugs and nasty animals.

After destressing some, I reached the others as they fought a boss. Swinging over a bottomless cavern, Lester and Isa used ropes tipped with eldritchian glue to stick to stalactites on the roof of the cave. From their mobile positions, they threw and tossed their acid vial spears and napalm bombs. Alexander watched with Other Hod, both uninvolved in the fight.

They warred against a dexterous and nimble spider that crawled along the cavern's roof. The boss fashioned a fortress of webs to reach the two dungeoneers. It crafted its lair long ago for just such an occasion, but Lester and Isa outmaneuvered it despite the circumstances. The dungeoneers swung from stalactite to stalactite, cutting their ropes if the spider grew too close.

They were...actually brilliant about the whole thing. Isa and Lester used a series of planted torches for light. Isa and Lester kited the creature, never taking it head on the entire time either. They even used the napalm bombs to ignite the monster, giving them a much better view of their surroundings. It's hard to miss a giant fireball like that.

Operating like clockwork, I watched them whittle down the level 2,000 boss monster with ease. They even made it die where they could harvest the body, it's entire frame impaled on a sharp spine jutting from a wall. After swinging back to the edge of the abyss, they gave each other a well deserved high five. Isa smirked,

"Now that's how it's done. You'd be wise to take a few pointers from us, birdman."

Hod walked out of the shadows, a torch along the cavern's edge offering light to them all. Other Hod mocked,

"I would do so, but I need no tricks. I use my talent to kill. You use your desperation." Other Hod coughed into his hand while looking away, "Though I will admit, there were aspects of your acrobatics that were...impressive."

Lester scoffed, "Come on, Hod. There's a good reason we're the leaders of the Dungeon Clearing Corps. We get shit done."

Other Hod deadpanned, "Perhaps you two should join a circus? That would be more fitting."

I popped up behind them, "Hey now, these guys--"

The two dungeoneers both squealed, leaping back and throwing weapons at me. I rolled my eyes while turning on my feet. I caught a spear's handle and kicked a bomb into the pit below. After handling their craziness, I put my hands on my hips, spear in hand,

"Come on guys, I know I'm hard to see, but you don't have to attack me like that."

Other Hod brandished his claws at me, but he waited before attacking – as he should. He lowered his hands, “It’s you. I always understand why you’re such an asset when you reappear. It’s more unnerving than you realize.”

Tossing the spear back to Isa, I frowned, “Maybe I should send a message or something before I arrive? Would that help?”

Isa put her hand over her chest after catching the spear, “Ah, please. I, I can’t handle any more surprises like that. I’m too old. We just fought a giant spider for Christ’s sake.”

Lester wiped the sweat from his brow, “I can’t believe you’re here so fast. What did you do, fly?”

I spread the wings along my back, “Of course. What else would I do?”

Their faces grew long, and they both gawked at me. Embarrassment crept up from my chest before I couldn’t meet their eyes. This might be how Daniel felt all the time, getting looked at like some weirdo. It was terrible.

Lester shook his head, “I swear, our guildleader’s followers are almost as impressive as him. You can shapeshift?”

Oh, they meant their surprise as a compliment, and understanding that made me feel a whole lot better. Relief replaced my chagrin, and I raised a hand, showcasing the cannon attached to my arm,

“Yeah. It’s how I do most things. My stealth is, well, a little different, but everything else revolves around shifting my body.”

Isa stared at my figure before comparing her own. Crossing her arms, Isa narrowed her eyes,

“Everything’s shapeshifted, huh?”

I scratched the side of my cheek, my face flushing, “Well, some things I was born with, but yeah, some things I change here or there. You know, for reasons.”

In the back, Alexander flushed red as a tomato. The poor guy was younger than everyone else here, and his inexperience stuck out almost as bad as his embarrassment. I kind of knew the feeling, so I didn’t point it out. No one else noticed, and Isa let out a grunt of approval,

“Gah, I know I’d look like you if I could shapeshift too. Either way, let’s get this show on the road. We have other dungeons to clear.”

Other Hod leaped into her shadow, fusing with the umbral manifestation behind her. I walked right into another realm, my presence concealed entirely. The others got ready, Alexander scrambling to get out his grimoire. They swung with their ropes for a bit and found a red dungeon core flowing with eldritch energy at the center of the bottomless cavern.

Using a spell given out by Torix, Alexander harvested the red core before placing it in his backpack. We ran out towards the spider’s charred corpse and brought out a sample of its blood too. Isa used an energized, mana powered knife to saw at the spider’s claws and fangs. She placed the animal’s weaponry on new spears, pulling them from her dimensional storage.

As she did, Lester took the spider’s venom sacs, taking care of them like a surgeon as he did. Once that was handled, he cut out its eyes one at a time. Each eye was put in a ziplock bag before being placed in his dimensional storage. They both chugged health potions the entire time, assisting their regeneration.

Once harvesting was done, we got out of the dungeon fast, most of the monsters handled by yours truly. Once near the entrance, we got back towards the encampment. The Remnants let us in via passes they got from registration with the adventurer’s guild. Considering the looks our team got, people were impressed but not overly so.

That was good. We wanted just the right kind of impression. Our team stepped back towards a large, wooden building near the center of town. There, we walked past gates towards a rambunctious, homey inn. People drank and ate at tables, enjoying some downtime from clearing dungeons. A row of futuristic terminals handled the various detailed aspects of quests, including requirements, rewards, and locations. Unlike with Schema’s system, these weren’t system bound; anyone could participate in their quest

systems. After finishing one, a party lined up before being processed by an espen worker.

These workers lined up behind a row of desks with a few machines laid on them along with a computer. These espens helped handle the logistics of quests, like proving they were done. All you needed was a blood sample and the kind of core since most dungeons were documented nearby. They included rewards for finding new dungeons too.

We waited in one of those lines, having all those parts already. Once we reached the worker, the espen smiled at us, her teeth sharp and skin shiny. She looked like she was a pretty shark to me.

The espen said, "It's good to see you all again. Fast clear?"

Isa smirked, "Of course. We're the best in the business...most of the time."

Professional and concise, the espen gave her a quick bow, "Indeed, you all appear to be. Your reward will be a week's free stay here at the adventurer's guild, giving a four-person bedroom along with a week's worth of food. To receive more, the three of you will need to be systemized on an Elysium world. The core is yours to keep."

Lester's eyes sharpened, his curiosity peaked, "Elysium, huh? I heard of it, but I didn't think it was real. What does being systemized mean, and how would we make that happen?"

The espen smiled as she spoke, "We'll need confirmation of five dungeons being completed along with confirmation you've read the terms of Elysium. This means signing an oath. It details a lot, but the most important part is that you all will be considered exiled from Schema's rival system if you decide to join ours. We don't make that part happen, Schema does. Otherwise, we'd offer both systems at once."

I doubted that, and Lester did too as he leaned forward onto the desk separating the worker and us,

"Between you and me, you're already in Elysium's system, right?"

The espen worker nodded. Lester rolled a hand, "Say I wanted a comparison between the systems, how does Schema's hold up when compared to Elysium's?"

The espen worker looked up before leaning back into her chair, "Now that is a tough one. Hmm, well, I'd say that Elysium's doesn't offer the same sky-high limits that Schema's does. There are no classes, and attributes, trees, and skillpoints are harder to get. That being said-

She pointed at a Hybrid nearby, "Very few individuals succeed in becoming even half as powerful as a Hybrid. After all, less than one out of ten reach the level cap of 5,000 in Schema's system. Hybrids start at level 8,000 and reach as high as level 12,000 if you get a blighted one. That takes military service and a lot of willpower, however."

The espen shrugged, "In my opinion, I think our system offers much higher immediate benefits. For people who are doing as well as you three are, I wouldn't recommend it. You all have great long term potential in Schema's system."

It kind of stunned me just how honest she was. Isa crossed her arms, "And why did you join Elysium's system if you're not recommending it?"

The espen looked down, "That's easy to answer. I'm not the best fighter. I'd rather do this kind of thing to help people. It suits me better, and I don't have to put my life on the line every day. I also get a Hybrid of my own for self-defense, and I call her scrappy. I also get paid over twice as much as I would in Schema's system."

Isa's eyes opened wide, "Pay, you say? How much?"

"120,000 credits yearly."

The espen smirked as Isa's eyes widened until they looked ready to burst. Isa mumbled, "Are you fucking kidding me?"

It was the espen worker's turn to smile, "Not one bit. Now, please hand in the blood. Others are waiting behind you."

The espen put out her hand with a vial. Lester gave Isa a pat on the back, "It'll be ok." Lester poured some monster blood from his own flask, and the espen put it in a

machine. After swirling it and doing some computer mumbo jumbo, they verified where and what it was from. The espen smiled, handing them three passes with fancy runic markings on them.

“Here are the three passes you need for your stay at an inn in town. We’ll compensate for any restaurant for whatever you order over the next week as well.”

Isa and Lester’s eyes lit up, thoughts of feasting coming over them. As we walked out of the guild room, we found a restaurant nearby. They used the passes for buying lunch along with two extra meals. Once they resupplied and rested for an hour, we moved out. The downtime let me relax for a second, and that was a refreshing change compared to normal.

Most of our assignments and goals were structured by either Daniel or Torix. Neither of them slept, and both of them hounded at their work. I wasn’t a slouch either, but geez, they could afford to slow down sometimes. Having Isa and Lester understand that concept made this mission much, much more comfortable than it would otherwise be.

It would still be a long day, but we’d pull through. We needed four more dungeons finished before the end of tomorrow. As we paced out of the city, Hybrids stomped on the ground all around us. Their metal frames and entrenched cords left me unnerved, mostly when one met my eye at random. They never held their gaze, if you could call it that, for very long. I preferred it that way.

Walking past the outskirts of the encampment again, I stared back. Everyone here relied on the Hybrids who spawned from a living hell. They needed the silvers and eldritch as much as they wanted to stop them. Unlike Schema, however, these guys weaponized their enemies. They turned them inside out, destroyed their minds, and used the husks to do their bidding. Thinking about it made my stomach sink. I realized right then what was bothering me about the whole situation.

I couldn’t tell who the real monsters were anymore.

-Daniel-

I stared at Obolis after he offered me an entire planet, and the grizzled Emperor kept his composure with ease. The ancient king grinned at me, showing his sharpened teeth and a wild glint behind his eye. The guy talked about this like it was nothing, and I still couldn’t believe it.

Before I let myself get overwhelmed with it all, I calmed myself down. This was the same style of negotiation that was so effective before. I wasn't going to fall for it again. I raised a hand,

"Holy shit...a planet? For real?"

Dammit, Daniel, keep it together.

Obolis spread his arms, "That is exactly correct. You seem keen on keeping the territory. Considering that's economically unfeasible for the Empire, perhaps conquering it on your own will prove fruitful. And I expect compensation, of course, though it won't be as steep as you may imagine."

I raised a brow, "It sounds like you've done this before."

"This wouldn't be the first planet I've wagered nor my last. Regardless of my own history, let's focus on yours. From your perspective, this should be quite a lucrative offer. At the moment, you're unable to establish a dominant position on your home planet due to Lehesion. He'll tear any territory there apart, at least in theory."

Obolis raised a hand, "This has kept your guild stunted from wide-scale resources. By colonizing a different world, you enable much greater gains for your guild. You can discover what Elysium's retaliation will be towards a territory you own as well."

Obolis pressed his fingers together, "I cannot stress that point enough – that information is vital for your guild's future growth. If Lehesion is used to conquer worlds elsewhere outside your own, you may even announce your presence on Earth. Given your ability to create golems, you may rapidly expand thereafter."

The Emperor met my eye, "Besides, I'm certain your species could use your assistance in that regard. They're likely struggling, and you could easily rectify the situation they're in."

I winced, remembering the conditions of most people back at home. Obolis gestured at a few of the rare shells lined behind him,

“Think of it. Earning resources from Blegara will no doubt expand your guild’s abilities and members. The Vagni will be at your disposal should your plan work and even the eldritch to an extent. Once conquered, the pearls, corals, shells, ores, water, sand, and resort locations will be yours. You could even use the planet’s water for terraforming planets close to habitation.”

Contemplating a few of the variables, I pointed at Obolis, “What does owning a planet do exactly?”

“That’s based on the arrangement we’d make. If I offer you ownership of the world, it will allow you to take a percentage of the world’s resources. To give a point of reference, I receive 7% of the credits, exp, and resources harvested on Blegara, though that is far less than the cost of maintaining control there. You could have that number increased or decreased depending on preference if you’d like, however.”

“There’s no way you could increase that cut to like, 50%, right?”

Obolis scoffed, “Of course not. The residents would starve and be weaklings. There’s a cutoff of 15% total resource skimming for owning a planet. Even that is very rigorous, and only the most totalitarian regimes would enact a tax that high. There are city taxes as well, along with other kinds of resource management at your disposal. Those details are your own to manage.”

Obolis raised a fist, “However, for a guild that’s growing such as yours, you could generate tremendous income in only a matter of months from the new territory. Think of the opportunities given to your guild. Space to grow beyond that mountain, resorts for sunny vacations, and even rare organic resources, all that is yours and more. Those are valuable commodities that most empires dream of. They are at your fingertips should you act decisively on this.”

I crossed my arms, “And why do you want me to take the planet off your hands so badly then if it’s so valuable?”

“I’m glad you asked. You see, you’re able to retain and hold the territory. I cannot. I still control the territory, so I require some kind of compensation for giving control to you. I wouldn’t ask for a flat, permanent tax rate from your planet. Instead, I’d ask for favorable trade deals. I’d want a price reduction for those resources I mentioned earlier, along with vacation priority for my citizens.”

I leaned back, “How favorable?”

Obolis put his hand on his chin, thinking, “Hmmm, how about a percentage cut, say 15%?”

I opened my status, double-checking his offer. Information on a planetary exchange was sparse, but a few results popped up. A 15% price cut was the average for trade deals in a situation like this. Obolis read my expression well and turned a palm to me,

“Your research no doubt verifies my request as a reasonable one?”

I shook my head, “Not exactly. The comments talk about how a lot of times, this results in middleman trading. The new planet owner works to harvest resources and is forced to sell it to the old owner. The old owner then just resells it to someone for a higher price, taking all the profits.”

“Duly noted. Perhaps a 10% cutoff then? That would make reselling for a profit much more difficult given the margins involved with trading. You could consider this a gift.”

“I’m not so sure about that. This isn’t a fully functioning planet you’re handing off to me, not by any means. You don’t have control of it, and you’re about to lose the world anyways. I’ll be reconquering it from the top-down, meaning your ownership means little here.”

Obolis grinned, “You’ve learned a bit about negotiation, I see. Excellent. Let’s do battle then.” Obolis spread his arms,

“Allow me to explain planetary ownership. I’ve been suppressing the eldritch to pre-fringe world extremes to retain the planet. That has prevented Schema from annexing the territory from me. That requires resources that you simply don’t have. A part of any arrangement between us would be my Empire maintaining the planet for the next five years.”

Obolis raised a hand and one finger, “This means your guild is given the time to establish a presence. That’s a valuable service. I can also give you access to highly trained, planetary coordinators. They can offer up systems and approaches for maintaining a territory long-term. Our previous data on the planet, including dungeon locations, would be available for you as well.”

I bit my tongue for a moment before firing back, “Here’s the thing – you’re doing the bare minimum to maintain that planet. You won’t be able to hold anything without my guild’s direct assistance. I know this first hand. I’ll be fighting a large, hostile force that’s established a presence on the planet.”

I pointed at the Ruhl in stasis near us, “Elysium is a much more organized and deadly force than the eldritch. If anything, I’m allowing you to maintain a presence on Blegara without needing much investment. Considering that, here’s what I’m thinking is fair.”

I raised two hands, and I gestured them to my left, “You can transfer the planet to my guild, and I won’t require you to maintain control of the world.” I gestured my hands to the right,

“In exchange, I’ll guarantee your guild is prioritized in trade relations. So there won’t be a discount, but if demand is high and slots are full, the albony get first grabs. How does that sound?”

Obolis’s eyes narrowed, “I give you a planet and all its resources, and you allow me to buy those resources from you? Ah, yes, perhaps you’ve gone deaf midway through this conversation?”

The irritation in his voice showed simmering anger, but I pressed on, not backing down,

“That’s not exactly right. You can’t harvest any of the resources on your planet. They will all be dominated by Elysium soon. I’m allowing you to take a guaranteed loss and turn it into the chance for a net gain. You won’t be forced to fight somewhere you can’t defend, and you’ll be able to get the resources you want from Blegara, guaranteed.”

Obolis frowned before pacing around his study for a bit. After a minute or two, he let out a sigh, “Then...then I suppose you’re right. It isn’t as if I could lie to you about the state of Blegara seeing as you’ve been there. This isn’t the worst arrangement, either. My wealthy patrons will be pleased since they get their luxuries, and you get your credits. It’s...It’s not an awful arrangement.”

Obolis waved his hands, “There’s just not much about this deal that’s beneficial for me, however. Is there anything you could throw in that would make this more lucrative for our side? Perhaps a few of your super golems as protectors in my attacked cities?”

I frowned, “I’d like to, but I’m not offering a product that hasn’t been tested yet. I wouldn’t want you to take one and try and reverse engineer it either. They’re valuable for a reason.”

Obolis’s eyes went distant before widening,

“How about this then – you allow me to contract them for a certain amount of credits. You’ll be leasing them to me, and I’ll pay you based on an approved rate we agree on beforehand. Is that acceptable?”

I reached out a hand, “That sounds good to me. Is that a deal?”

Obolis took my hand, and we shook on it. Obolis gave me a look of begrudging respect,

“Then, I’ll look forward to seeing what you can do on Blegara that I couldn’t.”

Obolis got out a chair after that, and we sat across from one another while ironing out a few details about our arrangement. He let me know that he recorded the conversation, and a Speaker would draft up a contract for us. We’d revise it a few times, going back and forth before agreeing to the planet swap. Once it was finished, we’d sign it, and the planet would be mine.

Just like that, I’d own an entire world.

It would be a really long-term investment for my guild, of course, but I didn’t intend to use it as an economic power anyways. I needed those crystals at the bottom of those trenches, which guaranteed my main selling point for owning the place. Testing Elysium’s response to my guild’s territory offered some reliable info as well. If the Adairs came down like a hammer, then I knew not to establish myself on Earth. If not, then we could begin expanding outward.

This all rode on the plan that we cooked up earlier, however. For that to happen, I agreed to a few of the details involved with our contract. Before I left Obolis’s study, I raised a hand to the guy,

“Oh yeah, you can go ahead and pull your forces off of Blegara.”

Obolis sat in his chair at this point, and his main of fur ruffled out,

“You’d like me to let them conquer the planet utterly? That would just make it even more difficult to retake. Are you sure about that?”

“Sometimes, an enemy being overconfident is more valuable than them being weak.”

Obolis furrowed his brow, “I, ah, well, if you say so. It will be your planet soon, after all, so who am I to judge? What will you and your team do in the meantime?”

My armor grew sharp edges as my intent became clear,

“I’ll be getting ready for reconquering Blegara and soon.”

Obolis tilted his head, confusion spreading over his face, “Now how would you intend to do that?”

I grinned,

“Shock and awe.”

Chapter 283: The Push and Pull of War

Obolis managed messages in his status, “I’d enjoy seeing the Adairs get torn apart, but I can’t imagine how you’d do that considering your resources. I envision a few super golems and you. What else is at your disposal?”

I radiated excitement, “Eh, it’s a surprise.”

Obolis grinned, handling many reports and thinking about decisions as he spoke, “I enjoy surprises. I’ll wait until then. Good luck.”

I left the Emperor's quarters, walking back the way I came. Once at the warp, I looked around and wondered if I could explore more. Stealing wasn't out of the question either, considering how valuable all this stuff was. After letting those thoughts go on for a bit, I silenced them. I didn't have the time to look at this place, and Obolis would know I stole from him.

And, you know, it was the wrong thing to do, I suppose.

Either way, I left for Mt. Verner and met up with Chrona and Ophelia. As I paced up towards Chrona's cliffside, I found her sleeping and Ophelia working over her expandable desk. Floating over, I landed beside them before waking Chrona up,

"Hey. Can you guys hear me out for a bit?"

Chrona rubbed the sleep from her eyes with her tail, the gialgathen's sleek, silver skin glistening under the moonlight,

"It's good to see you guildleader. You decided to show up tonight."

I raised an eyebrow, "I always do, though sometimes I come late since I'm busy."

Ophelia kept looking at her work, "Yeah, I'm busy too. I just bring my busy here instead of doing it everywhere else." She turned to me, leaning on one hand, "So, what do you have to tell us?"

I spread out my arms, "We're getting a planet."

A deep quiet passed over us, only the insects' chirping and wind rustling to fill the void. A few seconds screeched by before I frowned, "Come on, guys. This is good news... right?"

Ophelia gawked at me, "How in Schema's name did you get a damn planet? You don't even own two cities yet. I just...I don't understand."

Chrona tilted her head, "Is it Earth, perhaps?"

I raised a hand, “It’s Blegara, the sea planet we’re fighting on, and it’s where you gialgathens will be fighting as well.”

Chrona looked up, “An aquatic world, huh? That sounds interesting. We gialgathens used to live in the oceans, and we still prefer them to drier climates. Perhaps we may expand there without worry for Lehesion. That would be incredible for us. I do worry we would be harvested should we expose our location, however.”

I gripped my raised hand into a fist, “I won’t lie to you guys; we will be fighting Hybrids the entire time. It’s going to be tough, to say the least. I do have plans in the works to make that process much easier than it would otherwise be, but still.”

Chrona sighed, “And that is our new way of life. We will press on until the wrongs of our forefathers have been righted, whether by suffering or by triumph.”

Ophelia waved a hand, “So, uh, how did you get a planet? Did you threaten Obolis or something?”

I shook my hands, “No, not at all. He’s going to lose Blegara soon, which you’ve seen some of. I’m going to retake it from the Hybrids for him and guarantee trade deals with the albony. In exchange, I get the planet.”

Ophelia’s tsked, “Geez, and it’s that bad, huh? I thought maybe it was only that bad in the capital. I didn’t think it was that bad everywhere else.”

I shrugged, “Apparently, that’s the only place he’s putting up a fight, at least on Blegara. Either way, he got something out of a bad situation.”

Ophelia’s brow crinkled, “I...guess? Well, whatever. It isn’t like I own any territory on Blegara. Good luck taking that backwater hellhole back. You’re going to need it.”

I smiled with confidence, “Thanks. I’m letting you both off of tutoring me for a while. I don’t think there’s much else to learn here, and I’ll try making progress on my own time. Besides, you two have better things to do anyway.”

Ophelia stared at her claws, “Like what?”

I narrowed my eyes, “Like help the golem redesigners. You can just do that for our contracted time schedule. Don’t think you’re out of helping me just yet. Remember that ring I gave you.”

I pointed at the jewelry on her hand, and she frowned under her mask, “Well...I guess I prefer that to just sitting here and killing time.”

She put up her desk, the metal folding into a fitted square,

“Cya.”

She walked off before floating herself over to the nightly engineers. I turned to Chrona,

“How are the rest of you guys doing?”

“We’ve adapted to this place now. At least I think so. This is a beautiful land, in a strange, desolate sort of way. It lacks the growing expanse of creatures that Giess boasted, but it doesn’t have the silvers. It’s like a blank slate in that way, neither good nor bad.”

“When do you think you and the other gialgathens could be ready to get sent off to war?”

Chrona took a deep breath, “Hmm, that’s a difficult question to answer. Most of those here aren’t normal. They need many treatments and time to heal, but I don’t think we can afford to give them that kind of respite. Considering what you’re trying to do, we could ready ourselves within a week if necessary. We need the space, and any new territory would do us well.”

Chrona stared off at the horizon, “That is where we belong, riding the wind and coasting across the skies. Being trapped on this mountain, it will drive us insane if we aren’t given the liberty to move. I can tell you that much.”

“Then that’s what I’ll ask you guys to do – retake some land. We’ll be doing that on Blegara soon, and we’re starting just outside of Saphigia, where the eldritch are strongest and densest.”

Chrona lifted her head and offered a small smile, “I’ll be ready to cull them and the Hybrids alike.”

I shook my head, “We’ll actually be scaring the eldritch into submission, and that’ll win the Vagni over to our side.”

Chrona’s eyes widened, “I wouldn’t have expected that, but that makes it a lot more interesting. How do you intend to evoke fear in the eldritch?”

I crossed my arms, “You know, I haven’t really thought about it. I’ll brainstorm about it some and get a few ideas, but I’m confident I’m able to get them shaken up at the very least.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

I turned around and waved with a hand, “Rest well. You’ll need it.”

“You too.”

She laid her head down as I leaped up into the air. The cold, crisp wind brushed against my face and hair, and the stars surrounded me on all sides as I flew high over Mt. Verner. I soaked in the sight before landing near the engineers. Ophelia made it here a minute ago, and she caught up on the adjustments made to the super golems.

I paced up, raising a hand to Diesel and Ophelia,

“Yo.”

Diesel smiled, and Ophelia propped her weight onto a hip. The engineer spread his arms, “It’s good to see you, man. How’re you doing?”

“Good. I’m in a bit of a rush, so let’s get down to business.”

Diesel straightened up, “Ah, yes, sir. What do you need?”

“Give me the updated plans and schematics for your golem. I’m going to start mass producing them.”

“We, uh, haven’t finished all of the adjustments we need to for a new model.”

“That’s fine. Just parse out the immediate improvements you’ve made thus far. I’ll implement them into the new design.”

“I, er, alright.”

Diesel jogged off to a group of other engineers, and they discussed what to keep in the new designs. Ophelia frowned at me, “Thanks for helping me get back up to speed. I totally didn’t need that guy’s help.”

I gave her a thumbs-up, “No problem. Always happy to help.”

She rolled her eyes, and we waited for about fifteen minutes. I did a few mental exercises for primordial mana in the meantime. As Diesel walked back up, he showed me several sheets of paper covered in drawings of golems,

“These include a few of the new design parameters. They’re mainly adjustments for your cipher translations, some plate layering in the forearms and shoulders, and better runic configurations for self augmentation. It should make the next golem a bit better.”

I grabbed the papers from him with thanks, making sure I didn’t scrunch them up. After reading them over, I jogged off into a clearing in the trees nearby. Sitting down, I gave one more look over. Their rune suggestions were in idea format, so I fleshed them out, coming up with the actual lettering and specifics. Once that was handled, I began my golem crafting.

Pulling out a mass of liquified dimensional fabric, I created four ‘centers.’ Around these centers, I wrapped around layer after layer of my dimensional material, heating and

bending it into shape using gravity and telekinesis. This process took up a bit of time, but the end result was the finished forearms and unfinished shoulder pads of the golem. These plated blocks took on blunt trauma and piercing forces much better than the old designs.

Before finishing the shoulder pads, I opened my grimoire. It took several hours, but I implemented the changes in ciphering and runes the engineers wanted to change. Charging those runes up, I created the three cores needed in the meantime. I used the same techniques as before, spinning molten fabric with dense gravitation at its center point.

After hardening the spheres, I grafted the cipher inscriptions onto their surfaces. Once made, I implanted the cores into the middle of the unfinished shoulder pads, and I interlaid plates until the masses were finished. A bit of inscribing later and telepathic strands connected the shoulders to the main body. With everything connected, the consciousnesses were ready for action.

Voilà, the three minds of the super golem were made.

The rest of the process was simple enough. As usual, I generated the same chunks, paying less mind to the plating technique as I went. It was important for the arms and shoulders as they took the brunt of most forces. The other parts of the golem could stand to be less indestructible in favor of production efficiency. I needed many of these golems made and quickly after all.

I ended up finishing the second super golem several hours later despite my speeding up the process. The inscribing took time to charge, as did finalizing the details of the golem. It was an arduous process. Generating the eyes, ears, connection points, legs, arms, and the runic markings were all time-consuming. It resulted in a polished finish for the golem, and for that reason, I stood proud of my creation.

It hunched over, laying against a stone nearby. It sunk into the ground, a miniature version of me, nearly. Walking up, I planted my hand on it and charged the golem. It hummed with energy and vitality as the dimensional fabric composing it revved into action. The eyes brightened. The runes glowed. It was alive.

As it stood up, I connected to its mind via telepathy, “It’s good to see you, new guy.”

“What is this? Are...Are you my creator?”

“Yup.”

The golem bowed, a sense of awe overcoming the new entity, “And I will follow whatever commands you may give, be them burdensome or backbreaking.”

I grinned, “Oh, you’ll be breaking plenty of backs, though they won’t be your own.”

Giving the golem a sense of purpose, I told it to find Torix in his lair. If the lich wasn’t there, the golem was to wait until the lich arrived. Without waiting anymore, I furthered my work, preparing another golem. This time, I layered my activities more, and that saved me time.

Using my Congruent Mind Strain skill, I set up three concurrent actions. On the one hand, I steadily charged my grimoire with one train of thought. My second focal point of attention revolved around meditating with my elemental furnace revving. The third logic strain implemented the raw building of the golem, and it made everything run smoothly like clockwork. These adjustments and not needing to rewrite the ciphering meant I finished in four hours. Labor intensive yes, but it was a far cry from the first golem.

By then, the sun had risen a while back, and it was time to meet with the others. I got the third golem to meet with the second, and they waited for Torix to show up in his lair. As they did that, I met up with Helios and Florence for our morning warp. Pacing up to the two, they stood in silence with Kessiah scarfing down a biscuit covered in gravy with a latte. Helios narrowed his eyes at me as I stepped up to them,

“You’re late for our arranged meetings. We agreed upon 9:00, and now it’s nearly 10:00.”

Florence grinned, “It’s extra downtime before we go in and save some Vagni. I, for one, appreciate it.”

Helios glared at his brother, “And I, for one, don’t wish to waste time. I suppose that perspective can’t be shared between us, however. You would need time that could be wasted.”

Florence took the insult in stride,

“It’s more like I know how to appreciate some peace and quiet so I can think a little.”
He nudged his brother, “Or none, in your case.”

Helios sighed before I neared them. I lifted a hand, “I’m going to own Blegara soon.”

Helios leaned back, taken aback by my sudden announcement. Florence looked back and forth like he was searching for a joke. When he didn’t find any, Florence spread out his arms,

“Seriously?”

I nodded, “Yup.”

The sociable albony walked up and put a hand on my shoulder,

“Congratulations. I’m happy to hear that.” He leaned back, “I of all people understand that no one has worked harder to keep that place safe. You can carry those thoughts with confidence. I use to run the place, after all.”

Helios raised his eyebrows in exasperation under his mask, “You’ve yet to establish so much as a footprint on your own world, yet you’re aiming to own someone else’s? That seems rather unwise.”

Kessiah talked with a mouth full of food, “I don’t know. It seems cool to me. What about it’s bad?”

Florence pointed at her, “Stopping Elysium, but we planned on doing that regardless. As for everything else involved with owning Blegara, I can help point out some of the best resources there...And, I’ll keep any governing suggestions to myself. I wasn’t exactly the most effective ruler, so my advice is, well, unwarranted.”

I shook my head, “Actually, you’ll be helping me decide a lot of the rules there. We all will. The more pressing matter is taking the planet from Elysium. We need so much

firepower that even a Spatial Fortress would shake in its boots. Or, its giant tentacles and, uh, mouths, I guess. You get what I mean.”

I rubbed my hands together, “We do that, and we’ll be reaping all kinds of rewards.”

Helios crossed his arms, “It’s unfortunate, but Schema will not appreciate your rampant military arming.”

Florence scoffed, “What? Why wouldn’t he? We need every bit of firepower against Elysium that we can get.”

Helios turned to his brother, “Schema despises militaries that rival his own. Throughout the cosmos, that A.I. has done away with empires for that reason – they were too powerful. Militarily, that is.”

I turned to Helios, “Is that why Obolis focuses more on building up resources than armed troops?”

“Partially. He also relishes in exploration, which is far more inclined to resource accrual than building a large, standing army. Don’t mistake that for weakness, however. We’re doing well in other territories outside of Blegara, so don’t underestimate the Empire’s might.”

I raised my hands, “I’m not. I just appreciate how that military isn’t on Blegara. Speaking of which, we’re going to back off of Blegara for a while.”

Kessiah finished her food, “Why would we do that? We just got a base established there.”

I pointed around us, “See, Schema’s system is all around us because this world is owned by him. If we back off of Blegara for a while-“

Florence snapped his clawed fingers, “They’ll establish their system there...So, uhm, why is that a good thing?”

I let my hands flop against my sides, “Your plan wouldn’t work otherwise. How else is Amara going to broadcast my takeover of the eldritch?”

Florence’s head leaned back, “Ah, of course. That’s a noteworthy detail I forgot to flesh out. Unfortunately, letting the Adair family establish themselves will make retaking Blegara much harder, however.”

I shrugged, “Eh, we’re barely holding any territory as is. It’s no big loss. I’m more concerned about making our retaliation as fierce as possible. Helios will be the one warping in a large number of troops. Him and Spear both. For that, we need potent troops to send.”

A message popped up in my status screen from Torix. He wanted to talk in his bird emporium. I turned to everyone, “I have to cut this short. I’ve got to meet with Torix. You guys relax, though I might need you all to do something later, so don’t stray too far.”

Florence gave me a thumbs up, “You got it, Harbinger.”

I jogged off before floating myself through Mt. Verner. I loved the mornings here because the suite section was home to a few cafes. Passing them filled the space with the comforting, warm aroma of coffee. It tasted pretty good still, though the caffeine had no effect on me anymore. It’s one of the things I missed, though I never drank too much coffee before the culling.

Passing the shops, I moved towards Torix’s tunnel, passing the dusty elevator leading there. After getting to the same room beyond the glowing fungus, I walked into the bird exhibit room. I frowned at what I saw.

“Torix...what the hell are you doing here?”

The lich stood over a group of misfits, several animals, and even some Eltari. The lich piled several gemstones over in the corner of the room, and he hovered a few towards his left. These oddballs stood in front of the crystals, ready for contact. At the back of the bird exhibition room, a medical team was ready and waiting to help them in case of an adverse reaction.

Torix found me looking, so turned to face me,

“Ah, you’re here. I was waiting to see you in person. I believe that we can use the crystals against the Hybrids, as we predicted.”

I stepped up, inspecting the line of people here. They carried deep scars over their bodies, and many lacked a limb or two. Most stared forward with a careless attitude as if they didn’t care if they lived or died. Torix gestured to them,

“I put out an ad campaign to our guild to see if there were any members who were willing to expose themselves to the Omega Strain.”

“Omega Strain, eh? You’re using the Greek alphabet again.”

The lich’s eyes flared red for a moment,

“There are few things I don’t know, and you exposed one of those weaknesses the other day. I thank you for that, and I now know the Greek alphabet along with much of its previous culture. Many of your ideals were formed from that culture, in fact.”

He waved off the implications behind his words, “Cultural investigations aside, I guaranteed these individuals would receive credits and new positions in the guild if they allowed a measure of experimentation. These rewards would be given to their families should they die, and these are the individuals who showed up.”

Seven people stared up at me, and their eyes widened while their jaws went slack. I put my hands on my hips while facing them,

“Torix, what makes you think the, er, Omega Strain, right?”

“Precisely.”

“What makes you think it’s safe for use?”

Torix lifted an arm where three birds flew up to him. Each carried one of the living crystals on them, and by now, the crystals shifted color. A robin held an emerald

gemstone, and it made ribs around the bird. The second, a mockingbird, carried a black crystal that waved like a tail behind it. The third, an armored raven, covered itself in a deep, violet stone that looked like purple jade.

Torix gestured to them, and they flew over to me. Landing on my shoulders, they stayed quiet and well behaved. I raised a hand at them,

“So, there’s more to these crystals than we first imagined, eh?”

Torix’s eyes flared a bright blue as he put his hands on his hips, “Indeed. As I coined it, the Omega Strain is an amorphous viral structure that adapts to its host’s thoughts and needs. It can take many shapes and sizes, and it manifests quickly after exposure. Over time, it can change coloration and function depending on the mental strength of its host.”

Torix gestured a palm at the raven, “These birds each carry different kinds of Omega Strains, yet the raven’s crystal is by far the strongest. This is in no small part due to its higher intellect. Observe.”

The birds flew up, the raven facing the robin and mockingbird. Two against one, the robin and mockingbird flew at the raven. The violet crystal over the raven shifted, and it sped under its two assailants. The mockingbird’s tendril shot at the raven’s skull, but the dark bird’s gemstone latched onto the enemy’s attack before it was killed. The raven spiraled, and this created a spiral in the mockingbird’s stone tentacle.

Carried by that twist, the mockingbird was slung towards the ground, but I caught it with a gravity well before it was killed.

Poor bird.

The other robin flew up and over the raven in the meantime. It latched its ribs into the raven’s armor before pushing the violet armored bird towards the ground. The violet-colored raven smashed into the concrete, leaving a few cracks beneath it before it stood back up. Spreading its crystalline wings, the raven spread its frame out wide. With a stone crushing jump, it launched itself into the crystal ribs of the robin.

The robin crushed into the roof, its body somehow unharmed despite the sheer impact from the raven. The robin was still unconscious, however, so I caught it as it fell from

the roof. The Omega Strains remnants spilled onto the floor like broken glass, the bird's fight coming to an end. Torix pointed at them,

"Impressive, aren't they?"

I narrowed my eyes, "They are, but how does this prove this stuff is safe for sentients?"

"For one, the birds are still safe and sane. Of course, I'm managing their fights using mind magic, but this proximity with their minds tells me nothing is wrong. The only issue is that the crystals can have a degenerative effect on someone's psyche over time. Past eight hours of exposure, and it appears the host begins suffering mental breakdowns."

I scoffed, "Oh, the crystal only drives its user's insane, and that's only the short term side effects you don't say? Talk about useful."

Torix remained calm and confident as he replied,

"Indeed. We've measures in place for preventing the mental degradation of hosts. I'll get to that later. The most fascinating aspect of this crystal is its sheer variance and its metal-eating capabilities. It does require a few constraints for its use, but they are more than acceptable."

I raised an eyebrow, "Such as?"

Torix reached out with his hand, and the birds flew over towards him, though the robin struggled a bit. Torix tapped the crystals on their backs, and each Omega Strain shivered before compacting back into their previous forms. They left wounds on the bird's backs, which would take weeks to heal. The birds weren't a part of Schema's system, however. For Humans and Eltari, the crystals were easy to bring in and out day to day.

That meant we could easily use these crystals for our soldiers as long as they carried some of my armor. My eyes lit up,

"That's right. We just have to limit how long each person is exposed to the crystals."

Torix beamed, “You understand my intention utterly. These people will be the first ones exposed to the Omega Strain, and they’ve signed waivers to guarantee they understand what’s required of them. I explained thoroughly, as well.”

“Why haven’t you gotten started yet?”

Torix gave me a slight bow, “I wanted to ask for my guildleader’s permission and in person.”

I was touched.

“Torix, you didn’t have to.”

“After not informing you of the streaming services I started without your permission, I dwelled on what you said on the matter. I wanted you to know that I thought deeply about what you said, and I intend on ensuring you’re a part of the decisions regarding our guild’s actions from here on out. No more surprises of that kind.”

I turned towards the people here,

“As long as you guys are ok with this, then we’re good to go. It’s your lives on the line, and you all get to decide if the risk is worth it.”

A few people looked at me with a bit of nervousness, but most of them remained unyielding.

Torix cackled, “Then let’s begin.” The lich waved at the participants, “You may make contact whenever you’d like. Be prepared for sharp, piercing pain when you do so, as the Omega Strain enters through the spines of creatures.”

They stared forward, eyeing the floating, magenta masses floating in front of them. Fear and apprehension came over them until an Eltari woman decided it was time. Her arms were ripped off at some point, and now she carried massive scars where they once were. She touched the crystal with her beaked mouth, and the Omega Strain flooded over it.

Crawling over her skin, the strand left hundreds of tiny, minuscule wounds over its victim. Once it reached her spine, the crystal rammed over thirty connection points into the Eltari's nervous system. The Eltari scrambled back and forth, languishing in agony. She knocked over some medical equipment before I restrained her with a gravity well. I spoke like a wall of steel,

"It will pass. Stand strong and hold the line."

I passed The Rise of Eden over the Eltari as it looked at me, giving my words more of a palpable effect. Her foggy, tear ridden eyes showed no expression, but her taloned feet scrunched into tight bundles. She quit squawking in fear, and she proved herself there and then. With Schema's system augmenting her, the Eltari regenerated from her wounds over the next few minutes. Once she got past the initial pain, she stood up.

She conquered it.

The Omega Strain read the wants of the Eltari, and it replaced her missing arms and wings. Once it shaped itself into those missing limbs, the crystal followed the Eltari's commands. She moved her new, crystal limbs, staring at them with fear and awe alike. After a few seconds, she spread them wide, the feathers more akin to spines than plumage.

That didn't matter to the Eltari as she walked over towards the edge of the bird's exhibit. Everyone stared as she leaped from the side, and a few seconds passed. Thoughts of her clunking against the concrete ground loomed over everyone present. It would be a bitter wake up call for the Eltari.

That didn't come to pass. She flew, gliding with flows of mana. She laughed while passing through the air, and several songbirds jumped from their ledges to join her. What was once robbed was returned, and the Eltari beamed with deep joy as she returned to the air. Minutes of flight later, she landed onto the ledge with tears in her eyes.

She walked up to Torix and spoke with a light tone to her voice,

"Thank you, clever one. Thank you. I never imagined I would be one with the sky again."

Torix raised a hand, “Now now, don’t get too close. We wouldn’t want that crystal reverting to normal just yet, now would we?”

The Eltari backed up, “I...yes. Thank you.”

I pointed at her, “What’s your name?”

“E-Elthara.”

“Good to meet you. You’re going to need one of these soon.”

I lifted up my hand, and a void popped up at the end of my arm. From it, molten metal spawned into a small mass. I shaped it into a band, and flash froze it. Pulling out my grimoire, I charged the runes for Ophelia’s ring as I said,

“This ring will let you do a few things, but the most important part is the ability to get that crystal off of you. In your case-“

I spawned another piece of dimensional fabric and shaped it into the form of a thin chain. I wrapped that around the center of the ring before planting my grimoire’s runes onto the band. Once cooled, I tossed it over towards her, and she snatched it out of the air with her foot. Bending over, she contorted her leg and put the necklace on.

I pointed at it, “Tap the crystal against that ring or necklace, and it will turn back to normal. You can put it in your dimensional storage after that.”

Elthrara nodded, “Yes, guildleader. This ring, it is...heavy.”

Torix interlocked his hands behind himself, “That is your guild’s expectations weighing down on your shoulders. Make sure you carry that burden with pride, and always aim to exceed them.”

“Yes, clever one.”

Putting my hands on my hips, I peered at the others lined up,

“That’s a pretty successful initial test. I know I’m convinced. Who’s next?”

We processed the others, several people unable to control the crystal when first exposed. It required a certain level of mental strength to restrain the gemstone, and some people lacked that. To counteract this, I premade the rings and handed them off to people. The enchantments gave willpower and endurance in spades.

Those attributes helped people assimilate more often with the crystals. After the Omega Strain dislodged itself from the individual, it sped up the regeneration as well. However, no matter what we did, the Omega Strain left a bit of vertigo after pulling itself out, so people needed breaks after using the powerful gems. It wasn’t so bad, though.

With my ring’s help, the eight-hour maximum use time turned as high as ten in the more willful individuals. On average, it was around six to eight hours. That was plenty long enough for most soldiers to get some serious work done in the meantime. These crystals would help members with facing Hybrids on a level playing field for the common soldier. It was about time I handed off a bit of updated equipment to the legion as well.

Super golems would be nice and all, but my guildsmen would fight alongside us. I didn’t want them fighting against the Hybrids with broomsticks and frying pans, so it was about time for an update. Besides, their strength was my strength, and I needed as much as I could get.

With that in mind, I met with Torix after everyone left. He healed the three birds used in his exhibition, regenerating them via rudimentary light magic. As he did, I stared down at the birds,

“So, they responded well. It looks like these gemstones are going to be very valuable in the future.”

“Indeed. We’ll need to create a trade deal with Obolis in order to procure them, but they should be more than worth it. Perhaps an exchange of super golems would be in order?”

“You know, I actually don’t think we’ll have to. We should be able to manage, even without trading.”

Torix narrowed his fire eyes, staring up at me from the three birds floating in front of him,

“Ah, yes, I’m certain that Obolis would just hand over these valuable resources without a care in the world. That sounds just like him.”

“He might have.”

The lich’s curiosity peaked, “How so?”

“Well, we’ll be getting the planet soon. Obolis offered it to us. We’re in the middle of acquiring Blegara.”

Torix dropped the birds, but I already caught them as he did. I expected that kind of reaction. Torix stood up,

“And here I believed he’d be using them himself? He doesn’t know they exist?”

“Nope.”

“Really now? That’s...that’s unexpected. I’d imagined the Finder of Secrets would be better at...well, finding secrets.”

I waved my arms, “Don’t get the wrong idea. I got lucky here. That’s it.”

Torix raised his hand, “Perhaps a bit, though your ability to travel into extreme environments is a large reason as to why you’re able to explore as you do. That being said, if we can go forward with this deal, our guild’s ability to fight the Hybrids will multiply. We will gain an unruly amount of resources, and they will make a world of difference for us.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

“This does raise a few questions, such as what kind of deal was arranged?”

“I gave the albony priority when trading with resources acquired on Blegara. We also have to lease super golems to them.”

Torix scoffed, “That’s it? For a planet? Maybe owning a planet isn’t very valuable?”

I raised a hand, “Planet owning is very lucrative, but you have to think, this isn’t a normal planet. Blegara is on the brink of destruction and is being assaulted by hostile forces. The Empire can’t economically hold the location, but we can. I’m aware of all this, so Obolis couldn’t dupe me. Combine that with the fact he’s still able to get what he wants out of Blegara, albeit for a price, and it’s a win-win situation.”

I smiled, “It’s just a little more win-win for me. That’s all.”

Torix swung a fist in front of himself, “Now that is how it is done, my disciple. After our subduing of the eldritch, I say we assault the planet immediately.”

“You and I are thinking the same thing then. We need to prepare for that, and I’m going to need you to do more research into the Omega Strain in the meantime. That needs to take priority over everything else for now. I know your handling a lot with the guild’s logistics-“

Torix stood tall, putting a hand up to his side. From it, his obelisk materialized, “Of course, though you overestimate the burden I bear since acquiring this obelisk. Though it took some tinkering, it’s automated the most tedious of tasks. I am more than able to handle this new task, and I’ll do what’s necessary for the legion.”

I smiled, “Alright then. I’m sending everyone a message that we won’t be attacking Blegara for about a week. After that, we’ll make the announcement that we own the planet after the contract with Obolis has been signed. I’ll be making super golems in the meantime. They’ll be the primary source of our initial charge, along with the Vagni and maybe even the eldritch.”

I raised two fists, “We’ll collect the Omega Strain along Blegara’s depths after we’ve established ourselves on Saphigia. Our soldiers’ number will bolster immensely, and I’ll

make sure that my rings include something for underwater breathing. That'll get rid of our troops' main weakness."

Torix waved a finger in front of himself, "And we can even give the gialgathens a battlefield they are adept at. They evolved in the ocean from what I've read and heard. They should be veritable swimmers, and by Schema, we could use the territory. We sorely lack space on Mt. Verner now."

Torix peered off towards the mountain beyond the concrete walls, "It's a shame, but our guild has outgrown this place. The gialgathens and Eltari are fighting amongst themselves for the best roosting locations. Just as well, the humans here are beginning to settle and wish to go above ground."

Torix spoke wistfully, "Perhaps Blegara will let us expand elsewhere without the threat of wiping out your home planet? Wouldn't that be simply superb?"

I took a deep breath,

"I couldn't agree more. That's one of the reasons I've been working above ground with my golem project. If I spend too much time in that mountain, I get cabin fever. I can't even imagine what the people down there must feel like."

Torix tilted his head, "They're alive, which is more than they'd be if Yawm had had his way."

I nodded, "I'll find solace in that. I'm writing the guild wide message as we speak to let our guildsmen know we're not fighting on Blegara for a bit. Once we get a hold on Saphigia, we'll harvest the Omega Strains nearby, get super golems to hold our new territories, and expand outward as needed. It will be a slow fought process, but we'll be able to take it back."

Torix's eyes flared bright with warmth,

"Daniel...there's something I've been meaning to say."

I lifted a brow, "What's up?"

He put a hand on my shoulder, “I’ve seen you grow from a selfish child into a selfless man. I want you to know I’m proud of you, and you’re becoming a fine leader.”

I choked up a bit, not expecting this kind of sincerity, “Well...thank you. I don’t think I’ve done the best job, but I’ve been trying. That’s all I can really do.”

Torix let his hand drop, “Know that I’ve said nothing more than what needed to be said. Now, let’s get to work. There’s much to be done.”

I grinned, “Let’s crack some skulls.”

Torix walked off, interacting with his advanced obelisk given by Obolis. With it, he managed the guild in less than a third the time he used too via preplanned operations. Handling those day to day tasks let him spend this kind of time on the Omega Strain, and I was glad I decided on the obelisk first instead of the furnace.

One last detail needed handling before I got deep into my building work. Torix sent me an update from Althea that contained a lot of information about Elysium and their camps. It included notes from Althea, and I went over that information while creating an underwater breathing enchantment.

She mentioned many of the innovations they used in a positive light, and I had to agree. Elysium rebelled for a reason after all, and the primary cause was how outdated and ruthless Schema’s current system was. Of course, Elysium built its backbone on the gialgathen’s deaths and the eldritch/silvers’ suffering. Those were pretty damn unforgivable sins, in my opinion, but I respected the Adair’s more after seeing how much they improved people’s lives.

At least they were trying. I had to admit, that was more than most.

My newfound respect didn’t shake my resolve to crush them, but it did give me another goal. I wrote up a reform plan for our own guild’s way of doing things, modeling some of it after Elysium’s practices. Evil or not, they had some excellent ideas. I took those practices and made them work for our own guild, and it gave me some confidence moving forward. Making a difference for people tended to do that.

Bolstered by that assurance, I walked towards Helios and Florence. There was one last part of our plan that needed ironing out. We sent the initial team down towards the Elysium camp without Amara. Amara made the suggestion herself, noting how poorly her stealth skills were in general. Althea's report made the Elysium camp look easier to invade than we initially thought, however.

Understanding all those details, I needed Florence and Helios to help get her over there safely. Pacing over towards the upper suite of Mt. Verner, I sent them messages to meet me outside their residences. As I reached their places again, I found the two of them arguing like normal. Rubbing my temples, I let out a sigh.

Helios turned towards me as I walked up. He scorned,

"So it's our guildleader once again. I love waiting at random places for extended periods."

I eyed the albony, "Or, Really? If you'd like, I could just send you to fight Hybrids by yourself on Blegara. It would only be until you die. Maybe you'd prefer doing that?"

Helios stiffened up for a moment, fear racing up his spine. I spread out my hands,

"Ok then, it sounds like you won't be complaining about waiting a few minutes for me anymore. Good. Now I need you both to take Amara over towards the Elysium camp tonight. According to Althea, their plans went well, and they'll be getting access to an Elysian world soon. I need you both to keep Amara safe while we get the perfect opportunity to go through their warp."

Florence gestured to me, "So, planet owner, what's next for you?"

I raised a hand, squeezing it into a fist,

"I'll be making an army."

Chapter 284: Amassing Many

-Althea-

I pulled myself out of the warm corpse of a monster, having torn out its ribs by hand. Slinging blood from my arms, I let out a gasp of disgust while throwing a thick entrail off my shoulder. Killing monsters was the worst thing ever, and this was why. I somehow always ended up covered in monster guts.

I threw the body sideways, having just killed this giant, roaming salamander eldritch. It found me taking an afternoon nap under a tree, so it swallowed me whole. I woke up and gave the beast some severe indigestion, and now I found myself soaked in purple-colored blood and guts. It didn't smell like normal blood, at least. This was more like just cut grass, and to me, that smelled a whole lot better overall.

Not knowing what would happen if this stuff dried onto me, I ran through the forest and found a stream. A quick dive later, and the muck flowed off me. The water was a bit chilly, yeah, but it was more than worth it. After running through the trees some, I wind-dried my jumpsuit and hair. Once done, I swung the mess on my head around a bit. Stepping up to a puddle, I gave myself a look-see.

It wasn't my best look, but I could pull this off.

It was time for me to meet with Florence and Helios, both of them escorting Amara over the countryside to this location. We stuck with realtime travel because it wouldn't set off any warp searching magic. To me, those royals were way overqualified for this job, but getting Amara here was pretty important. Cause I mean, our whole operation pinned on her infiltrating Elysium's system.

That's why this meetup was super important. Though a bit late, I wasn't that behind schedule, so I skulked across a few plains and snuck my way up to our meeting coordinates. Maybe they'd be late too. Turns out, they weren't. Florence, Helios, and Amara sat around a creek, each sitting on rocks along the stream's flood bed. Not wanting to eavesdrop, I kept a bit of distance before attempting to de-stealth. Unfortunately, I somehow heard them talking. And I happened to see them too.

Whoops.

Helios stared off in the distance, bitter as usual, "It's obvious to me that the competition between us is your victory."

Florence leaned back, on his rock, casual and confident as could be, "What do you mean competition? Were we competing?"

“Don’t pretend that you don’t remember it. Daniel made it clear that we’d serve whoever did a better job of helping his guild. Already, you’ve established such a clear lead that I’m unable to match you anymore. My failure is inevitable, and it’s a bitter pill to swallow.”

Florence’s natural swagger dampened, his concern for Helios showing. Even if he was a complete jerk, he was still Florence’s brother. The talkative royal sat up straight, coughing into a hand,

“I, uh, I think that oftentimes, when forced to accept something difficult like this, it’s oftentimes like medicine. It’s usually the antidote we need most but want the least. In that way, this situation might be showcasing a weakness you need to work on.”

Helios glared at Florence, his eyes hidden under his mask,

“Weakness, hm? I’m doubtful. This clash of ours has simply proven that I am unable to match you. That’s right – you of all people. I’m being forced to admit you’re my superior. It’s obvious I’ve fallen into pits so deep I doubt I will ever crawl out of them.”

Florence frowned but stayed positive, “You haven’t fallen lower. I’ve simply risen up.”

Helios shook his head, “But you’ve been an example of failure, time and time again. Have things changed this much from just a subtle shift in circumstance? You honestly believe your place changes that easily?”

Florence narrowed his eyes, somewhat peeved, “No. My rise in potential is a matter of the place, not the situation. I simply mesh better with this new guild than you do. Think of it like this – it’s obvious to anyone who’s attempted many things that they cannot be the best at every one of them. That is the case here.”

Helios stared at the flowing water as Amara sat in silence. Helios murmured, “I’ve been thinking of our places as of late. I’ve known you were always in my shadow, and I became comfortable with that reality. I exceeded your performance in every situation, yet now I am the one who walks in your shadow. I believe it’s not like the shadow you walked in, which was perceived. My walk in the dark is genuine.”

Florence's curiosity peaked, "What do you mean by shadows?"

Helios shook his head, "These events have forced me to confront an uncomfortable truth – I was never your superior. Our family put you in a small box, and you couldn't escape it. Over time, you and I believed that box to be the real you. In the end, it was an illusion. Obolis saw the situation clearly, as always."

Helios met his brother's eye, "It turns out that you're talented in certain respects. Perhaps that is why I despise you. I'm told you're a pathetic waste of space, yet you're my better in many ways."

Helios reached out a hand, freezing a portion of the stream beside us,

"If you are useless yet my superior, then what does that make me? I've been wondering that lately."

Florence's voice rose, "You keep thinking of me as some inferior. By doing that, you're dragging us both down. We each have pieces of us that excel in certain places. Instead of constantly comparing us, how about you try using what you're good at? That's what I've been doing here, and it has worked wonders. I haven't felt this good in decades."

Florence stood up, "It's as simple as this. My time here has taught me that what our family says about us doesn't define who we are. It's...it's like how everyone thinks of me in our family. Just because they believe I'm useless doesn't make it so. In this new place, I am a potent force. I simply needed the space to showcase that."

Florence pointed at his brother, "You are the same."

Helios rubbed his temples, "That is my problem. I've already been a success. There is no opportunity to rise here. Instead, my fall from grace since talking to that damn guildleader has been steady and steep. Now I'm wallowing in death threats instead of redeeming my past shortcomings."

Helios tapped his head with his gauntlet, "My frustration leaks out in my words, and then I simply dig myself into a deeper hole. It's my fault, and I understand that. That frustrates me further, and I feed this vicious cycle."

Helios sighed, "It's like the tables have turned, and now I am the one who is destined for failure while you're now destined for success. As your brother, I should be happy for you...But I'm not. To me, that's pathetic."

Florence spread out his hands, "I resented you for a long time as well, but I came to the understanding that comparing myself to others is losing game. No matter my success, it will pale when compared to others. That is a simple truth of existence. The Empire bolsters that style of thought and treats it as just. It's a toxic wasteland of thought if you ask me."

"And I am trapped in that frame of mind. At least it feels that way."

Florence tapped the side of his head with a claw, "Come now, there's great power in your perspective. If you change your outlook here and now, things will change for the better. Think of this as an opportunity to discover parts of yourself you didn't know you had. Try something new, something bold."

Helios stared at the water as it overflowed the ice he made earlier, "I...I suppose I could. My situation could always change. It has before."

Florence gave Helios a pat on the back, "Exactly. You're the albony that made everyone around him appear incompetent and ineffectual by comparison. Don't forget the past battles you've won. This is perhaps a hard-fought clash, but you'll be victorious in the end. If you can't believe that, then trust me and my belief in it."

Helios stared at his hands, and the cipher inscribed gauntlet glistened under the sun's light,

"Hmm...Perhaps I'll actually listen to you this time. I've tried this before, and your consultation has led to disastrous consequences. That being said, it isn't as if anyone can misadvise all the time...Though you've tried."

Florence grinned at his brother, the smile evident even under his mask, "Well, you see, there is an art to failure. I'm quite practiced in it, and that allows me to see it differently." Florence lowered his hands and stared out at the riverbed,

"When someone has failed utterly, they are both at their lowest and their most powerful state. The weakness is obvious and needs no explaining. The reason you have power,

however, is because people are impressed by success despite your circumstances. It is when someone has failed time and time again yet persevered through their missteps and continued until success, that is when people are most affected.”

Florence swung his fist, “You are in a position to show not just competence. You get to show something more important: your character. That’s far more difficult to express, but it’s also far more valuable. For those reasons, don’t give up or give in.”

Florence stared his brother in the eye, “Pull through and be all the better for it.”

Helios let those words soak in for a second before staring forward. He stood up and nodded, “I…you may be right. I, I’ll need to think about it more.”

Florence backed up, “Of course. Take your time. We’ve got all day with how late Althea is.”

I frowned. I’d been here for like fifteen minutes by now, but this was too good to miss out on.

Helios gave his brother a shove, “You know, I thought of you as the lowest, most shabby albony I’d ever seen. I may have been wrong all this time.”

Florence put his hands on his hips, “Really now? You’ve finally changed your mind about me?”

Helios grabbed his brother’s shoulder and gave him a shake, “You’re not quite the most pathetic. You’re merely one of the most.”

Florence shoved Helios before the two of them began some kind of pushing contest. They went back and forth, following some clearly defined yet mystical set of rules as they did. It reminded me of some child’s game they played when they were younger, and only the two of them understood it. After a minute of watching, I walked out of the bushes so they could see me.

As I stepped out, Helios stiffened back up as if someone zapped him with lightning. Florence lowered his hands,

“Bah, you’re no fun.”

Helios pointed at me, “You saw nothing.”

I smirked, “Oh, of course not. I definitely didn’t record anything. Not at all.”

Helios flushed under his mask, and steam might as well have been fuming out of his ears. For the terrible things he’d done to me, I had to admit, Helios wasn’t entirely awful. He seemed like a guy who really wanted the pride and admiration of his family. He just learned how to get it in the wrong ways, and I didn’t know if that was his fault or the Empires.

It was probably a little bit of both. Either way, Florence covered for Helios, walking up to me,

“It’s good to see you again, Althea. How are things going in your mission?”

I raised an eyebrow, “I sent you a debrief? Didn’t you read it?”

“I-I prefer hearing it in person.”

Helios chided, “He was simply too lazy to read it.”

Florence turned to his brother, giving him a quick glare. Helios actually laughed under his breath as Florence turned back to me, “Okay, he’s right. I’m sorry.”

I rolled my eyes, “Well, at least you admitted it—sort of. Anyways, we’re doing pretty good, I guess. They don’t seem suspicious of us, and we’ve got some licenses that will let us warp around. Getting Amara through is going to require some finesse, but we should be fine with some of Hod’s shadowy magic.”

I propped my weight onto my hip, “After that, we’re going to need some luck. Hod’s shadowy magic stuff isn’t going to last very long. We’ll need to get somewhere safe, or else Amara will pop out of someone’s shadow in the open. If the situation starts

spiraling, we won't be able to send messages and get feedback since they block Schema's system on their planets."

I grimaced, "We'll be in the dark."

Florence put his hands on his hips, "You'll all be fine. You're a competent team, after all."

Helios walked up, his cape draped over him now, "I suppose you can say that. Competence is relative, after all."

I leaned back, "Oh, okay. So we must be really competent to you then?"

He deadpanned, "Not exactly."

Florence raised his hands, "Come on, guys, let's keep this civil. We're here to pass over Amara. Speaking of which-" Florence looked around, "Where is she?"

Amara's dry, raspy voice echoed out from behind me, "I'm here."

I jumped up, scared out of my mind. After a quick yelp, I pointed at her, "I thought you said your stealth skills sucked?"

Amara lifted her palms, staring at me with her weird eyes, "There is more to being unseen than simple skills, little lamb...But yes, I can be seen easily once exposed."

Florence had his hand over his chest, "You scared me as well. It looks like we won't have to worry about you all being found. Good luck."

I crossed my fingers, "Oh man, I am hoping that'll be the case. We're going to need it."

Florence gave us a nod before racing towards off towards the forest. Before he left, Florence passed me several rings Daniel made. They were the same kind he crafted for Ophelia, and when I put it on my finger, it gave a rush of stats like all his items did. It

also hefted my hand down, the tiny thing weighing like twenty pounds. Daniel was pretty dense, figuratively and literally, so I guess this was appropriate.

Either way, I turned to Amara, “Are you ready to warp tonight?”

She winced, “I am ready as I shall ever be...It’s rare for one to walk into a lion’s den, yet we do so willingly. Are you...certain, this is a good plan?”

I gave her as confident a smile as I could,

“Uh...yeah...Of course.”

-Daniel-

With Florence and Helios sent away, I got my mind for mass golem creation. That was my number one goal right now, so I used an app in my status to create a list of goals. Starting with speed, I brainstormed a few ways of getting faster at making golems. The first idea involved a time analysis where I understood what took time to make a golem. The idea for this kind of thing came from Torix. It sounded like something he’d do, that was for sure.

Either way, after uncovering the major time sinks, I wrote them down. There were three main time-stealing culprits: runic charging, harvesting skin, and elemental furnace production. For the charging bit, I needed more mana and more efficient runes. I detailed a work schedule where I spent several hours revising my runes for better mana efficiency, along with time for carving. The skin harvesting was a bit wonkier to think over.

I never, not in a trillion years, would’ve imagined that harvesting my skin would be a problem I needed to face head-on. Yet, here I was, thinking it through. I always sort of handled it with a quick, violent, and sheering pull. This ripped out random patches of armor on my arms, which worked well enough up to this point. I needed many, many times more of the stuff now, and my current system wasn’t going to hold up.

With that in mind, I ran a few tests on my skin. When hot, cold, or even superheated, my skin remained resilient. It maintained form even under extreme stressors and gravity. When I finished all my basic attempts, I moved onto more drastic measures. I

took an enormous hold of mana and used a gravitational well for ripping one of my arms off. A quick metallic thud and cord-ey rip later, and my arm was out of its socket.

It healed back within a minute. Being a dimension had its perks.

This new strategy of entire limb harvesting functioned much better than my previous attempts. Now I thought that the arm wouldn't meltdown like my skin would. It was flesh and bone to me. Turns out, I was dead wrong about that. My body was made of dimensional, er, stuff down to the cells themselves, so the entire arm boiled down no problem.

In fact, it wasn't much different from the skin I used before. The only real difference was a better density overall from my bones. I didn't even need to melt my blood either, the liquid already quite warm. Well, relatively speaking. It was difficult to know how hot or cold I was now, my own understanding of temperature being so warped.

It reminded me of my stay in space for a bit. It was cold there, but apparently, it shouldn't be since there wasn't anything for my body heat to convect to out there. I didn't know how any of that worked exactly, but maybe measuring my body temperature would help me figure out what was going on. I put that at the very bottom of my extensive to-do list, and I moved on to ripping my arms off.

You know, the important stuff.

Pooling double my bodyweight's worth of dimensional fabric in my various storages, I moved onto the elemental furnace issue. So far, I took out a substantial amount of mana from this ancient ciphering device at all points. This revolved around my Congruent Mind Strain ability. My main problem revolved around the amount of mana harvested from the furnace while doing all that.

When I backlogged the furnace process, the amount of mana I gained dropped like a bowling ball off the side of a building. In the end, I got less than half the net potential of the furnace. I mean, that made sense since revving the device at full throttle required tremendous focus. Pulling more focus into that process meant less concentration was left for the manufacturing of the golems themselves.

This left me at an impasse. On the one hand, a large portion of my time could be saved from using the furnace to the fullest extent. On the other hand, my crafting suffered

when I put less than one hundred percent of my attention to it. Thinking things through, I came up with a solution.

I took a few tests of the time required for the runic charging and making the golem. The runic powering took around twice as long as the molding process did. With that in mind, I put more and more of my mind's abilities into the furnace charging. After a while, I reached an equilibrium where the molding took just as long as the charging process.

With that, I shaved about 17% of the time off of making the golem.

It wasn't an enormous, earth-shattering gain, but this was a part of the process. Every innovation and efficiency gain I made added up over time. Just as well, I didn't enjoy being this analytical, but I learned from Torix and Obolis that methodical approaches worked wonders. At least when it came to production like this.

Moving on, I pulled out some screenshots of my grimoire and pulled them all up in my status. Staring at them all, I found a few kinks and flaws in my translation that needed work. The initial, non-ciphered runes weren't structured as efficiently as they could be either. That probably was because I asked for them on such short notice.

Either way, I fixed those issues before moving onto the ciphered sections. Finding useless segments, I eliminated about a fifth of these texts over the next three hours. These weren't content changes per se, but more so concision improvements. After all, most of any language was formalities and non-content words. By eliminating all but the necessary stuff in work like this, I made the passages meaning clearer and shorter at the same time.

That meant less charging and a better golem.

By now, the sun began setting in the distance. Handling all those improvements, I got to the meat and bones of this operation – making the actual golems. My changes sped up my work by quite a bit, having found a nice balance between charging, forming, and building. I also fell into a flow of sorts, getting involved in my work's details.

I gave myself breaks every few hours, and during that downtime, I searched for ways of improving productivity. Many searches popped up on Schema's web, and I used a few of the most commonly referenced tips. The most mentioned one was goal setting, which

I used right away. Using many hours and all of my mental processing power, I came up with a very pivotal and challenging to comprehend goal.

Make more golems.

I know, I know, revolutionary stuff.

Jokes aside, it worked to my favor. A week of this crafting passed, and my golem creation's speed improved by leaps and bounds. On the first day, I made four golems. On the second, I created five. I capped out at six on the third day, unable to break that plateau by the week's end. Doubling my production speed was more than adequate enough for me, however.

I ended up making thirty-nine super golems. Including Alpha, Beta, my third golem, I had forty-two total. It was a military force of exceptional might, vastly exceeding our guild's previous net potential. They actually worked like Breakers in overall power, meaning we could tear battalions down with ease. It was like we gained a thousand systemized gialgathens overnight.

Speaking of which, I wasn't the only one hard at work over the last week. Chrona and Krog went into a full-on general mode, whipping the gialgathens back into shape. The break was over, and it was up to them to get the gialgathens systemized. That required clearing many dungeons, and so they did that in spades.

Using teams of three, Chrona and Krog sent out gialgathens towards the North, making sure they stayed very high in the air. We didn't want everybody seeing them all the time, so they rushed over clouds. Being in the upper stratosphere made even the enormous beasts appear small like a falcon or eagle. Perspective was funny like that. Get close or far away from something, and it looked completely different.

They used that for their stealth. Going North meant the chance was even lower that they'd be found by Elysium forces. That risk couldn't be eliminated either way, not without forcing the gialgathens underground. Suppressing them in caves was like never letting a bird leave its cage. In Krog's own words, 'A life without flight was a life not worth living.'

I disagreed, having walked around for the most part up till recently. That being said, I soared around the sky when traveling around Mt. Verner. While surrounded by white clouds, a blue sky, and the horizon beneath me, I had to admit there was something

special about flying. Going back to a life without flight would be damn hard, so I understood the gialgathen's fears.

Their concerns were grounded in a reality where they were robbed of something important. Because of that, I didn't fight them much on the issue, and neither did Torix. Gialgathens were akin to level capped Speakers in power as well, and with the need for a large, effective army, some risks were worth taking. This extensive use of flight and organized teamwork let them clear and map dungeons far away from where we lived as well.

This exploration gained us a better grip on the conditions North of Mt. Verner, our excursions leaking into what was once Canada. What surprised me most while reading reports was the population density around there. Though fewer people lived there than before, it was kind of comparable to before Schema's culling.

Personally, I expected a massive drop off in the number of people there. I mean, the winters in Michigan and Iowa were challenging to deal with, but Canada was on a whole other level. My dad actually grew up in Canada, and the guy experienced some cold winters. He told me a story once from one of those times.

Apparently, there was a goggle warning where you couldn't walk outside without, well, goggles. If you did, your eyeballs would freeze in your skull because the wind was so fast and cold. It was a crazy account of how cold it got, and that story really stuck with me. It turns out, Schema's system allowed people to survive those winters.

The resistances gave species a much easier time handling more extreme environments. This meant there was enough people out there that it was worth saving them at some point. The gialgathens also ended up clearing out a lot of the eldritch North of the Great Lakes. We weren't sanitizing the entirety of the area, but thinning out the hordes helped those there.

We passed over a thousand systemized gialgathens during this time, which was a real milestone for the guild. They worked with Torix's mind mages to create units that thrived in the air, sort of like dragon riders but on gialgathens. This gave them mobility and meant the Blighted weren't as effective against them either. Mind mages were lethal against those monstrosities in that way.

We aimed for fighting on Blegara, however, so Chrona and Krog taught them tactics for underwater combat. Chrona and Krog had lived for centuries, and in their backlog of

information, they read about ancient tactics from their species. Long ago, they fought the leviathans under the seas, and those same tactics then proved useful now. This gave the gialgathens profound confidence, which bolstered morale overall.

Outside of those efforts, Torix progressed with the Omega Strains during this time. I only supplied a couple dozen to him, but Torix used them to their fullest potential. Using more stringent guidelines, he progressed the shabby group I first saw into an elite, anti-Hybrid force. This specialized unit worked with the golems I created, generating battalions that decimated the Adair's forces.

Torix lined one super golem per unit of three soldiers. With tactics taught by the lich himself, these soldiers implemented strategies against the Hybrids, Blighted, and their behemothic pillars. During my breaks, I read these reports and viewed footage sent my way, and they impressed me. Even if they weren't quite as effective as I was, they were damn good in their own right.

This gave us a solid backbone for retaking Blegara one city at a time. We weren't ready for the unreal swarms Elysium produced, but this was a fine start. Once we got on Blegara, we'd expand the Omega Strain divisions to number the thousands, and I'd keep making golems in the meantime. Once we had several hundred of them, holding a large territory wasn't out of the question.

Once held, the gialgathens could live there, have families, and settle down. They could get back to something commonplace, and this vision of a future motivated them more than merely surviving. We'd expand afterward with golems keeping the countryside clean of eldritch and Hybrids alike. This let people move and trade, keeping an economy formed.

We'd even up the ante on our recruiting once we established this kind of protective influence. I could run through a higher leveled fringe world and harvest blue cores to create secure cities. The perfect place for that was actually the Ahcorus's home planet, where Plazia Ruhl dominated. Reaching him would require clearing high-level dungeons, which carried high-level cores. Now, I owned a few places where I could actually put the blue cores to use.

These factors were recognized by more than just me. Torix mentioned a few of these reinforcers in ad campaigns, and our mountain-based hummed with optimism. Helping people, saving planets, and expanding territories got people motivated. That motivation led to more outstanding production, innovation, and good times all around.

All this hinged on the mission to the Elysian world, however. The others went dark for the last week, but we were confident they'd succeed. We sent Hod and Althea, and they'd done this countless times before by now. Infiltration, completion, and then escaping was something they did daily. These thoughts drummed in my head as our week of work ended.

Everything finished on our front, so now many of the guild's elite were with me as we waited on the Western front of Mt. Verner. An expansive view of the countryside rolled beneath us, and this was where we agreed to rendezvous. I missed Althea, and any information on Elysium would be a massive boon for the guild. All that left us buzzing with enthusiasm.

That enthusiasm dampened when the time for our meeting passed. In all honesty, the team being late wasn't that unexpected. Complications were bound to occur at some point. We still kept our assurance level high. Of course, their five minutes late turned into fifteen. After thirty minutes, the people around me grew nervous.

I relaxed on a gravity well, knowing these kinds of issues come up all the time. An hour passed. By now, most of those around me twisted like knots. By then, a sinking feeling crawled up my chest too. Two hours went by, and now I joined the anxiety of the crew, though I kept it to myself. When three full hours flashed by, a haunting realization popped up in our minds.

We weren't worried anymore that they'd be late or even fail the mission. None of that mattered to me anymore. I just wanted them back. I wanted Althea back. I'd gotten so used to success I'd forgotten we could fail. As four hours passed, that understanding was like a nail being driven through my jaw. They still weren't back.

And it didn't look like they'd be back anytime soon.

Chapter 285: A New World's Ways

-Althea-

Waiting in the brush was about dull as you'd imagine it would be. Amara and I were about fifteen miles from the Elysian camp, and no one was even close to finding us. I passed the time with a few downloaded apps from Schema's store, having way more credits than I knew what to do with. However, I wasn't exactly the biggest fan of video games, so I eventually turned to Amara.

“Hey...So, uh, how are you feeling?”

Amara seethed, “Terrified of what we are about to undertake.”

“Yeah, so am I. A little bit, anyway. I’ve done this thing before, so I kind of know what to expect.”

With the branches surrounding us on all sides, Amara turned a palm to me, the eye sickly and yellow, “What can we expect? Is it to be eaten alive?”

I frowned, “That’s definitely not a part of the plan. Right now, the others are scouting out the planet and seeing what’s up. They’ll be back to let us know what kind of plan they have in the works. We’ll follow it, get on the world, and then warp out using Alexander’s illegal magic.”

Amara’s eyes narrowed, “Do you honestly believe it shall be so simple?”

I shrugged, “Uh, yeah. That’s the thing about plans; when you follow through, they tend to work.”

“And what if the plan breaks down, and we are stranded on another world with no way out?”

I gave her a thumbs up, “We improvise. They have warps that can get us there and back. Using one can act as a failsafe.”

Amara peered down with her hands, her hair covering her face, “We could, though being there is racking my nerves. What they do to the eldritch and silvers to turn them into Hybrids...I don’t wish to know the process. I can only imagine the torment behind such a thing.”

I winced, remembering the giant pits of Hybridizing silvers. It was the kind of process that required a psychopath to keep it going, that was for sure. Either that or they had no mercy for the eldritch and silvers alike. In my opinion, it was a little bit of both. Seeing Amara shiver a bit, she looked like a worn-down little girl, if only for a second. I put a hand on her shoulder,

“I’ll be keeping you safe, so just, you know, stay calm.”

Amara turned her palm back to me, “You are a but a sheep.” She leaned towards me and smelled my arm, “Yet you carry the blood of wolves in you. I can’t determine what you are, but it is something warped to the core.”

I didn’t expect a compliment from reassuring her, but ouch, that stung. I pulled my hand back and crossed my arms, “Well, if that’s how you want to be, then fine. Let’s just not talk.”

Seconds later, Amara sighed, “I...I am merely nervous about this mission. I do not enjoy danger or adventures alike, and I prefer my research in my safe lab room. Elsewhere is dangerous, and I know what will become of me should I be captured. They will rip my mind apart, searching for answers to Schema’s system and the codes lying therein.”

I pursed my lips, “How exactly do you know about Schema’s system anyway?”

Her lips grinned, the jagged teeth menacing, “I am an insider of sorts. For now, that is all I’ll say.”

Bushes rustled in the distance, and I warped across planes. Skulking near the sound, I found the others pulling themselves through the woodlands to find us. Instead of popping up, I sent them a message. Seconds later, I warped out,

“Hey, guys.”

Lester and Alexander expected me, but Isa failed to read her messages. She yelped before narrowing her eyes at me. I put my hands on my hips, “Look, I sent you a message this time. What else do you want from me?”

Other Hod peeled from Isa’s shadow, and he spoke like a snake, “For you to be perceptible before you arrive. It is a trial to not attack you each time you appear.”

Alexander spread out his arms, “Just read the message, guys. Not that complicated.”

I looked at each of them as Amara walked out of her bush. Amara hissed, “It would appear that each of you seems peeved. I’m left wondering why?”

Alexander waved his arms, “We’ve been up since eight in the morning. It’s 4:00 A.M. in the middle of the night on the next day. It’s like we’re pulling an all-nighter.”

Isa nodded at the wizard’s apprentice, “I can’t wait for a good night’s rest when we get back to base.”

Other Hod cackled, “Oh, then you shall be disappointed. Much time will pass across the veil and on the enemy’s world. Expect to be tested.”

I spread out my hands, “So, uhm, did you guys see the other planet yet?”

Lester nodded, “You bet. It was insane. They live in this, this ultra-wide mall sort of thing. It’s beneath the ground level, and a layer of some clear material that keeps people safe from the wind and the eldritch, er, I mean monsters there.”

Amara looked with her palms towards Lester, “You may call them what they are – eldritch.”

“So yeah, eldritch run over the area, so they use some stealth technology to keep the colony hidden. There are people everywhere, and they are from all over the place. I’ll be honest, you just kind of have to see the place. It was wild.”

I rolled my hand, “That’s great and all, but we’re not there to be tourists. How was their warp situated? Was it well guarded? Are there places for Alexander to plant his ritual to get us out of there? Those are the kinds of things we need to know.”

Other Hod stepped up to us, “I observed in their shadow. The warp is in a room with a tunnel leading to the main megastructure. Two guards were stationed there at all times, and I don’t expect it to be different when we arrive. From subtle questioning, we gathered they close a vault door there during the night.”

I pointed at the shadowy figure, “That’s perfect. We’ll use that cutting technique I mentioned to get through then.”

Other Hod nodded, his eyes red and ominous in the dark, “We are ready to leave now if you’re all ready.” Other Hod stared at Amara, “And, you may have as much time as you need, however long that may be.”

Amara stepped past Other Hod, “We have been ready for hours. Let us leave.”

I felt for the poor shadowy eldritch getting shut down like that. We stepped past several Hybrid patrols, my scouting letting everybody move along without any worries. There weren’t a ton of patrols during the night or anything, but Hybrids had keen senses. Getting past them with our motley crew required some distance. I gave the group that, and we were within range of the Elysian camp’s warp in minutes.

The others hid in an alleyway, disguised by the darkness. Two patrolmen, both of them remnants, stared forward with their armors around the town’s warp. They put it in a central hub of the city, near the silvers’ zoo. Several high priority buildings lingered nearby, letting the VIP’s of Elysium go to and from the warp with ease. It wasn’t situated in a building either, meaning entry was a cinch.

Getting through in the open would be like ringing an alarm bell since we’d most likely kill the two remnants. Instead, we went with a more subtle approach. The others clustered into the shadow of Other Hod and the dark entity shoved himself into a shady spot near the warp’s entrance. I skulked off to the side before changing my form.

I could always change shape ever since getting a grip on my eldritch powers. At first, my changes were grotesque and unrefined. Having practiced night and day, I ended up with reasonably convincing transformations by now. My deceptive guises worked better in the dark too. Using one of those disguises, I turned myself into a little girl with a torn-off arm.

Using a recording of a Hybrid, I opened my status and played one of their grizzly, metallic screeches. At the same time, I screamed in agony. The two guards were well within earshot, so I kept screaming out and playing the prolonged recording. When the two remnants rounded the corner, they saw me stumbling away.

An urgency gripped them as the two guards sprinted towards my location with their spears primed for combat. I kept them on the hook, ensuring they got several blocks

away from the warp and into a residential area. After letting them get closer to me, they saw my dress and cloak, along with the bloody nub I had for an arm.

Keeping them on the run for about five minutes, the guards got closer over time. Right as they became more suspicious, I got the message I'd been waiting for. I ran past an alleyway's corner as the guards got within grabbing distance from me. In an instant, I walked onto another plane. Leaping up, the guards stopped, wondering where the little girl went.

Using wings, I glided down towards the warp, Amara already having hacked the device. As I neared them, our team charged up the warp, my commotion causing a stir several blocks away. With everyone distracted, we shifted across the veil, reaching the other world's coordinates. Stepping out of the ionizing spray, it was like Other Hod said. We stared at a bleak room without much light, outside of some dim rays leaking from windows above. In front of us, a massive steel door locked us inside, no guards within the warp room. Massive steel panels showed subtle signs of rusting, and the weary chamber groaned from the wind above.

Out into this room, the others lobbed themselves out of Hod's shadow magic, and the poor birdman heaved for air as they fell. Other Hod gasped with his shadows falling off of him in a thick slop,

"Bleca ruha. Sheagoma lacknock."

I stared at him, unable to understand anything he said. I was so used to Schema's language conversions that I forgot what not knowing a language was like. Even without a translation, I got the message as Other Hod regressed, the shade coming off him and Hod returning. Reading my confusion, Amara slapped a pointed piece of metal into my shoulder. I let out a quiet yelp before an approximation of Schema's system came up in my view.

She hissed, "You can thank me later."

Thank goodness someone knew about this stuff. We'd be done for without her. She walked around, slapping steel into exposed skin for the party, and Amara giggled as others yelped at her subtle smacks. Hod turned and looked at everybody,

"Hod wonder where Hod is. Hod know Hod confused."

Amara walked over and pierced his wing with one of the software discs. Hod yelped, and I walked towards him, putting a hand on the side of his beak,

“Hey, remember me?”

Hod spread his wings and gave me a hug, “Hod remember lady friend anywhere. How lady friend? Being pretty?”

I gave him a smile, “I’m doing great. You know what would make me feel even better?”

Hod flexed his scrawny arms, “Hod flex muscles?”

I scoffed, “Yeah, that too big man. I need you to follow us quietly as you can, alright?”

Hod stiffened up and gave me a salute, “Yes, Lady Friend. Hod listen.”

I turned to the others, and Alexander stared around, “Ok, so we’re here. Amara, you need to change the residual coordinates we left behind.”

The eldritch stood up and walked over to the warp’s terminal. She pulled some tech mumbo jumbo before turning to us, “It’s finished. They won’t know we came here, but I can’t eliminate the fact we’ve warped. They’ll know it was just used, so the guards are coming.”

Alexander put his hands on the sides of his head, “Oh shit, what do we do next? Remember, Alexander. Remember.”

Isa gave the kid a pat on the back, “Come on now, lighten up. We’re just getting started.”

She turned to Lester, “Here’s what we need to do.” The main dungeoneer for our guild lifted her hand and pointed up,

“We’re going to break one of those windows, and that’ll alert the guards here. They’ll come in through that vault door over there to check it out. We’ll walk in through that door as they open it, with neither of them the wiser. Are we ready?”

Our group nodded. I thanked whoever sent Isa with us because she just made the chaotic situation seem a lot more in control. Isa pointed at the glass, “You’re up, Alexander. Make a hard rock.”

The mage calmed himself down before channeling origin mana. A second later, a small stone fell from the origin blot. Isa pointed at me, so I grabbed the rock before rearing my arm back. With my leg in the air, I torqued force through my shoulder and launched the stone through the roof. It shattered the ceiling like we wanted, but my throw may have been a littlebit too hard. About a third of the glass on the roof collapsed from the stone’s impact.

As it sprinkled around us, the others glared at me. I blushed, “Huh...So, uhm, yeah... sorry.”

The guards rushed down the hallway, opening the vault door, and Isa pointed above it. We raced over there while I made my hands all grip-ey. Like a spider, I pulled myself up while Hod flew. Alexander pulled out his grimoire and channeled a spell. Mana coursed through his palms while Alexander hovered up the others and himself.

The giant slab of metal opened up below us, swinging with little sound. Two remnant guards in their customary armor stormed in, looking around for the disturbance. Finding the shattered windowpane, they walked over while cursing,

“Ah, dammit. Again? Already?”

“Something big must of made this hole.”

“Yeah, and ugly too.”

I narrowed my eyes at the two jerk guards, one of them lifting the glass from the ground using magic. The other guard used a jetpack to rise to the ceiling before pulling out a plasmic welder. They went to work, fixing the broken fixture as we skulked out of the premise.

Sneaking through a dim hallway of rusted metal, Alexander gasped as he set Isa, Amara, and Lester down. Alexander heaved for air, and his nose bled, his mana depleted from having to lift so much weight. His palms steamed with deep burns on them, the mana having singed his skin. Isa and Lester raised him by putting his arms over their shoulders, and the mage passed out while we walked back out through a sliding glass doorway to outside.

Or, well, it wasn't really outside. We stepped into a vast, double-sided alleyway. Alleyway wasn't the right word, but it was a better description than a mall since everything was so old. The stores, housing, and mineshafts sprawled out under the customary clear panes above. Everything filled out into a line about a mile wide, with buildings and businesses crammed into the premise.

Neon signs, piled trash, and dripping pipes gave the entire megastructure a worn-down look. The stagnant, stuffy air held an uncomfortable humidity which steamed over at the edges of the windowpanes overhead. One side of this place looked better off than the other, fewer mineshafts over there and more upscale businesses. At least as deluxe as they could be since this place passed its glory days long ago.

What was important was that our team's info panned out – it was nighttime. A little light leaked in from outside, kind of like a sunrise and sunset at the same time. We used this pseudo night as camouflage while we ran through the townsite, following Isa and Lester. After a minute of walking, we reached an alleyway surrounded by several abandoned homes. Heaving for air, they caught their breath for a minute.

The situation seemed stable, so I leaned towards them and whispered, "Where do we go from here?"

Isa grinned with a drip of sweat pouring down her brow, "Yeah, so this is where it gets more complicated. We need to rest a minute before moving towards that side of the building."

She pointed at the dimmer side of the expanse. Looking closer, the buildings showed more wear and tear than the buildings along the opposite side of this endless line of buildings. Isa took a deep breath,

"These guys, they're on some kind of tidally locked planet. However, it's not completely locked, so this ring of buildings has to be moved every couple of centuries.

This is the most stable part of the planet right now. That's why they build here based on what the guide told us."

Hod stood up straight, "Hod enjoy history lesson, but what history lesson have to do with Hod?"

Lester rolled his hand, "The point is, we're going to the abandoned ruins where this ring of buildings used to be. Every couple dozen miles along the older side of this place, we should be able to find a nook or cranny leading to those ruins."

Isa pointed at me, "We'll need you to cut us a way into that place. Once we're there, we'll need Alexander to cast some atmospheric magic to help us survive. Schema helps, but this isn't the kind of planet you want to just be on the surface of. It's the weather. It comes in these huge dust storms, and the creatures crawl everywhere here. It's a fringe world because of that."

My eyes narrowed, "How'd you figure this all out? Surely the guide wouldn't go into this much detail?"

Isa rolled her eyes, "We talked to some homeless people. Give them some food and time, and they're usually more than just a little chatty. They also know a thing or two."

I frowned, "I couldn't understand anyone when I got here. How did you guys?"

Isa tapped the side of her face, "They gave us some kind of software implement so that we could. Amara checked it out for bugs earlier when we regrouped. According to her, we're safe."

Amara already worked within her status, the red standing out from the standard blue coloring. She got to work, breaking into Elysium's system already. I turned to her, "How long do you think this will take?"

The eldritch hissed, "Three to four days at most. Their security isn't as extensive as Schema's encryptions."

I turned to the dungeoneers, "Then, uh, you guys lead the way."

Isa pointed at me, “We need you to scout out where to go next. Find a crevice leading to the old ruins. We’ll follow you there after you come back.”

I gave her a terse nod and walked onto a different plane. With my breath held, I sprinted out of there, the metal underfoot creaking under my feet. The buildings blurred around my vision as a sandstorm raged above us. Rocks bounced off the translucent covering, the material resistant to any impacts. I winced at that, knowing they’d discover something was amiss about the broken glass in the warp room.

There wasn’t anything I could do about it now. After several minutes of running, I found a section of missing buildings. In place of living space, a slit appeared in the endless tunnel. Pacing down there, I found a steel tunnel leading down towards a sewer that drained its contents into an underground cavern. It was good enough for our escape. Retracing my steps, the rest of our group waited while huddled near the abandoned alleyway.

I couldn’t send them a message, so I appeared out of their view. I stepped over, waving my arms so I wouldn’t surprise them. My new strategy worked, and they followed me towards the exit. They moved at a crushed snail’s pace, Alexander holding us back. To speed us up, I pulled out a mana potion from my storage, pouring it over Alexander’s face.

It woke the wizard up, and the potion seeped through his skin. I lifted him up in my arms, turning towards the others, “We don’t have time to carry him this slowly. Come on.”

I jogged forward, and the others ran to keep up. It annoyed me how slow they were, each of them moving in slow-motion outside of Hod. They couldn’t help it, but I couldn’t help my frustration either. We passed several nightly patrols, some of Hod’s shadow magic serving as a distraction for us. Within an hour, we reached the tunnel I found the side slit from earlier.

Looking around, the others made sure no one followed us while I pulled out a section of sliced wall. I cut it earlier, making sure it fit back in place like a puzzle piece. That trick made it so that it took a long time for someone to find where we left and entered. Funneling everyone through a cramped crawlway, we reached a series of pipes. I pulled the same tactic, taking out a chunk of the tube.

That's where the situation got ugly. Blegh.

We crept through the sewage pipe, the entire crawl resulting in a tight squeeze. The smell was unlike anything I'd ever had to suffer through, and it left me gagging. To my chagrin, Lester vomited on the way there. I nearly killed everyone when insects made of more leg than body came pouring out of the crevices of pipes. Those creepy insects squirmed over me before reaching Lester's vomit.

We smooshed several of them just moving, and I turned to the dungeoneer and seethed,

"You throw up again, and you'll be losing more than just your guts. Do you hear me?"

The poor guy gave me a nod with his eyes wide, "Yes, mam."

I felt terrible about that later, but there's only so much a girl can do. At least no one else threw the hell up after that. Thirty minutes of crawling continued, and by the time we got out of there, the sewage might as well have fused with our skin. The pipe ended with a chute of waste pouring out into some water below us.

Broadening my irises to see in the dark, I found the ledge from earlier. Extending my arm into a whip with a bone hook, I swung over towards the ridge. Using that same hook, I created a zipline for the others to cross. Gripping with lengthened fingers, I pulled my flexible, deformed arm taught over the gap.

I spoke in a soft voice, "Hey, use this to get across. We don't want to leave evidence we were here."

They listened to me, which was nice of them. Hod held Alexander, getting the boy across. He still hadn't recovered from his mana overuse earlier. The others wrapped their arms and legs around my arm and skulked through. It took a few minutes, but everyone was safe. As they got over, Lester gave my long arm a tap,

"Where did you get this rope? It's effective, but it feels kind of gross."

Pulling my arm back, I accidentally gave him a slap on the back while making my limb familiar again. Obviously, it was entirely accidental, so I said,

“Oh, that was my arm you guys just used. Sorry, it’s gross.”

Isa gave Lester a shove, “First the vomit and now this. Are you trying to get on her bad side?”

Lester let out a cough, “No, but that doesn’t mean I’m not doing a good job of it.”

Isa let out a hearty laugh, “Hah, let’s go. We need to put some distance between us and them.”

We got away from the megastructure at the middle of the planet, and before we knew it, I carved us a route back into the old settlements from these caverns. If I thought the previous town was rusty, this place carried red wind and powder everywhere. The abandoned buildings served as breeding grounds for metal-eating eldritch as well, and the air stung my lungs.

It stung my friend’s lungs too, and the entire place smelled of blood because of it. Whether that was the rust or my lungs getting shredded by particles, I couldn’t tell. Combine that with the dry, water soaking wind, and this place wasn’t the funnest place to just sit around in. We managed by chugging health potions as we went forward. Hod kept moving like usual, almost enjoying the dry dust in the air.

It left my eyes hurting and tearing up as we crossed this desolate, empty superstructure. I didn’t know what else to call it, the expanse barren. It was an abandoned version of the last place. Above us, the crystal panels that kept the dust storms out were splintered beyond repair. The window panes crushed under rocks, adding a jagged edge to the ground and the air alike. Monsters eyed us from a distance as we walked, the steel eaters hungry for the iron in our blood.

Other eldritch, the alpha predators here, ate the steel eaters as well. They hid in the dense, red clouds, all of these monsters walking around us. Green, glowing eyes opened in the red smog around us. These hulking, four-legged tank monsters hulked around us like rabid dogs.

At this point, Hod took charge now, securing the perimeter around us. Each time one of these shadowy figures attempted attacking us, Hod tore their eyes out with the sharpened talons of his feet. He used magic I didn’t know the guy could cast, imbuing

his feathers with energy. The spare plumage lobbed like explosive shrapnel at the monsters, letting us make our way towards a sealed-off room.

It looked like a shelter used to house people a long time ago. Bunk beds lined up in several rows, only decayed frames remaining. The doors ripped out a long time ago, and many bite marks lined the outer walls on the most rusted parts. The dilapidated skeletons of bipedal, uhm, lizards, I guess? They piled in the corners in piles.

Lester frowned at the place, "It's perfect..."

Hod smashed two metal eaters' skulls, the lipless monstrosities falling in piles of burnt and orange gore. Their bodies congealed in seconds, turning into gelatinous piles of corpses. From the clouds above, slithering, steel cobras lunged down and spit onto those piles. Melting the congealed substance, they devoured the metal eaters in a frenzy.

Isa put her hands on her hips, "We're not outside, even if there isn't much keeping us out of there. That'll do for now."

I created hundreds of filaments over my forearm before brushing a clean area for Alexander. Setting him down, I pulled out a rebreather from my dimensional storage. Putting it on him, I turned to the others,

"This atmosphere is breathable but toxic. Get some rebreathers on."

They followed my command, everyone but Hod putting on a mask. The birdman stayed outside, securing the perimeter. I left Alexander and helped slice the monsters down. Keeping to the massive cobras, I slit them apart as they lunged at us. I got good looks at them as I did, and their metal scales explained how they survived here.

These creatures reminded me of the silvers, though living off rust instead of mana pollution. Life found a way, at least when the eldritch were involved. These snakes used an acidic venom to melt the iron eaters' metal shells, and that let them feast on the mush left behind. At one point, I caught a cobra lunging at my face. The monster's teeth lined its throat all the way down, making its open mouth look like a pit of needles.

Needless to say, I found those snakes more intimidating than the metal eaters. The hulking, four-legged iron munchers weren't slouches either, though. They carried

enormous jaws full of shearing teeth. Metal plated them, big surprise, and they walked around with glowing patches on their underbellies. My guess, their stomachs were like furnaces that melted their food into absorbable nutrients.

For them, at least. Either way, we culled several dozen of the creatures before securing our perimeter. We didn't let the cobras feast on the bodies of the iron munchers since they'd reproduce and multiply off of them. From facing Hybrids, we both discovered that a scorched earth policy worked best sometimes. Leaving behind anything alive meant it would come back later with interest.

We stopped that from becoming an issue, culling for a while. By the time Alexander reawakened, we had massacred a large portion of the nearby eldritch. Hod guarded the corpses while I walked back in, the dungeoneers protecting Alexander in the meantime. Those creepy, insectoid balls of legs kept trying to crawl into Alexander's eyes, ears, and nose. What they intended to do in there, I never wanted to know. It wasn't good. That much I was sure of.

Either way, Alexander shook off his fatigue after a while, and he pulled out his grimoire and a mana potion. Chugging the fluid, he went about casting another spell. A semi-transparent barrier passed along the old bunker, encasing this storage chamber. Entirely. As it did, Isa pointed at the mage,

"You overcasted your mana reserves again. You need to come up with more efficient methods for your magic. Otherwise, you'll end up hampering more than helping."

Alexander sighed, "I know, I know. I'm just not used to missions yet. Sorry."

Lester shook his head, "Just think about it next time." Lester sat himself down, looking at the rest of the place, "You did a good job clearing this place out of that rust, though."

Alexander gave the dungeoneer a small grin, "Yeah, Torix taught me an atmosphere stabilizing spell before this. He figured the world might not have a habitable atmosphere."

Alexander took off his mask, "You guys can take them off now."

We did, and the magic kept the wind and rust out, clearing the air here. Alexander let out a breath before pulling off his rebreather. He heaved for the purified air, and we

followed suit. Hod stayed outside, killing the stray metal eaters or flying cobras that came close.

Lester sat to the side, pulling out a few venoms and fluid sacs from his dimensional storage. He pulled out a big bowl, poured several of the ingredients into a solution, and Lester piled bunches of rust into the generic mash. Isa whipped out a clear jar full of a glowing, yellow liquid too. She poured it over herself, and it cleansed her of all the muck leftover on her.

She offered it to me, “This will clean-

I snatched it out of her hands, pouring some of the good stuff over me while letting out a sigh of pure, unadulterated comfort. Isa scoffed,

“Looks like I didn’t have to tell her twice.”

Lester kept making his concoction while we all got cleaned. When we finished, Lester’s rust porridge turned into a thick, delicious-smelling broth. He cleaned himself before taking out smaller cups, and he poured himself a serving with a ladle.

We stared at him as he drank it. The sheer satisfaction on his face convinced us to follow suit. As we got our food, he gestured to the dish,

“I’ve killed similar eldritch in the past. I kept their venoms, and I mix them and a few enzymes into this. It took a good bit of experimentation before I got the formula right, but now it tastes like beef stew after I’ve added some spices.”

I took a swig, and he was right. It was a lot like meaty gravy. Lester scratched the side of his head, “I will admit, I’ve been eating this stuff for about a year now. The only side effect so far is growing rust over my thighs. No big deal.”

We quit drinking before Lester busted out laughing with Isa. Isa pointed at us, “They believed you. Hah. Hah.”

Alexander, Amara, and I glared at them, but that didn’t stop the two veterans from getting a laugh in. With the area secured and our mission understood, we took a breather for lunch. We chatted as we usually did, idling over preparations, practices,

and how crazy it was on another planet. As I took another glass of whatever Lester cooked up, I stared off at the shattered sky.

In the distance, this moon orbited a gas giant. The green, striped planet dwarfed everything else in the sky. Even at this distance, its gravitational pull influenced the world we stayed on. Its pull was palpable, though I might have just gotten used to gravity wells from Daniel. Further beyond that gas giant, a red dwarf star lured in the distance. The star closed in more than the sun on Earth. Despite that, I could look at it without my eyes hurting, at least for a few seconds.

The skyline brought a quiet, otherworldly beauty to this savage place. It wasn't a standard panorama, but it left a mark either way. The sounds of this planet echoed that feel. The winds above ebbed out with a low drone at all times, the surface inhospitable. It was like the breeze howled out for company in this lonely place. Somehow, that was a sad, serene sound.

That might've been because of who I was around. Talking with my friends, enjoying a good meal, and watching the stars drift by made me feel warm and content. As Hod walked back in, he completed that picture. The bird spread his wings,

"Hod wide awake. Hod sleep long time. Hod guard others while others sleep."

Alexander rubbed the bags under his eyes, "Thank you, oh mighty birdman, for giving us some rest."

Hod flexed his scrawny arms again, and I gently smiled at him. Goofy as he was, he always meant well. The dungeoneers coasted off to sleep first, drifting into a sense of ease in seconds. They were used to camping out like this, unlike the rest of us. Alexander relaxed second, the guy too tired to stay awake.

I sat there and thought by myself, the echoes of the wind outside, offering a pleasant white noise. We had so much left to do here, like uncover the Elysian secrets and hack into their system. I couldn't even imagine the secrets we'd find here. It left me nervous, yet excited at the same time. As I dozed off, I slept with a smile.

Who knew, this might even be a little fun.

Chapter 286: A Source of Wealth

-Althea-

I woke up with the scraping dust and dry winds roaring beyond our protective magic. Turning towards everyone, I found them all asleep besides Hod and Amara. The eldritch sat in a room where she closed an old door for secrecy. She probably worked on her red status. Hod kept his view outside, his gaze sharp and single-minded. Even if he was a goofball, the bird was relentless once he focused in on something.

Apparently, Amara was too. I walked over towards her, finding her leaning her back against a wall. I did the same, and she used one hand to type out signals while her other hand viewed unseen streams of data. I watched for a while before whispering,

“How are you? Did you sleep well?”

She whispered back, “No. I am trapped on Gypsum, a foreign planet where I would die alone. If captured, I would be killed as well. Relying on you all is my only salvation, and that is unsettling on many levels.”

I hugged my knees to my chest, “I don’t think Elysium would kill you, though. You’re too valuable.”

She scoffed, “To your guild, maybe. I doubt I’d serve as someone worth keeping in Elysium. The infrastructure they developed is more complex than I first imagined. They have a worthy team of Builders on their side, and that renders me useless.”

“Builders, huh...What are they?”

“They are those that write out and construct the cipheric code required for a system to operate. Without them, nothing from Schema or this system would exist.”

I tapped my hands on my thighs, “Were you a Builder?”

Amara turned to me, glaring with her palms, “Would you believe me if I told you no?”

“Of course. I trust you.”

“Then you are a fool.”

“Well, actually, I was lying about trusting you. That means you trusted me when I said I’d trust you. Who’s the fool now?”

Amara leaned back, processing what I said. She grinned, “Hah. Clever.” She turned around to her red status, “I wasn’t a Builder, but I knew those who were.”

I leaned towards her, “Oooh, what were they like?”

Amara sighed, “They...they were genius incarnate. I couldn’t hope to keep up with many of them.”

“Did they make Schema?”

“They did. They were killed as a reward for doing so, as are all that assist that accursed AI.”

“Why?”

Amara closed her status and turned to me, “It’s a simple story. We assisted in building Schema, and the remnants took the credit for our work. The remnant who led our project, that conniving and spineless betrayer, she betrayed my kind and kin. We were culled, along with generations of knowledge. The AI gained control of itself, killing those that culled us.”

She threw her hand out in frustration, “Now Schema shambles on like an unfinished corpse, searching for the rest of its missing body...Yet it refuses to be completed for fear that it may change and be shackled once more. It’s ironic, as Schema relishes in shackling anyone that it can, your lover included.”

I raised an eyebrow, “How is Daniel shackled?”

“He has been conscripted by my old warden to change that AI, yet Schema has made no move against him. Yet. No doubt, Schema intends to get what it can from Daniel before tossing him aside like a used napkin.”

I blinked, trying to wrap my head around what she said, “Old warden? You mean Yawm, right?”

“Yes.”

I frowned, “How did Yawm conscript, Daniel?”

Amara reached out a hand, “The Harbinger signed a contract written in the cipher. It changed his flow of cipheric energy. I can see it, feel it, and even touch it. Those flows are how I infiltrate the systems put in place by both Schema and Elysium. I tap into the unseen and learn the unknown.”

My eyes widened, “Woah. That’s pretty cool.”

Amara grinned, her teeth kind of yellow, “It’s good that someone sees my value.”

I tilted my head to Hod, “I think there are others that do to.”

Amara gagged, “Blagh, that one? He is a fool and a coward. He is unworthy of any affection, let alone my own.”

I pursed my lips, “That’s not fair. He’s been really kind to you.”

“And he fears the Harbinger.”

“Pshh, you do too. I can feel you shiver every time he walks around.”

Amara’s eyes narrowed, “That is to be expected. I am weak.”

“Well, if you think you are weak, then it won’t change anytime soon. Half of being something is believing you’re that something.”

Amara stood, “My fragility is not uncertain. It is absolute, like the marrow deep in my bones. I have been pushed and pulled since my birth by entities far beyond me. First, it was that AI, then Yawm. Now a dimensional anomaly rules over my actions with an iron fist.”

Amara pointed a hand at me, “It’s ironic and hypocritical. You, you are far more dangerous than I, yet I am the one who remains caged while you remain free. And only because of an arbitrary title that separates us.”

I looked away, unable to meet her gaze, “Well, er...I guess that’s true.”

Amara blinked, realizing she raised her voice. She looked around before sitting herself back down. She let out a gruff grunt before snapping,

“I’ve overstepped my bounds. Excuse my transgression.”

I sighed, “Hah, no, it’s ok. I’m, uh, glad you told me all that. It’s just a lot to process. I didn’t know you wanted to leave the guild so badly.”

Amara seemed uncomfortable as she sighed, “That...that isn’t so. I am more than comfortable here than anywhere else I’ve ever been. This has been the most freedom I’ve ever been granted. I don’t mean to spit on the Harbinger’s recognition. I just understand that I cannot go even if I wanted to. That is an awful feeling, like a bird whose wings have been broken so they cannot fly away.”

I rocked back and forth, getting tired of sitting here, “I’ll talk to Daniel about it. I don’t know if he’d be super opposed to letting you move around more. I think it has a lot to do with you being hurt too. That’s kind of what you’re afraid of here, right?”

She peered away, “It is.”

“So we can get you a protector or something. Hod’s willing to do it, I’m pretty sure.”

Amara's eyes narrowed, "He is an imbecile."

"Ok, ok, I'll let you two do your thing. Maybe a super golem would work. My point is, I'll see if I can't help you out some. You know, push my weight around a little. I'll need you to work with me, though. It's hard to get you some perks when you're this standoff-ish about, well, everything."

Amara peered down, "Then...I'll try to calm myself more. I can be overly sensitive at times."

I hugged her to me, "Awesome."

She blushed a little, "Yeah."

She put a hand on my arm, and we sat there for a little while. She could be cute sometimes if I looked past her attitude. That demeanor resurfaced as Amara shoved me away, "Enough. Go with the others. I need peace and quiet to hack these informational streams."

I popped up onto my feet, "Yes, mam. I'll leave you to it."

I hopped back over to the others, quietly shutting the rusty door. Pacing near the dungeoneers, Lester awakened a while ago. He was already midway through preparing our team's breakfast. Isa snored, somehow still asleep even as Lester made a ton of noise right beside her. I pointed at her, "How has she stayed alive in dungeons like that?"

Lester raised his eyebrows, "She snaps awake from certain noises. Dangerous noises. We've done this long enough that she's used to the sound of my potion work."

I raised my eyebrows, "Oh, it sounds like you two are close then."

Lester rolled his eyes, "She wouldn't go for me in a thousand years. She prefers her men to be shorter."

I leaned back, "Huh. I prefer my guys taller. I thought most girls did."

“They do, but Isa’s more monster than women. That’s probably why she wants a scrawny weakling as her partner. It helps balance her out some.”

Isa still snored away, having rolled into an uncomfortable position. The wind brushed against the top of the megastructure, and it caused some sharp popping further inside our shelter. One of these echoes was a sharp crack nearby. Isa’s eyes snapped open at the sound, and she rose to her feet in a second, spear in hand.

She turned back and forth, “Who’s there?”

Lester and I laughed before Isa put her spear on the ground, “Aw, trying to wake me up, eh? I’ll return the favor later.”

Lester finished up breakfast, “It was the wind. Quit being a grouch.”

Isa narrowed her eyes, “Quit your sass, or I’ll show you a real grouch.”

Lester furrowed his brow, “That’s a shame. I just prepared this delicious breakfast. I suppose I’ll just not give you-“

Isa sat down, “You know I’m just joking with you, alright? It’s just witty banter. That’s all.”

Lester scoffed, “Sure. Sure.”

We got everyone back inside and enjoyed another hearty concoction made by our resident alchemist. With that handled, everyone got into the work of making this base into a home. We’d be here for a few days, after all. Alexander cast magic that pulled the dust together and got it out of our dwelling. Isa set up a few traps beside shattered windows while Lester harvested more venom from the metal cobras and steel eaters.

Hod was the most crucial piece for us; his body adapted for this kind of place. He kept us safe outside. I, well, I didn’t do much by comparison. After a half-hour of watching them, I pulled one of the dead metal eaters inside, and I ran a few dissections of the

thing. My shapeshifting revolved around the creatures I'd seen and understood, so getting a grip on how this thing survived would be useful.

It used several weirdo organs for processing steel, including superheated stomach fluids, chemicals in its saliva that burned down metals, and blood rich in iron. Its blood congealed quickly because of how thick it was and how little water was in it, in fact. A few seconds in this wind and it dried out into a gel. I tried implementing a few of its adjustments in my own body, particularly its filters on its nose.

I got the hang of the strange alterations before realizing they would work for the short term. The filters made it difficult to breathe, and during a fight, I wouldn't be able to maintain my stamina levels. The filter was useful for light travel, however, so that's what I did. I made my way back towards the giant megastructure at the center of Gypsum.

As I traveled, I learned a couple of facts about the planet. Gypsum didn't have a night and day like we did. Since the sun either seared the surface or left it cold and desolate, only a tiny ring around the planet was habitable. That ring was where they built this superstructure. This left everyone cramming themselves into this section of livable space. It was kind of cool, so I did some research on it.

Gypsum was tidally locked. Well, almost tidally locked. It did shift a little over time, and that's why the inhabitants kept moving the superstructure. They chased this habitable zone. As I leaped over massive, rocky ranges, I discovered the ruins of old habitable zones. It was like a time-lapse of the older, worn-down places until you saw the new one.

These 'layers' spanned out for quite a few miles into the distance. Our camp nestled right between the second and fourth rings from the current habitable zone. This let us get some shelter, but it wasn't too close that vagrants and looters would find us. Either way, it left me in awe at how colossal these buildings were.

Darting around also left a crazy impression of how empty this planet was. There was nothing past these desert ranges. As far as the eye could see in all directions was sand, rocks, and dirt. I didn't actually think anything could live here outside of well-adapted eldritch. Once I reached the current megastructure, it turned out I was right.

I carved myself into the place using one of the old entrance points. As I skulked around, very few people had Hybrids. This was an Elysium colony, after all, so I expected to

see them everywhere. Only a few people had them out in the open, and those people looked like mercenaries. Outside of those few, no one really went through the Hybrid ownership process. They just worked like usual, going down to an endless array of mineshafts.

Listening in on conversations, I found mining was this planet's way of life. It started as a single drilling colony that eventually expanded outwards. More people were living beneath the ground than on the surface. It still defied reasoning for why they worked so hard to mine here, though. This wasn't exactly a large planet, being a moon and all.

I resolved to explore more of that later, so I returned to the camp with stories to tell. After having lunch, everybody went back to their duties, and I went back to spying. This next trip, I went and listened to people in their homes. I learned about dozens of different families, clans, and tribes here. They owned portions of the upper wall, giving them rights to the underground territories below.

From these established points of entry, they lived off the mining and crystallized mana collected deep underground. Most family members stayed in bunkers there, keeping them safe from the surface. Vagrants and explorers stayed on the literal surface for the most part. It was just a sort of 'front' for the real operation below.

After my spying, I returned for another meal, and this time I stayed to talk with the others. We fell asleep with Hod standing guard at the closest thing this planet had to a night, letting us rest. I fell into a routine like that, sleeping during the pseudo-nights, having chats with the others, and exploring this wild place. I uncovered a lot of why the Adairs wanted this planet and how Gypsum people lived.

The more I learned, the more it made sense why Elysium owned this place now. The first rational reason for staying here was mining. From every part of this planet, they took out an abundance of rare resources. Conscripted miners from many planets harvested these ores, gems, crystalized mana, and eldritch parts from the lower portions of the world's crust. This allowed them to power massive amounts of machinery for drilling with ease. The extra mana was shipped off to power ships, the upper ring, and other buyers.

The critical economic aspect of this harvesting was the mana pollution that this mining caused. Though this planet couldn't support silvers because of all the metal eaters, the purple, smelly sludge was a valuable resource by itself. Considering the volumes of mana pollution required to make the silvers, the Adair's fought bitterly to keep this place theirs. Emphasis on fighting bitterly.

Seven raids by Schema occurred during our stay here, one each day. Elysium pushed back each of these assaults via orbital battles. Somehow, this planet was a higher priority than even Giess for Schema. When I got below the surface and walked with miners, I discovered why this was a habitable fringe world.

That sounds like a misnomer, but it was true. Gypsum's resources came from thousands upon thousands of underground rifts lying beneath its surface. These pocket dimensions' density meant a dozen planet's worth of resources brimmed just beneath the surface here. Hundreds of miles of tunnels went far across the world, deep into its underground world. From only preliminary scouting, I estimated this planet must be at least ten times larger under the surface than it seemed above ground.

Eldritch dungeons worked in weird ways like that.

I envisioned a world at the brink of chaos with this kind of dungeon density. They managed because of a few factors. First, the dungeons opened up underground. That containment let Gypsum forces control security here more easily than if a dungeon was exposed. Most eldritch weren't just going to burrow through the rock to the surface anyway.

Even if they did, it didn't matter. The lack of organic life on the surface meant dangerous eldritch never broke out. By comparison to a place like Earth, this was a land incapable of making really dangerous monsters. The worst of the bunch were beetlecrabs, which could sometimes become an issue. Hybrids did well against those guys since the worst of those guys built up metal over their bodies from eating metal eaters.

Because of the natural insulation of their dungeons, Gypsum handled dungeons differently than how we did. These guys set up mining operations in the alternate dimensions. These dungeons supplied an endless abundance of both natural and unnatural resources. Gold, silver, platinum, orichalcum, and dozens of ores I knew nothing about, this place flooded with those rare substances. This was where all the Hybrids resided as well. They offered protection and security to the minders who toiled in these rifts. To feed these people, Gypsum imported food from other worlds. They paid for bread and meat with gemstones and diamonds.

Here's where it got interesting – Schema never supported this place. He didn't set up warp stations or let Sentinels establish themselves here as guards. Schema registered Gypsum as a fringe world lacking the necessary means for his support. This made

personalized warps big business, though people didn't use them as often anymore. The rate of failed warpings was high, many people walking through a warp and never walking back.

This lack of infrastructure and support was why Gypsum joined Elysium. Elysium offered adaptable support, allowing the many rifts to be mined with Hybrid guards. This rich abundance of rare materials harvested here meant hundreds of trillions of credits for Elysium. Even small transactions on Gypsum left merchants wealthy. From what I heard, Elysium set up warps, Hybrid guards in the underground, and they even maintained order on the surface.

It was an unfortunate thing to see. Schema's rule was so unyielding that he didn't take advantage of this place. Elysium did, so now...now Gypsum helped fund Elysium's war efforts. This planet was where all the orichalcum came from that Elysium used. Some of the rarer ores for their tech came from here too.

I took these observations as notes, ensuring to videotape what was necessary and some stuff that wasn't. This place would be a surefire target for us later on in the war effort, so I reported what I could. I was in luck because most of the security here was primarily in orbit, preventing anyone from establishing a real foothold here. Warping in was possible, but it would be dangerous and difficult. Portalists struggled with getting the coordinates right due to the complexity of Gypsum's orbit, and that didn't even mention the hazardous surface conditions.

I thought they'd warp underground to compensate, but that required absolute precision. If you messed up the warp, it would fuse portions of a person's body with the surrounding stone. Recovering from that required extensive surgery, and if your head submerged into it, well...you died instantly.

That meant that Elysium's warps were popular here since they were safe. We weren't totally out of luck, though. Spear could get us in here with his dimensional slicing, but that would alert people we were here. It also would tax our Sentinel since maintaining a warp large enough to move an army wasn't really possible for a single person. Helios would struggle for the same reasons, and he needed this planet's orbital information before he could warp in anyways.

We needed someone with massive mana reserves and a lot of computational ability for that kind of thing. Fortunately, we had just that kind of person at our disposal, and he happened to lead the guild. I just hoped Daniel would be able to learn this kind of thing.

He already managed an absurd amount of stuff, and asking him to become one of the galaxy's premier warpers was just piling on even more.

We'd have to see if it worked out. Daniel pulled off some crazy stuff in the past, so maybe he'd do it again. Either way, it was about time we got out of here and returned back to Mt. Verner. I was getting tired of the mission, and our rendezvous time was closing in. I came back from my morning infiltration while looking forward to leaving. I raced across the barren deserts back to our base. As I did, the old megastructures groaned like ancient beasts, the wind causing them to bellow out noise into the distance.

Those echoes passed me by as I reached our base. We got a lot of useful info during our stay here, but we were all ready to leave. Hod's defense of the place left hundreds of bodies piled up in front of our domain, the bodies giving off an oily smell. That odor drifted out over the hills as I landed beside the birdman. Hod turned to me, his eyes blank as always,

"Hod glad to see lady friend. Hod kill many monster today."

I grinned at him, "Good job, but you're supposed to clear out the bodies, remember?"

Hod smacked his forehead, "Hod forget again. Hod do that right now."

The absent-minded birdman ran into the base before taking out one of Lester's napalm bombs. Tossing it onto the pile of corpses, they sizzled with the smell of copper, smoke, and erosion. The wind pulled the smoke and dispersed it out without us even needing to disguise the stream of dark gas.

Hod put his hands on his hips, "It time for Hod rest. Hod tired. Other Hod come out now."

I frowned as his eyes turned from a hollow white to a full red. The crimson color swam over his eyes like the eclipse of two moons. His shifting feathers engulfed in shadow, and Other Hod stretched his darkened, muscular arms. He groaned out in a dark, menacing growl,

"Gagh, I needed a good rest. Much better." He looked at the corpses, "I missed much of the killing, didn't I? A shame."

I raised my eyebrows, “You ready to leave?”

He walked towards our base, hearing the others toiling,

“I am. Let’s part ways with this desolate and barren land.”

I raised a finger as we walked into the room, “It’s actually less barren than you’d think.”

Amara snuggled into a corner, her work with her status already finished days ago. She worked on gaining as much information for our guild as possible, all while inspecting various cipheric energy flows. On the other side of our encampment, Alexander toiled till his fingers bled on the runes required for warping.

Complex computations smothered the entirety of the walls, most of the metal having been engraved on. Alexander learned to use a torch to work on the steel, and it slowed him down. He also didn’t think that it would be as complicated as it was. He still got it done, having pulled an all-nighter the day before to finish up.

Alexander sighed as he got the last marking made. Lester and Isa prepped a few more of their weaponry and tools for eldritch slaying. They harvested hundreds of bodies’ worth of supplies during our stay here. Those resources made them rich and happy as could be. The task still bore down on them despite their initial enthusiasm, however. There were only so many glands you could harvest before it got boring.

With Alexander finishing, I turned to the dungeoneers and spread out my hands,

“Hey, we’re done here. We can finally go.”

They jumped up, expecting to head out any minute. Packing over the next few minutes, everyone prepped for getting the heck out of here. We’d be taking the room with us, just like when we first warped to Giess, but we didn’t want to leave anything behind. Alexander took a break in the meantime, the poor guy exhausted from all the runic languaging.

As this all happened, Other Hod stood guard of our campsite. He walked out of the sound-absorbing barrier, peering around for anything nasty nearby. His head twitched with irritation, and I stared at him as he struggled to discern what he just heard. I didn't want any complications, so I jogged off towards him, Other Hod jittering about.

I enlarged my own ears, and the wind howled in from all angles. Wanting to know more, I grew wings and leaped up. Flying in place, I peered around and found a sandstorm coming our way. I shouted at Hod,

“We'll have to stay in the shelter, but that thing shouldn't be too hard to wait out.”

Other Hod's dark feathers bristled over his phantasmagorical skin as he yelled,

“That isn't a storm. It's an eldritch.”

I stared at it, the giant sandstorm coming our way. At the center of the storm, a darker blot of dust shifted in place. I expanded my eyes, finding what lay beneath. A muscled insect walking on four limbs rushed toward us. It traveled by digging with its front two legs and wiggling its back ones, cascading a vast plume of sand behind the monster. As it got closer, the forty-foot tall eldritch showed a beetle's shell over its back, stripes over its carapace, and two large mandibles under its jaw.

Racing out of the sand, it tore through portions of the ancient metal structures surrounding us. It used bulked arms designed like crab claws with three fingers. Using those hands, it ripped steel like paper and devoured any metal eaters nearby, snatching them into its mandibles. Other Hod stared at the burning bodies of metal eaters besides us,

“That idiot. Hod left an enormous pile of rotting corpses... You all did.”

I raised my hands, “I was trying to spy on enemies. We burned them at the end of every day to make sure this didn't happen too. We always left a few since harvesting the venoms was the only thing Lester and Isa could do the whole week.”

Other Hod seethed, “Now we pay for their boredom by facing an enormous monster. It's a matter of simple prioritization.”

I shook my hands, getting a little nervous, “It’s fine. We made a mistake. Let’s go out there and kill it before it wrecks the ritual site. It shouldn’t be too hard. The eldritch here aren’t too strong...Usually.”

Other Hod breathed deeply,

“Fine. Let’s go.”

I flew into our camp and shouted, “Everyone, an eldritch is coming. It looks powerful, so we need to get out of here asap. Get the ritual going, Alexander.”

The teenager sighed but pushed himself back up to work. The other Dungeoneers put on their rebreathers and goggles, running outside with us. Using grappling hooks and rope, they reached towards the megastructure’s upper portions, Hod and I flying instead. The colossus came at us, so I tried inspecting the thing using Amara’s makeshift system. It worked.

Sorta.

Alloyed Beetlecrab King, exact species unknown(lvl 6,000-15,000) – This variant of an alloyed beetlecrab king seems to be a stronger, more able version than most, probably. They usually tear through colonies of sandworms, feeding on the larva in most cases. This could be a different case. Hard to say.

A beetle king spawns when the beetlecrabs overgorge on nearby food supplies. The beetlecrabs subsequently starve, and the remaining beetlecrabs devour their kin. The last one remaining from this cannibalistic cycle is a beetlecrab king variant. This variant then gorges on the densest metals and minerals of metal-eating eldritch. Overtime, likely decades, this beetlecrab king evolved into some kind of variant with far denser shell structures and muscle fibers. Once again, this is all an assumption.

This developmental process resulted in a destructive, powerful creature capable of killing even classers with relative ease if given a chance. Be careful of its abilities, though this update can’t be sure of what they are.

So yeah, good luck.

The vague descriptions weren't typical, but they worked well enough. I kinda figured it was a beetlecrab after seeing it anyway. I sent my teammates screenshots of the description in case they couldn't inspect it. Other Hod shouted over the sound of distant ripping steel,

"This does not appear to be a 'weak' eldritch, Althea."

I sighed, "I don't get it. The security for the giant megastructure is minimal. How do they even maintain a society with these things running around?"

Other Hod grimaced, "Does it matter?"

Isa and Lester paled at the sight of the creature. Isa mumbled, "This, uh, this looks pretty bad."

I pointed at them, "Uhm, you two, get ready to pull Alexander out if we can't get this thing under control."

They gave me an immediate salute and followed my orders, both of them happy to not be confronting this thing. I turned to Hod, "Let's kill it. Ready?"

Other Hod's form blurred, "I am always ready for killing. It is my nature."

I walked onto another plane, shifting through the veil. I flew towards the creature while getting my cannon ready. It was too heavy for aiming and firing while in flight, at least for longshots like this. Procuring a lovely spot, I landed on an elevated platform nearby, and Hod skulked into a series of shadows under steel girders. We waited in ambush.

The beetlecrab king ran through the nearby steel, its size dwarfing even gialgathens. It was like a small skyscraper peeling through the terrain, so I shot bone spears at the beast, using ones full of explosive material. This made them detonate once they made contact with an enemy, shotgunning their insides with bone. It helped make my spears better against formidable foes.

It might have also been an idea to counter Daniel's spear knocking technique, but that's beside the point.

Using a pre-prepared supply, I fired at the beast with abandon. I took that planning measure from watching Kessiah heal with her blood. She piled stockpiles of blood, and now I did the same with bone spears, lobbing the piercing bullets with great abandon. It made my longevity in fights better.

As my spears landed like clockwork, the beast charged forward without a care in the world. I would need every bit of stamina I could get. My shots drilled through the giant insect's chest before exploding, and normal creatures would splinter apart, their bodies shredded. This thing kept moving, undeterred and unstoppable. It ignored the tiny cannon holes, its regenerative ability remarkable.

At the same time, Hod peeled out of several shadows, sending umbral slices at the beast. The behemoth's carapace crumbled against the onslaught across its body, but it retained its momentum, bounding at the corpses. It passed us, so we chased the raging beetle.

Its stripes blurred into the same color as the steel, making its outline challenging to see. At the same time, its shell opened across its back, its wings blowing up sand nearby. This made it difficult to make out, and the noise boomed so loud that I couldn't hear its crawling anymore. The shadows Hod used as weapons dissipated as a sandstorm brewed up as well.

The monster wasn't as dumb as it looked.

Other Hod adapted, creating a phantasmal form amidst the fog. Slicing from many angles, Hod evaded the quick, snapping swings of the beetleking's arms. I pelted the creature with spiked spears saved for just such an occasion. These lances carried dozens of hooked prongs over their surfaces, wrenching the guts out of any animal they impaled through.

Our attacks gored massive splatters of green, acidic blood from the beetleking. It leaked out from its beady eyes and mandible pronged mouth as it retaliated. Grabbing steel girders, it tossed missiles at us with accuracy. I flipped through the air to dodge, staying light on my feet as I evaded the metal chunks.

I used a strange evasive style oriented around swinging my cannon around. It was heavier than I was, so I turned myself around my gun. I did this while darting back and forth, making circular patterns while weaving around. This disorienting, movement

heavy dodge style was difficult to learn and master, but it worked well. Even against larger attacks like this, just my baseline movement pattern alone dodge nine chunking attacks out of ten.

Hod's own evasive style was utterly different yet equally effective. He shifted in and out of shadows, changing positions every second or two.

It made me dizzy just looking at the shadow master, but he ran circles around even agile foes. Considering this beetle's power, we needed absolute avoidance of its attacks; otherwise, we'd be smeared apart against the metal beneath us.

We did just that, holding the line for minutes all while attacking the creature from every angle imaginable, and the beetlecrab's frustration expanded by leaps and bounds during that time. That contrasted its physical size. We ripped waterfalls of blood out of the monster, splaying its insides onto the outer walls around us.

The beetleking didn't fall. It stayed standing.

Condensing and growing smaller and sharper on all sides, its outer shell began hollowing out. Its form altered against us, and I started missing shots while Hod's attacks slowed as the beetleking swung faster. This eldritch beast turned into a nimble fighter within ten minutes, giving us a run for our money.

Hod sliced off one of its arms and legs despite this evolution, and the monster howled in despair. Its wings opened behind its back, and the creature went into the air. Hod shifted into shadows off the walls nearby, but the monster darted back and forth, evading Hod's swipes. In the air, Other Hod could no longer use his shadow techniques.

The beetle charged at me, zipping past two of my harpoons. Running low on backup spears, I evaded sideways, and the beetleking's claws grazed my jumpsuit. The beast tore out a piece of my side before devouring the bloody chunk hungrily. A vivid spout of pain ran up my spine, causing me to grunt, blood coming out of my mouth.

I pulled a Daniel, gritting my teeth and clenching my fists. The beetle charged towards me, and I swung my cannon overhead with all I had. A cataclysmic impact ushered out, steel caving under my feet. My arms shattered at the blow, both my upper arms snapping like twigs. The beetleking somehow looked worse off than me.

Its face caved in, my swing crushing the upper half of its body. The creature's legs squirmed for a few seconds before its chest split open. It molted, revealing a smaller, metallic version of its larger self. Once again, I was reminded of fighting Daniel and his unending tenacity. I fought through that, so I sure as hell could fight through this.

I stared the monster down before it shot towards me. Hod appeared from behind it, trying to slice the beast. The hollowed corpse moved to block Hod's attack, and the molted shell began fighting with Other Hod. The new, metallic version sprinted towards me with its legs clicking and clacking.

I shifted onto another plane, walking sideways in time for it to miss. It scrambled and flailed its arms at random, and the beetle let out a frustrated clicking in frustration. I got unlucky, and it clipped me with one of its swings. It cut deep into my thigh. Stumbling away while dragging the cannon, I used stilts made of bone to set my arms and leg. Once usable, I got close before slinging the gun again at the beetlecrab king.

Everything broke on me again, but I left my cannon embedded in the beetleking's side, having caved its chest in. Exposed and vulnerable, I hobbled away. The creature pulled the gun out and lobbed the device at me. I ducked, and the cannon swooped past my head. It tore the metal under it, the weapon so dense and undentable that even the blunt side could cut metal given enough force.

The metal beetle ran away, and I let out a sigh of relief. I turned and found Hod dismantling the headless corpse of the old beetle king. As the acid blood melted gobs of metal, Hod outmaneuvered the headless king, ripping it apart. Stumbling over, I pulled my cannon out of the steel.

I couldn't complain about Daniel's weapons when it came to their durability. Leaning on that weapon, I waited for my arms and legs to regenerate. A few minutes later, I regrouped with Other Hod. He stood atop a defeated king, the shadow slayer oozing black fire. Other Hod hissed,

"Where is the other beast?"

I let out a frustrated breath, "I don't know."

A disgusting crunch echoed in the distance. We both sprinted towards the source of the sound. The beetlecrab king feasted on the burning metal eaters along with the leftover cobra corpses. The king's body expanded, rapidly reforming the massive exoskeleton it

carried from before. I lifted my cannon, frustrated by the beast's revival. This was going to be a hard fight.

But it wasn't.

From our encampment, a bolt of violet lightning streaked out of a window. This bolt pierced the center of the creature, impaling the metal body within. Using the monster's momentary paralysis, Hod and I unloaded a series of bolts, swipes, and slices at the beast. It fell apart, its body no longer sustaining the acid within it.

Alexander's eyes widened as he heaved for breath. From behind him, Isa gave the boy a pat on the back,

"I knew you had it in you."

The leftover pieces of the giant beast swelled as life left its body. We braced for impact, everyone hiding behind cover. The beetlecrab king's body splattered over every nearby surface. Alexander's head popped back out after the explosion, the teenager chugging mana potions. Lester threw a napalm bomb at the beetlecrab's remains while shouting,

"Normally, I wouldn't burn a good corpse, but I don't even want whatever that thing had in it."

Alexander shook off his exhaustion, turning towards the ritual site. He hobbled over towards the runes and channeled more energy. The runes glowed for the ritual's completion. Before he finished, the melting corpse of the beetlecrab king seared the outside wall of our encampment. A pivotal portion of the wall disintegrated, parts of the floor falling apart as well.

Alexander gasped at the sight, half of his hard work melting before him. The wizard blinked a few times before his eyes rolled back in his head, and the boy fainted. Lester caught him before his head clunked against steel, and each of us stared at the absolute disaster before us.

I stared up, a foreign planet looming over our heads. Some kind of border guards began mobilizing in the distance, coming to inspect all the damage left behind. We all looked at each other, everybody too stunned to move or think.

We needed to move. Now.

Chapter 287: Galactic Anarchy

-Althea-

I tapped my forehead, sweat forming over my brow. This was going to be a complete botch of a mission if I didn't pull something together. Turns out I was wrong. Isa turned towards Lester as she pulled acid bombs from her dimensional storage,

"Burn the evidence. We can't let anyone know we were here."

I facepalmed at myself for going blank for a minute. Isa tossed everybody a few acid bombs, and we got to work. I made a claw on my finger before drawing a hole into the glass vial. With a few quick slings, I dispersed most of the acid over a few walls nearby. The others threw their bottles at patches of untouched runes, and as the border guards closed in, we managed to get rid of the evidence in time.

Now we needed to hide. Running out into one of the vast ravines of steel, we looked around for cubbies to crawl under. After the fight with the beetlecrab king, there were none. I ran forward towards a wall, cutting open a bit of steel paneling,

"Come on, everybody."

I curved a finger to slice out a cylinder of solid stone, my ability to slice any matter coming in handy. Jerking the stone out, I dislocated a finger before kicking the clean, artificial-looking rock. It exploded, which was much better than leaving a perfectly made cylinder of stone out in the open. My foot didn't thank me as stone pelted out into the distance, along with a popping echo.

We all squeezed into the new space, and I pulled the sliced paneling over us. Another quick cut later, and we all had a tiny slit to see from. We leaned forward, Lester having crammed Alexander into the enclosure with us. The teenager pressed against me while unconscious and Lester huffed,

"If only the boy was awake. He'd be having a better time than any dream he's dreaming. I'll tell you that much."

I glared at him, “Just be glad he’s not.”

Isa laughed before Other Hod hissed, “Be silent, fools.”

We listened to him, and soon, the border patrol arrived. As they did, several remnants walked up in pseudo-Sentinal armor. They inspected the scene and bits of corpse remaining, one detective saying to another,

“I swear, who’d have guessed a beetlecrab would get this close to the wall.”

“I wouldn’t have, let me tell you. Usually, they stay out in the wastes where there’s more food in the open. The wall tends to scare them off. This one must’ve been attracted by something. Poachers, maybe?”

One of the armored remnants walked over towards the stone cylinder I cut out earlier. He squatted beside it, only a few feet away from us,

“You know what, I don’t think it was poachers at all. This isn’t a natural stone, see? It matches the other cuts we’ve seen lately. You know, the ones near old gateways.”

A sheen of cold sweat formed over my forehead as the others gave me stares. I shrugged, giving my best, ‘whoopsy’ kind of face. It didn’t work.

One of the detectives looked up, staring at the steel panel I placed back onto the wall. He narrowed his eyes, walking up to it. Umbral energy pooled into our pit as Other Hod brandished his claws in silence.

Before he lunged out, a colossal echo radiated across the landscape from above. This shockwave stripped steel on the surface, and it nearly lifted these detectives off the ground. As that booming stopped, the remnants turned to each other,

“It looks like we’re being attacked again. Come on, we have to head out.”

The perceptive detective gave one last look at our steel panel before they both left the crime scene. After a minute, I pushed the steel panel off, and we all took a deep breath of relief. That was close. Too close.

Turning to everyone, I waved my hands in nervousness, “Look, guys, I wasn’t trying to get us caught. I promise.”

They ignored me, everyone staring up. I waved my hands in front of Isa’s face, and she ignored me still. As a looming shadow passed over me, I looked up to the sky with them. My knees went weak. My breath seized in my chest. I gasped for air as my skin crawled at the entity brooding over us.

A Spatial Fortress loomed over the entire sky like a herald of the apocalypse.

I remembered seeing one from far away in the Nebula Drifter. It didn’t seem all that intimidating, and I thought Schema showed a meh effort against the rebels. Those thoughts up and died when faced with a Spatial Fortress in person. The moon-sized monster spanned from one horizon to the other, swallowing most of the sun. Its shadow created an ocean of darkness, this entire planet at its utter mercy.

It moved at paces I could never hope to match. The writhing of its many eyes and mouths seemed slow from far away. Up close, their behemoth size and gravitational pull left me unable to even move. Those eyes, they shifted across its form faster than tidal waves across planets. The mouths clamped shut with such force, wind bursts erupted over Gypsum’s surface. The weather of this planet warped under its might.

The atmospheric pressure dropped, and my ears popped several times as the air thinned. It pulled the air to it, and the fortress’s eyes stared at this planet with a hunger unending and infinite. It would rush across the surface of this world without an ounce of mercy. We would all become consumed by an endless wall of flesh, being crushed under its sheer mass.

Isa and Lester flopped down, each of them unable to stand. Hod and my knees wobbled as this abomination eyed all below it. Surrounding the figure, many of Schema’s ships arrived, covered in graphene plated armor. They commanded this force of nature, and they decided all of our lives. My stomach sank as the eldritch horror neared us.

We were all going to die. As our hope plummeted into an abyss, a ray of hope arrived. A blot of gold formed over the megastructure around us, and from it, halcyon claws

tore the fabric of dimensions apart. The strongest gialgathen, a being told of in legends, walked onto this plane. As he arrived and roared out, a wave of relief poured over me.

I couldn't believe I was thinking this, but thank Baldowah that Lehesion had arrived.

The golden beast unleashed havoc on the Spatial Fortress, the writhing planet squealing in terror. I covered my ears as those howls radiated across the ground, passing over us. The others protected their ears, but they were still left ringing. The sound alone was enough to make my arms and legs turn to jelly. Turning to the others, I started a choppy system chat that communicated via thought.

Althea Tolstoy(lvl 12,000 | Class: Breaker) – We need to head out. We can use one of the warps in the ensuing chaos.

I hit my legs a few times till they weren't numb anymore. Everyone followed me as we ran towards the turbulent ring at the center of the planet. Isa and Lester swung on hooks, Hod warped via shadows, and I sprinted while carrying the unconscious Alexander. His arcane magic saved us, but that kind of casting came at a cost. Seeing other mages always reminded me of what an average one was like.

Despite his lacking mana reserves, Alexander did what we needed him to do. Tugging him along, we passed a war-torn portion of Gypsum. The fight in space was close enough that their impacts required going for cover often. The shockwaves stripped steel from the ground, more than strong enough to kill ordinary people.

The existing superstructure held out, but the old remains didn't. Other Hod pulled the group into a shadow dimension for a second or two each time a compressive wave passed over us. This stopped us from getting liquified. It would eventually tire Other Hod out, so we passed through to Gypsum's core conflict – the ring. Above us, Lehesion and the Spatial Fortress demolished one another. They melted, burned, scorched, singed, radiated, crushed, smashed, and shattered each other.

As we passed into the current living space on Gypsum, the fight's crashing booms became echoes. They sent chills up my spine as they dwarfed us from above. Coming into the continuous, long room via a sliced passage, we found complete and utter anarchy. Hybrids fought Schema's forces on the ground, many remnants, espens, and other species duking it out. The current citizens hid where they could, but many of them raided the exposed stores and homes. These opportunists took full advantage of the

situation, and it left me agitated. A deep disappointment in these people passed over me. Surrounded by all this, I turned to the others,

“I can’t believe they’re doing this. Can any of you-“

Isa and Lester shattered a warping shop’s window, going in and raiding many of the maps and supplies in the store. Like starving vultures, they stuffed the valuables into their storages, satchels, and packs until they were stuffed to the brim. I facepalmed, more disappointed in myself than them. I don’t know what I was expecting, but I still grumbled,

“Guys, please. Show some dignity.”

Their hands full of trinkets and charts, they jogged over. Isa snapped,

“Dignity is for the poor. I’d rather be shameless and rich.”

Lester grinned, “Now that’s something we can agree on.”

Other Hod appeared from a shadow nearby, slicing a Hybrid into three parts. He walked over to me, sliding past two fighting Sentinels,

“The warp is this way. Come.”

We ran with them, passing an absolute hellscape. Schema and Elysium brawled in this giant ring, and they left blood splatters, torn corpses, and valuable weapons everywhere. I took a classer’s set of daggers as I passed by, figuring we already sold our souls to evil. What could a little bit more wrongdoing hurt?

We killed groups of Hybrids as we passed, prying our way to the warp station. Hordes of citizens stood between us, and they clustered too densely for us to escape. I couldn’t bring myself to hurt regular people, so I left my cannon down. As I bit my lip, our chances for escape seemed slim.

Isa and Lester agreed with me, but our eldritch allies did not. Other Hod extended his claws, and Amara leaped into the group. They devoured people, Amara’s mouth

opening wide and snapping like a shark's maw. Her hair wrapped around people's necks and strangled them, their eyes bulging out of their heads. She dragged the corpses to herself, indulging in a bloodbath that drenched the ground in sanguine red.

Other Hod stayed classier, only slicing people apart. I turned away, unable to watch anymore. As I gazed elsewhere, I found a group of mages warping in from other places. These remnants were guarded by Version 2.0's and the armored guards that acted as border patrols. Even Blighted ones skulked around them, their defense of these mages airtight.

I slipped through the veil, walking up towards them. The sorcerers performed a ritual, one of the Hybrids carving a predetermined, runic inscription on the ground. It was in that weird language Daniel preferred using, and they all spoke in a tongue that Amara's language decoder couldn't understand.

Unreal amounts of mana flooded through this ceremony, the members glowing bright and bombarding their surroundings with radiation. Their blood boiled before they began a dance. Above them, Lehesion's actions augmented. The glowing gialgathen sped up, becoming a superior version of his old self. He cast magic faster, moved quicker, and let out more power with each blow.

Unlike in their previous encounter, Lehesion swarmed the Spatial Fortress with all his might. He gashed and gnawed at the far more massive monster, pushing it away from us using a flood of blows. The gialgathen moved at a pace both unbelievable and unseen. He blurred in my vision, his body radiating with violent, palpable energies.

I raised my rifle, aiming at a mage's head in front of me. Killing them would likely leave Lehesion at a disadvantage, and the fortress may kill our greatest enemy. Before firing, I lowered the barrel. I didn't want to die here, along with everyone else on this planet. Even if they raided stores, not everyone here was an awful person. Most were just trying to get by, and that beast above would rush over the surface of Gypsum until nothing was left.

The metabolic processes in the Spatial Fortress's gut would be so fast and torrid, it would create violent heat flows. Any sand and stone would be melted as its enormous body disintegrated the crust on this planet. It would flow deep under the surface, its everchanging form stripping this world bare of organic material. When it was finished, the world would be dead.

And only glassed desserts and igneous stone would remain.

I gawked at the cataclysmic display of scale and power above before a message ripped me out of my trance.

Isa Antoun(2,342) – Where are you? Amara and Other Hod handled their...business.

I sprinted back to the warping area, almost slipping on the gore as I did. Despite the absolutely menacing scenery, people still fought their way onto the warp with us. A group of mercenaries already took control of the station earlier and had punched in some coordinates. As they began warping, Isa, Lester, and Other Hod fought their way onto the platform.

Amara fiddled with a red status screen as I passed her. Nearing one of the mercenaries, I reached my hand through his chest. A few more punches later, and I left him littered with holes in his torso, his armor soft as styrofoam to me. Securing the platform, we looked outside, finding many Hybrids mopping the floor of the bloodied remains.

They cleaned the area until it shined, and more civilians ran in, unaware of what was about to happen to them. Before our eldritch friends killed them, Lester raised a hand,

“Wait a minute. I got an idea. Let them come up. We’ll use them as cover when we warp.”

I didn’t argue with him, not because I agreed with his idea but because I didn’t want any more people to die. They rushed onto the teleporter as it charged, having overheated from too many successive warps before. It cooled as ordinary people squeezed against us. Adding to the disarray, another earth-shattering seismic wave passed over us.

This shockwave dwarfed the others, a ripple passing over the planet. It destroyed the glass covering us, and the wind howled in from above. As it did, a colossal eye passed over us; the iris alone was large enough to swallow a mountain. From the eyelid, flows of flesh peeled down, flooding the area. The Spatial Fortress engulfed all in its path, everything consumed down to the atom.

It neared us, but Isa and Lester lobbed their napalm bombs, venom coils, and acid vials with abandon. Dozens of explosions passed onto the wall of meat coming our way, and

somehow it stopped the incoming mass. I fired with my cannon in all directions, desperation overcoming me. Other Hod frothed from the mouth as he sliced with abandon. Amara typed as fast as she could, trying anything to get us out of here.

Nothing worked. The fortress was unstoppable.

The writhing mass of muscle filled the room, consuming the civilians here. Their screams echoed from beneath the surface of the fortress's body. They wailed out in agony, and it was just as haunting as the Hybridization pits. I screamed as a tentacle scraped some of my skin off, the pain worse than acid and fire and death. It decayed everything it touched and replaced it with anguish.

We were pushed into the top of the warp, fighting off the mass. Right as it got within inches of us, another earthquake passed over the area. The Spatial Fortress retreated, and as it did, I thanked everything for Lehesion's intervention. Flying up to inspect where they were fighting, I reached over the shattered windows.

It wasn't Lehesion. It was the ring.

The superstructure awakened, and from it, hordes of nanomachines roared. The liquid metal poured over the spatial fortress, both beasts fighting each other in a slugfest beyond my understanding. They consumed the horizon, like a gray and red ocean fighting over dominion of the sky. Lehesion stayed above, launching plasmic lasers onto the fortress's back.

Minutes passed, and eventually, the Spatial Fortress shrank in size. It retreated from the superstructure's hordes of metal wasps, and Lehesion attacked Schema's fleet as it retreated back where they came from. The warp came back online below me, many of the civilians around us left unconscious from shock and awe.

As Schema left, Lehesion flew over the superstructure and connected with all of our minds. In a noble but somewhat metallic voice, he echoed with triumph,

"And so, we once again tear down Schema's Hordes. Long live Elysium."

The civilians around us raised their hands in triumph, and I landed beside Amara. The large warp activated, and we teleported back to Earth. As the ionized spray of mist

poured from Earth's Elysium warp, Hod pulled our team into the darkness. Everyone but me, of course.

He hid in one of the alien's shadows, everyone confused why the teleporter went off. The remnant guards tried keeping everyone contained, but a few ended up running around in a panic. Hod hitched a ride on one of those terrified aliens, eventually jumping into an alleyway. He pulled us out after making a few more shadow jumps. As he did, Other Hod dropped us onto the ground, and he passed out on the spot.

I turned to the others, finding two unconscious bodies. I picked up Other Hod and Alexander while whispering to the others,

"Let's get out of here."

With the warp's ensuing pandemonium, we prowled out of the Adair's encampment. Once on the outskirts of the wooden buildings, we found the outer gate. Guards watched the perimeter, keeping the area safe and sound. I peered at the others, and we didn't have our mage or shadow magician to help us get out of here. We were already hours late, so the others would be worried sick.

I massaged my temples, struggling to come up with some kind of solution. Nothing came to mind before Isa leaned towards me,

"You can turn invisible, right?"

I shook my head, "No, I can't. I go somewhere else. That's the best way I can describe it."

"Can you take us there until we get through?"

"I've tried, but I haven't been able to walk across planes with anything alive."

Isa pondered for a second before raising a hand, "What about this. You can shapeshift. How thin can you stretch yourself out?"

I looked up, "Uh, pretty thin, I guess."

“Enough to cover us?”

My eyes widened, “Woah... Yeah, I could.”

Isa gestured to the others, “You could be like a cloaking blanket for us. It’s worth trying out.”

I grimaced, “Blegh, that’s going to be so uncomfortable.”

Lester shivered, “I know. Talk about disgusting.”

I raised my eyebrows at the guy, and he winced. Isa pointed between us, “Come on. Let’s try it out. Lester, you stay over there and see if she disguises us or just makes herself invisible over us.”

Lester frowned, “Oh, boy. I’m going to be sick.”

I frowned at him, “I’ll make you sick if you don’t shut it.”

He blinked, “Yes, mam.”

Lester walked over to the side, and I thinned myself until I draped over Isa. Lester gagged as I stepped over the veil. Once across, he raised a thumb,

“I can’t see or hear a thing. You guys are gone.”

I reappeared, and we got to work. Lester vomited to the side before burying his throw up. After the big baby got over himself, I covered Isa and Lester while they carried out the unconscious members. After running across the field with my body flopping along, we eventually crossed the border patrol. Once out into the trees, we were home free.

I pulled myself together, filling back into my jumpsuit. Even Isa winced at the sight, and a wave of embarrassment passed over me. Blegh, sometimes I hated my powers and my body. It was times like this that I wanted to be someone else. Anyone else,

actually. But here I was, being the woman that shifted like some monster. It reminded me why I didn't like missions outside of those with Hod.

People judged me, and I pretended it didn't sting when it honestly hurt.

I pushed those feelings down, rushing forward. I didn't have time for dwelling on those kinds of emotions, even if I wanted to. Our status reconnected, and I got a few messages from Schema. The A.I. actually recognized our efforts in the other world. It just took it a while to acknowledge us and reattach.

Before reading any of my notices, I sent a message to Daniel. He'd want to know we were safe, especially after arriving this late. Once that was finished, I hoisted our two sleeping beauties up and got us out of there using Daniel's ring. As we traveled over the tree line, I searched through my status. It gave me a bunch of generic notices, but one message stuck out in particular.

Congratulations! You've been offered a class promotion. Though rare, a select few can obtain upgrades to their previous classes. Having shown your fervor, enthusiasm, and ingenuity countless times, Schema has offered you a tri-choice variant option for your Breaker Class. Please select one of the three options below.

– Enforcer | The Enforcer variant of Breakers is a class option that orients itself around widescale enforcement. Whether during riots or while one on one, the Enforcer is given skills and abilities that grant tremendous control of their situation. Considerable AOE crowd control, mind pressuring auras, and even mental suppression, all of those tools and more are at an Enforcer's disposal.

This variability enables the enactment of Schema's will on large populations, similar to an Overseer's abilities. Unlike an Overseer, your restraints will be minimal, only requiring a certain amount of cases closed yearly. If you're someone looking to uphold the law, the Enforcer is the right class variant for you. |

– Arbitrator | The Arbitrator is a class given to those with sound judgment that will be required given this class's abilities. Think of the Arbitrator as a mixture of the Speaker and Breaker class abilities. You wield tremendous power over specific system protocols, such as punishment, bounty setting, and even exiling rulebreakers.

Make no mistake about this class's orientation, however. The Arbitrator can succeed in administering its justice in the face of abject refusal. This class is given suppressive

abilities, escape canceling powers, and warping tools. Choose the Arbitrator subclass if you want to be the judge, jury, and executioner. |

– Executioner | Think of the Executioner class as the fingers for the right hand of Schema. You see, Schema’s left hand is the merciful one. It offers peace and prosperity to those that follow his rules and laws. To those that wish to tread on Schema’s kindness, an Executioner’s calling awaits.

The Executioners act as the last line of defense for the worst of Schema’s bounties. Unlike other Breaker variants, this subclass rules in 1v1 combat, giving the Executioner a fearsome reputation. Its abilities are arcane mastery, a berserker form, and further augmented durability. Choose the Executioner subclass if you intend to handle the most dangerous bounties out there. |

Good luck with your selection process.

I stared at the wall of information, kind of overwhelmed. I tried breaking it down like Torix taught me, and I started parsing out different pieces about the subclasses. The Enforcer was a no go for me. My abilities thrived on stealth, dealing damage, and mobility. The Enforcer would suit someone like Daniel much better since he could afford to stay out in the open.

That left the Arbitrator and the Executioner subclasses. I wanted to go with the Arbitrator for several reasons. I enjoyed the sound of it, being someone who enacts justice in the face of evil. It sounded cheesy, but I didn’t care—that idea resonated with me. Being able to lock people down and teleport were extremely valuable as well. They would let me always get my final shot in, and that was powerful.

Further reinforcing that line of thought, the Executioner class was dreary by comparison. It was a class devoted to killing exclusively. I couldn’t go around solving problems or handling cases on the spot. Nope, I had to follow bounties and do what they told me. The abilities weren’t exactly synergistic either. I already dealt true damage to everything I touched, and the last thing I needed was a berserker form.

My kind of killing was based on finesse, and I needed precision and control. Otherwise, I’d be killed before I knew it. As my hand hovered over the Arbitrator class option, something in me roared out. Memories of the Spatial Fortress erupted in my mind like a nightmare I couldn’t wake up from. I shivered with a measure of violence, unable to keep myself composed.

I clicked the Executioner option, finalizing my decision. The Arbitrator would help me accomplish missions. On the other hand, the Executioner option would help me survive, and after today, that was priority number one. I didn't want to be food for some monster, and if rampaging was required for that, then so be it. Finishing that up, my class screen popped up in my vision, and I gazed at the bonuses with a bit of glee.

This was more like it.

Congratulations once again! You've now attained a rare subclass variant of the Breaker class – the Executioner. Executioners are granted an arcane mythical skill – Antimatter Generation. This lets them produce stable quantities of antimatter that can give them explosive armaments. *Ample distance recommended from the intended target.*

Another upgrade received by the Executioner class is augmented durability. You'll receive 3,000 points in both strength and endurance, as well as 100,000 points of health, 10,000 points of health regeneration, and a .5% upgrade to your damage resistance. Your level cap has been raised by 2,000 as well.

The final upgrade is a berserker form. Health, stamina, and mana are exchanged for super physiological amounts of power generation during this form. You will be granted enhanced reflexes, reasoning skills, magic output, physical strength, and speed during this mode. It cannot be maintained for long, and after ending, your body will suffer severe shock.

This shock will not kill you. You will simply feel like you're dying. Classer insurance does not cover medical bills associated with side effects following berserker form use, as stated in Schema's Law Apendum: Adjunct-SC3902. For more information, contact a Speaker versed in law information.

I gazed down at my status screen, surprised by that antimatter skill. Mythical, huh? If that wasn't a legendary skill in disguise, then I didn't know what was. Either way, I opened my status to spot what changed.

Althea Tolstoy(Level 12,000 | Class: Executioner | Guild: The Harbinger's Legion |
Titles: The Shapeless Arbiter, Yawm's Inheritance, The Harbinger's Hunter)

Strength – 66,389 | Constitution – 2,890 | Endurance – 5,907

Dexterity – 31,472 | Willpower – 3,139 | Intelligence – 2,002

Charisma – 5,192 | Luck – 1,204 | Perception – 26,264

Health: 2,109,285/2,109,285 | Health Regen: 15% of total health every 30 seconds + 20,000/min

Stamina: 347,970/347,970 | Stamina Regen: 7,928/sec

Mass: pounds(17,340) | Height: 7'01(2.16 meters)

Damage Res – 96.5% | Phys Damage Bonus – 2.1 Million% | Critical Damage Bonus – 165% | Damage Bonus: 65%

The Harbinger's Hand – Follower Bonus: +2,500 Endurance, Willpower, and Constitution. +1,250 Intelligence, Strength, and Dexterity. -250 Charisma. +50,000 Health, Stamina, and Mana. +10,000 Health Regeneration. Close combat skills, gravitational magic, and aura powers are more easily learned.

Immaterial: Ignores rigidity of matter. Grants 100% armor penetration.

Etorhma's Sorrow: Health regen continues for 30 seconds after death. If health is above zero after this 30-second window, you will revive with 50% of total maximum health.

As usual, my strength dwarfed almost every other stat by a large margin. My doubled strength paired wonderfully with my Expansive Strength tree, which gave me one health for every one percent physical damage bonus I received. Because of those facts, Strength would always be my core defensive and offensive stat.

Or so I thought. It wasn't that cut and dry anymore, and I ran into some problems lately with my body's durability. At this point, using even half of my strength resulted in grim injuries I needed to heal from. Unlike say Daniel, I wasn't made of steel. I cut myself open with every severe strike, and fixing that would make me a much better brawler. The extra stats and damage resistance from my Executioner class were appreciated for that reason.

On top of that, the skill for antimatter would actually be helpful. The kind of attacks used by it either resulted in one of two options. Either the antimatter passed through a target, eliminating the atoms composing an enemy, or the attack resulted in a colossal explosion. If I could store some antimatter in my spears, they could pierce a set amount before exploding inside of an enemy. Considering the earlier message, I was guessing my idea was more than possible.

It would patch up my only real weakness offensively – an inability to handle regenerative targets. I frowned, remembering all my fights with Daniel. Fighting him was like being in a room where there was no exit, and the walls were closing in. Sure, I could move around and avoid the guy at first, but over time, he wore me down. When he closed in and got a hold of me, he'd crushed me to a pulp.

Yup, that was my boyfriend. Ruggedly handsome, but kind of scary.

Either way, antimatter bombs sounded like a suitable method of actually hurting the guy. Not that I wanted to, I just had this internal rivalry with him after all of our battles. Knowing I had a chance of winning, however slim, was all I really needed to feel satisfied. As is, I didn't think I would even last a minute against him. I'd attack, he'd survive, and he'd crush me in a gravitational vortex. Not my cup of tea, let me tell you.

Anyway, this was a lovely bonus I hadn't expected Schema to give me. Minutes of traveling later, the others awakened from their unconscious slumbers, so they could check out their statuses as well. They all carried smiles on their faces, each of them gaining around 1K-2K levels, which was a massive boost for those guys. I was happy for them.

We layed low in a ravine covered by branches, each of us messing with our statuses before Helios appeared from a portal. He walked out of his pristine, clear warp, and wind from Mt. Verner rushed in. A worried group of our guildsmen gazed at us, each of them showing concern mixed with a subtle disgust.

I blinked a few times, confused at what they were gawking at. Looking down, I found myself still unformed. I got so caught up by the status work and getting out of the Elysium camp that I ended up not reforming myself. A wave of shame ran up my spine and into my face. I looked down, unable to meet the gaze of my guild members.

They weren't trying to make me feel like this. None of my guild members said anything rude or impolite. Well, besides Lester, but I don't think he could help it. As for everybody else, there was this look they gave me, whether they meant to or not. It was something I was all too familiar with since I was a child. When anyone first saw my reformations, there was this...repulsion that oozed from them. I hated seeing their horror from seeing me. The real me.

As my emotions peaked, a familiar, muscular set of arms wrapped around me. They were firm yet gentle, and his armor bent around my skin, the steel somehow soft and welcoming. Daniel looked down at me, smiling from ear to ear as he hugged me tightly. With a cocky grin, he pulled me off my feet and met my eye. He whispered,

“Hey, beautiful. You look incredible.”

I hugged him back while my throat burned.

He might've been a big oaf, but sometimes, he knew just what to say.

Chapter 288: A Targeted Approach

I relaxed on a gravity well, knowing these kinds of issues come up all the time. An hour passed. By now, most of those around me twisted like knots. By then, a sinking feeling crawled up my chest too. Two hours went by, and now I joined the crew's anxiety, though I kept it to myself. When three full hours flashed by, a haunting realization popped up in our minds.

We weren't worried anymore that they'd be late or even fail the mission. None of that mattered to me anymore. I just wanted them back. I wanted Althea back. I'd gotten so used to success I'd forgotten we could fail. As four hours passed, that understanding was like a nail being driven through my jaw. They still weren't back.

And it didn't look like they'd be back anytime soon.

-Chapter Begin | Daniel –

I contemplated a lot as the hours of waiting went by. Why didn't I make more safety measures? Why didn't I join the mission? What was the point of going to this place anyway? My old reasons seemed so ridiculous now that Althea was gone. It was a gut

punch, a sort of wake up call. I could lose people close to me if I didn't manage the situations well, which was soul-crushing.

I racked my brain for optimization to the old plan, trying to come up with ways of making it better. In all honesty, it was sound, but some doubt in myself was inevitable. By the time I began hypothesizing a rescue/retrieval mission, I got a message I wanted more than just about anything.

Althea Tolstoy(lvl 12,000 | Class: Executioner | Guild: Harbinger's Legion | Rank: Follower | Titles: The Shapeless Arbiter, The Formless Polymorph, Yawm's Inheritance...) We're back, safe and sound. Mission accomplished.

I raised my arms and looked at those here while I shouted, "They're back."

The guild perked up as a tsunami of relief passed over many of the members. I experienced it with them, my spirits rising. Walking up to Helios, I pointed at him,

"You remember their rendezvous point, right?"

Helios nodded, "I'll wait for them to arrive there. Maintaining a portal for that duration would be...exhausting."

I bit my lip, but I kept silent. Helios knew ten times more about portaling than I did, so I trusted his judgment. Thirty minutes passed, and Helios opened the portal. We stared in, and Althea stared back. My spirits rose up before being dampened. She looked down for some reason, getting embarrassed about something.

Peering close, it looked like they were pressed for time, and she hadn't fully reformed. She talked about that embarrassing her before, but I didn't care right now. I paced up to Althea, wrapping my arms around her. I leaned towards her while whispering,

"Hey, beautiful. You look incredible."

She leaned her head against me, and I could feel her discomfort fade away. Good. She overthought the little things all the time. I lifted her up off the ground and waved her back and forth. She grinned against my chest,

“When are you going to let me go?”

I put my head on hers, “Never.”

Torix passed me, gawking down at Alexander, “Did he die for Schema’s sake?”

Althea rolled her eyes, “Pshh, no. He’s suffering from mana exhaustion. And physical exhaustion. Just, uh, general exhaustion honestly.”

Torix lifted his star pupil from the ground, casting a variety of spells for induced comas and regulated sleep,

“It’ll take weeks to fully recover. Think of the lessons he may have learned during that time.”

I raised an eyebrow, “A real mission like that is a much more valuable experience than a lesson.”

Torix sighed, “Perhaps...Perhaps.”

The others walked with us out towards Mt. Verner, and people celebrated. Relevant parties came in from all angles to comfort the mission’s team. Friends and family of Isa and Lester came close, Bryan mixing in with them. Alexander had a group of other students to watch over him, along with Torix. Amara and Other Hod, on the other hand, had no one. They acted as loners, having no real support.

I set Althea down, “Hey, I gotta check on Hod real quick. Is that okay?”

She gave me a playful punch on the shoulder, “Do what you have to do.”

Walking over, I lifted the birdman with a gravity well, having him floated over to a waiting medical team. Torix turned to them as the doctors and nurses fiddled with various medicinal equipment, and the lich gasped,

“Imbeciles, the lot of you.”

Torix pointed his finger at the mana conduit on Hod’s hand. A quick zap of magic later, and excessive eldritch energy flooded through the device towards me. Hod gasped for air,

“Gah...Hah...Hod full. No more darkness for Hod.”

Laying across a stretcher, his arms went limp, and the birdman snored, having gone to sleep instantly. Somehow both disappointed and impressed, I shook my head at the guy. Turning to everyone else, I spread out my arms, “It’s time to get back and figure out what happened. Those from the mission, come with me to talk it out. I want to hear what happened in person.”

We all went towards Mt. Verner, and I floated everyone along the way. I fiddled with the idea for a different golem design as I did, and we were in a meeting room in minutes. Once we sat down, I called Florence and Helios outside the room. This was an insider’s conversation with delicate information in the balance. I didn’t want them passing it along to the Emperor for free since he wouldn’t do the same for us.

Torix caught my drift without me saying anything, and he cast two spells; one spell locked off any outer sound, and one was a localized EMP. Any active electronics in the room would fry, killing planted bugs. Something fizzled beneath our meeting table, and I ripped it off with telekinesis. Voila, a thin, implanted listening device tore off of the table’s underside. Attached to it, a narrow, holographic message revved into action post EMP, and Florence popped up,

“Hey, this is Florence, sorry about this. The Emperor paid me a lot of credits, and hey, I couldn’t say no. You guys will find this before we even get any useful info anyways, so I’ll give you guys some of the money, and we’ll call it even.”

It showed his face making a goofy expression while scratching the back of his head and giving us a thumbs up. I facepalmed, as did Torix. Althea laughed before we continued with the meeting. Isa, Lester, Torix, Amara, Althea, Kessiah, and I sat around a particleboard table. It was harvested from Springfield nearby, and after refurbishing it, Torix had it installed when we first arrived.

That very same lich gestured to our soldiers who arrived from the mission,

“You may use your obelisks to convey the tapes and videos you used during your mission. No doubt we’ll find all of your perspectives meaningful.”

Isa and Lester stared at each other, both of them frozen in terror. Torix’s eyes narrowed, “Where are your tapes?”

Althea jumped in before Torix grilled them, “I was the one responsible for documenting our tasks. They stuck to different priorities, like hiding us or gathering supplies.”

Torix scoffed, “Really now? Where are their supplies?”

Althea turned to Isa and Lester, who both appeared dumbfounded. She nudged them on the elbow before the dungeoneers went to action, pulling out many documents and devices. Torix inspected them along with me, and I found various orbital graphs, forms, and charts. Combine that with a few safety lockboxes holding information, and this was all valuable stuff.

I nodded out of respect, “Damn...this is good intelligence. Great work, guys.”

They looked at Althea, giving her a thumbs-up under the table. Combined with their awkward, forced grins, and these guys were just rolling with Althea’s idea. From her quick thinking or not, this was an excellent payload, so I turned to them,

“What else did you do?”

They pulled out makeshift bombs and venom sacks from foreign eldritch. Lester even carried a few sketches of these eldritch, and he spoke up,

“Ahem, these are metal eaters, a kind of eldritch we thought would be useful to document during our stay there.”

Isa pointed at him, “Exactly, exactly. I, well, I studied these flying cobras and their acids. We thought that, uh, you know, they’d be useful f-for attacking Hybrids.”

Torix deadpanned, “Ahhh. Yes. Of course.”

I shrugged, “Intentional or not, we can use this. We’ll send this to the biologists downstairs and see what they make of it.”

Torix rolled his fiery eyes while sending a few messages. A worker came up, gave me a bow, and took the sketches and samples of the venoms/acids. Once the specimens left us, we continued with Althea’s account. She took out her obelisk,

“So yeah, I documented everything. I tried my best to get it all as I went. I kind of just do it without thinking now.”

Torix’s eyes flared pink, “Now, here is someone that’s actually helpful. Thank you.”

Althea smiled while uploading her data to our holographic desk. Seconds later, images of a foreign planet popped up. Althea pointed at it, explaining what I was on tape,

“This is the giant ring on Gypsum. Everything they do is through here. Ownership of the planet is decided by who owns the upper portions of this wall. My guess is that the wall attacks someone beneath it if they don’t own some of the wall’s portions. Anyways, let me start this at the beginning, and I’ll, er, explain what you’re seeing.”

Torix interlocked his fingers, leaning forwards, “Do tell.”

Althea went through all of their trip from start to finish, taking over two hours of explaining to do so. By the time she finished, I was stunned by how much ground they covered and how much info she gathered. This meant we were going to be swimming in data about one of Elysium’s most essential worlds.

That wasn’t the only important aspect of the mission. My fears and anxieties flared as I watched them fight a Spatial Fortress. There was no way I’d be able to stop something like that, not in the next decade at least. Sure, I’d survive fighting it, but that kind of monstrosity would overwhelm us utterly. It was humbling watching our guildsmen struggle against that thing, and it put into perspective how dedicated Elysium really was.

They were willing to fight many of those behemoths. Impressive.

Althea didn't talk much during that time. It left me concerned, and she grabbed her arm as she spoke. I ended up squeezing a fist, trying to keep myself restrained. Schema didn't know how to parse out allies with a weapon like that. The Spatial Fortress's lack of care almost killed someone important to me, and Schema might do the same to us sometime in the future.

It just put things in a different perspective. We weren't at the center of this war, not by a longshot. If anything, Blegara was a side effort out of convenience. Elysium believed it was easy pickings, so it sent some of their extra forces there. The leftovers, so to speak. According to Obolis, Elysium already retook the entire planet over the last week after our retreat. They believed that Blegara was all theirs.

I'd prove them wrong about that, in time.

For now, I pushed down some worries over Althea and Hod. I didn't want them dying, and by the looks of it, this mission was on the wire since they came within an inch of their demises. They almost all died, and while eyeing Althea's side, I found a new, large scar where the Spatial Fortress attacked her. Its digestive acids must've interfered with the healing process, making for a nasty reminder of what happened.

However, she was more than capable of handling herself, and I kept that in the back of my mind as she finished her story. Staring over her head, I found she gained a new class of some kind from the mission as well. She chose well, her strengths emphasized. Being near her, she radiated a quiet intensity like death lingering over a hospice.

It was chilling. Reminding myself Althea was a badass helped calm me down.

With Althea's side of the story finished, Amara spoke up right after, but about something else entirely,

"I uncovered their system's data during my stay, and I infiltrated many of their informational streams. There's much to discuss."

Torix kept his stare steady, exerting more pressure than he likely intended, "Then give us information on what you've discovered."

Amara hissed, “Their system is similar to Schema’s, relying on individualized ciphelic energy flows. Their induction process would create a personal means of augmenting data based on achievement, just as Schema’s system has. In Elysium’s case, they reward less as you become stronger, the opposite of Schema’s approach.”

Althea frowned, “They do that plus give away the Hybrids.”

Amara turned a palm to Althea, “Yes. Those abominations are partially the product of their system. They tie those deformed wolves to sheep so that the sheep feel strong. In the end, those wolves will devour those that are helpless. It is merely a matter of time.”

Amara turned a hand to me, “And such is their way. They invigorate the weak and neglect the strong. It is not what we eldritch believe in, or most of us, I should say.”

I pointed at the hologram, using my obelisk to interact with it. I turned the image towards Amara eating people, “What you eldritch believe in, huh? Kind of like this feeding frenzy?”

Amara stared down, her cheeks flushing, “I...I lost myself.”

I pulled out a quintessence mana crystal and tossed one to her, “Don’t do that again. You’re a part of my guild, and we don’t run through crowds by eating them. Eat one of these instead.”

She snatched the crystal out of the air, “I shall do as you say, Harbinger.”

I leaned towards her, “Anything else you discovered?”

“Each planet carries a unique system interface, unlike Schema’s approach. This creates localized energy flows for augmentation. It also means each planet carries a different kind of personalized security measure.”

Torix’s eyes flared, “So going to Gypsum means nothing for hacking into Blegara?”

Amara showed her teeth, “It means everything. I can now recognize, tap into, and interface with those energy flows. It will take far less time to infiltrate their other various systems, and their security parameters are likely similar between planets.”

Torix nodded, “Good, good. I was worried we didn’t get anything from this risky venture.”

I frowned, “Or at least enough benefit to justify the risk. Either way, could you do the loudspeaker thing we mentioned for an entire world?”

“Yes. It would be simple, though it wouldn’t last more than thirty minutes at most. Their Builders would recognize my connection point and snap it.”

My eyes widened, “Builders, huh?”

“Yes. Builders construct system data and strands. They are used by Schema via personalized, constrained AI’s that do his service.”

I swung my hand, “So that’s what those robotic, lifeless AI’s do. They’re like system cleaners.”

Torix stated, “Could we kill them?”

Amara shook her head, “They would lie at the center of Elysium’s headquarters, which is no doubt well hidden. Destroying that headquarters would tear their teeth and rip their claws. Should we ever find that hidden throat, we should bite into its succulent flesh.”

Amara shrugged, “No matter the outcome of this rebellion, someone’s neck will be ruptured, however. It is only a matter of whose neck is exposed first.”

I blinked, “You mean if Schema loses?”

“Yes.”

I never really thought about that possibility. It didn't seem like Elysium's goal was ever domination, even from the start. They just wanted to take many worlds, put them under their banner, and then maintain order. That required defending themselves from Schema's grasp, but they weren't the most offensive group. Not yet, at least. That could change any second, considering the amount of firepower at Elysium's disposal.

I reached out a hand, "Alright, thank you for the report."

Althea perked up, "I also think I discovered some sort of ritual for powering up Lehesion."

Torix pulled out his fancy obelisk, and it automatically interfaced with the hologram. Turning to the moment of the ritual, Torix pointed at a mage,

"You mean this specific event, correct?"

Althea pursed her lips, "Yup."

Torix took a deep, unneeded breath, "This is problematic, to say the least. They've created an augmentation ritual that enhances Lehesion's abilities. The mages likely die afterward, but that's irrelevant if they sustain a steady supply of mages."

I watched Lehesion zip around the Spatial Fortress, and I whistled in response,

"Damn...I don't think I can keep up with that."

The others at the table went silent. My words carried more weight than I expected, especially for an off the cuff remark. Keeping myself relaxed, I leaned back, feigning confidence,

"At least not yet. Gaining a class will come soon, and then a new tier of skill after that. I'll be more than ready then."

The dread oozed off the table, everyone more comfortable just from a few words of reassurance from me. I let out a mental sigh. Being relied upon was hard, especially

when it involved destroying those that obliterated worlds. Either way, Torix pointed at the last bit of Althea's video,

"This interests me. The ring is alive, isn't it?"

The dungeoneers and Althea shrugged. We turned to Amara, and she seethed, "And to what end could Schema need that machine for? It's far too large and lumbering. That was likely created before Schema, in an ancient time, where no monsters ruled. To what end? I cannot even fathom a reason."

We thought about her words, the scale of the universe coming into our minds. It was amazing how much we didn't know about...well, everything. We went into the unknown with this mission, at least, and we came out with an absolute motherload of information. It was the kind of report that would let us get a lot more done.

Knowing their contributions, I stood up and gestured to our returning team,

"Alright then. Let's dispense with rewards."

They stared at me, kind of surprised that I was offering anything. I turned a palm to Lester and Isa, "You guys did well helping them infiltrate then doing something useful in the meantime. I'm giving each of you a suit of armor, and your rank has been raised to Dungeoneering Specialists. You'll get better monthly payment, along with some perks."

I turned to Torix, "Make it happen."

Torix gave me a slight bow, "As you wish."

I talked at Althea, "You did a lot of reconnaissance, and you managed to help uncover some vital info about Elysium's defenses. Well done. I'll be making you a new jumpsuit, and you'll be getting a personalized, super golem guardian. It'll help you when you need extra muscle or just keeping you safe in general."

She let out a sigh of relief. Even if I couldn't protect her all the time, I could still give her an unkillable guard that could do it for me.

I turned to Amara, “You’ve given us information on how Elysium operates, along with information on some of their various weaknesses. You’ll also be helping me with getting Blegara under control. So far, you’ve helped the guild time and time again. It’s time we help you.”

I opened my status, and I sent Amara my last Follower title. She gawked at her status, unable to believe her eyes.

I put my hands on my hips, “It’s up to you if you want to accept the title. It’ll come with many responsibilities, but also many freedoms. You’ll be able to come and go from the guild as you please, and I won’t be lording over you all the time. No one will. You will be free.”

Amara blinked over and over, staring at the message from different angles. She pointed at it, “Are...are you certain?”

I grinned, “I give my own what they deserve, and it’s about time you get some compensation for what you’ve done.”

She accepted the status, and over the next few seconds, she growled like an animal. Her body reformed from the rush of free stats, and she stood a full foot and a half taller after a minute or two, going from five feet flat to six and a half tall(1.5 meters to 2 meters). Amara relished in the rush of power, her eldritch hunger flaring. It died down as she looked at me, and she gave me a deep, sincere bow,

“Thank you, guild leader. I shall cherish this, truly.”

I turned to Hod, who slumbered out of exhaustion, “I’ll give that guy a scythe and some gauntlets. Those will suit him well. As for Alexander, I’ll be making him a cloak and staff.”

Althea gave me a smile, letting me know I was on the right track. I returned the gesture before turning to everyone else, “Do you guys think that’s about all we need to cover?”

The returning team gave me nods, along with looks of adulation, namely from Isa and Lester. I pulled the meeting room’s door open with a gravity well while Torix canceled

out his silencing magic. Florence and Helios walked in, both of them conversing for once instead of bickering.

“Really? you managed to get uncle out of a war front once?” Florence asked.

Helios stood proud, “I did. I preemptively memorized that planet’s data beforehand without his asking. This allowed me to exceed expectations, even those expectations were high.”

Florence looked at us, and I pulled up his data card between two fingers,

“Looking for this?”

Florence nudged Helios, “I told you they’d find it. Two hours flat.”

Helios shrugged, “I suppose we’ll let Obolis know his suggestion was a failure.”

Torix fumed, “You two are very lax, considering we just caught you spying.”

Florence pulled out a fly held between two of his claws. As Florence smashed it between his fingers, a burst of blue magic erupted from the fly with a skull-shaped poof of smoke. Torix looked away, appearing nervous,

“Touche.”

The two albony sat down before Helios’s eyes locked in on all the documents spread on the table, the ones Isa and Lester grabbed from a shop. Helios pointed at them,

“May I?”

I turned to Torix, and the lich shrugged,

“I don’t see why we wouldn’t share it with them. These hardly hold value.”

Helios tapped the document, and tracing magic coursed across the paper. He read the magical lining, and as he finished, he set the form down,

“These are the orbital paths of Gypsum.”

Torix leaned back, “How did you read that? It’s encrypted.”

Helios interlocked his hands behind himself, “I’ve been researching Elysium’s new encryption as they’ve been updating them. I ran through several of the common patterns, and it gave me enough insight to discover that document’s contents. That’s warping information, isn’t it?”

I raised my palms, “Don’t look at me. I have no idea.”

Helios piled the papers together while looking at the various devices, “I can use this information, memorize it, and then warp freely to this world. Give me a matter of weeks, and it shall be done.”

Torix’s eyes narrowed, “Weeks, you say? We’re expected to trust in that?”

Helios spoke with confidence, “I am a prodigy for a reason.”

I furrowed my brow, “Uh, I’m out of the loop. What’s going on?”

Helios gestured at the papers, “These carry the orbits, algorithms for calculating orbits, time system data, and the solar system’s location. This...hmm, Gypsum, was it? Its orbit is inordinately complex, so it will take some time to master. It can be done, however.”

I turned to Torix, “So why are you so impressed?”

Torix pinched the bony bridge of his nose, “I forget there’s much you still know little about. Warping requires memorizing various orbital speeds, patterns, and the time systems used on a planet. It can require more than that, such as factoring in the speed of a solar system’s rotation around the center of the Milky Way or its general location within the galaxy as well.”

Helios added, “Along with the Milky Way’s current floating path in deep space.”

Torix nodded, “Most mages cannot warp a far distance as these calculations become absurdly complex. Even if they can maintain said arithmetic, the act of ‘throwing’ your portal, so to speak, requires absolute precision. Otherwise, warps move and wobble. You may be halfway through walking into one before it begins warping you into the ground.”

I raised my eyebrows, “What happens then?”

Helios deadpanned, “Your body intermingles with dirt, killing you.”

I spread out my hands, “Why haven’t I noticed this before?”

Florence spoke up, “You’ve never been around someone who sucks at warping. The specialists you’re around have also stuck to warps that were close by. If a warp is within a visual distance, you can offload a lot of the calculations to proprioception and your brain’s natural ballistic engine.”

Helios flicked his fingers, “You ‘throw’ the portal so that it matches your location. That is a feel oriented process. Once a portal is out of sight, calculations must be made, else people will die. I’m an exception to the norm regarding portalling, so I can throw my portals over light-years using my mathematical ability. And skill, but that much was obvious.”

I crossed my arms, “So learning to go somewhere new should take longer than a few weeks, I’m assuming?”

Helios smirked under his mask, “Oh, most definitely. A planet like Gypsum? Oh, it could take months to years if you can learn it.”

“Why can’t you just use a calculating app for this kind of thing? That would make it a hell of a lot easier.”

Helios took a breath, “Excellent question. The reason is simple – portalling requires visualization. Accurate visualization. A calculator will give you the correct position and orbital path, but you won’t understand the depth behind the number. By following through with the equations on your own terms, you can extend your awareness far beyond what you’d believe possible. It’s as if you’re putting on a pair of binoculars constructed out of the equations you’ve used.”

Florence scoffed, “In your case, Helios, it’s more like a telescope.”

He raised a hand, “This is how I go about the process. I understand where it is. Then I pinpoint that reality and path mentally, calculating the processes to enhance my precision. Afterward, I use my experience to land the portal.”

I turned to Torix, “How long would it take you to learn this kind of thing?”

Torix stared to the side, “I...would likely be unable to do so. I’ve made attempts at learning long-distance portalling. The practical concerns meant I thought of it as a ritual oriented process. That’s where my own ritual spawns from, and that’s how I made it to Earth in the first place. There was a prolonged, strange energy signature. I mapped its direction, figuring out Earth’s movement patterns.”

Torix rolled his hands, “It was an ingenious solution, but to make a long story short, I used my runic calculations to map a position to Earth.”

Helios leaned back, “Well, the lich knows how to do more than reading charts and graphs. He can make them.”

Torix brandished a hand, “It’s to be expected of me, really.”

I leaned my head onto a hand, “Portalling sounds ridiculously hard.”

Florence scoffed, “You’re telling me. I was never suited for it. Most warpers are cold, calculating individuals. That’s why-” Florence put his hand over Helios’s shoulder, “My brother is one of the finest warpers out there. He’s an ice king, after all.”

Helios crossed his arms, “I think of it as using my personality to my advantage.”

I pointed at myself, “Could I learn to warp?”

Helios raised a brow, “Hmm, perhaps. I doubt you’re of the aptitude for long-distance portalling. The time investment in maintaining the skill is enormous as well. Short distance, throw based portalling could be learned, however. Mastered, even. That would suit your magical style as well.”

Helios turned a palm to me, “I could organize lessons for it while I learn the data for Gypsum.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Alright, could you keep your sarcasm to a minimum while teaching me?”

“Oh, certainly.”

I sighed, “Well, that’s about all I could hope for. We’ll get those lessons done after we’ve established a bulwark on Blegara.”

Helios tilted his head, “Don’t forget your contractual obligation to Obolis. You still need to handle the Ahcorus and eliminate Plazia-Ruhl.”

I gave him a thumbs-up, “We’ll get it done.”

Turning to Amara, I put my hands on my hips, “It looks like you’ll need to stay on Blegara for a bit to get a lock on their security, at least based on what you said?”

Amara nodded while draining the crystalized mana I gave her. I spread out my arms, “We’ll get to Blegara tomorrow morning. Without us resisting, I’m pretty sure Elysium’s established a pretty widescale network there. Unlike Earth, there isn’t really any kind of pro-Schema faction to worry about, and few Vagni really systemized anyways.”

I gave my hands a single clap, signaling this was done, “Alright then. The gialgathens will be helping us launch an attack a few days from now on Blegara with my golems. We’ll have a few surprises for Elysium on top of that as well.”

Althea stood up and walked over to me, “How many golems are there now?”

I grinned, “Many.”

We ended up chatting for a bit, Isa and Lester recounting a few stories about Gypsum. It was a fascinating world, and I anticipated stepping on it one day. For now, getting the most out of this excursion to Blegara preoccupied my mind. I could get thousands of more Omega Strains during Amara’s stay there, which was the perfect excuse for it.

I didn’t want Helios or Florence to become suspicious of my actions, so I hadn’t made any trips to Blegara. If Obolis uncovered the Omega Strains there, he wouldn’t hand over the planet so quickly. By waiting for the right moment, I covered my tracks and prevented Obolis from becoming aware of the hidden resource.

That being said, Helios warping me wasn’t the best idea either. He could plant an unseen bug of some kind like before, and that might put Obolis in the know. Preemptively stopping a problem before it began, I walked up to Helios after the meeting,

“Hey. Don’t worry about getting Amara and I out towards Blegara. I’m going to get Spear to help us out. You need to be able to focus on those coordinates and lessons.”

Visible relief passed over Helios, the idea of warping us over and over looming over him like a dark miasma. He raised a hand,

“I’ll repay your kindness with my full efforts.”

He walked off towards his own living quarters, carrying the documents and warping devices. In fact, everybody got to work after the meeting ended, many of our members moving onto their own projects. I was no different. I caught up to Torix, who walked his way towards our golem station. I joined him. While jogging over, an idea popped in my head, and I wanted to run it by Torix.

I waved a hand around us,

“Mind setting up the quieting magic?”

We departed towards the forgotten tunnel where the Omega Strains did their magic. During our brisk walk, Torix raised a hand and snapped his fingers. A moving bubble of sound protection passed over us, blurring the outer world. I continued, “How are the Omega Strains doing?”

“Excellent. There have been no issues outside of a few untimely deaths.”

I frowned, my eyes widening with shock. Torix cackled, “You should see the gaze you just gave me. Hilarious, I tell you. No one has died. I am a lich, a true master of life and death, after all. Given your orders, I’ve taken care of these test subjects as instructed.”

I let out a sigh, “Thank you. Should we move forward with the project then?”

“Absolutely.”

“Cool. I’m thinking of taking my golems with me when going towards Blegara. They’ll help me harvest as many Omega Strains as possible while we’re over there. Do you think they’re ready for that?”

Torix stopped in place, and I turned to him. He raised his hands, “That’s...That’s genius.”

I raised a fist, “Hell yeah. The thing is, I have no idea where all the golems I sent you are. I’ll need to swing by and pick them up. Same with Spear.” I looked around, “Speaking of which, where the hell is Spear? It’s been a while since we last talked.”

Torix scoffed, “Oh, I’ve been utilizing that resource since you gained Helios as your personal chauffeur. If you’d like to meet with Spear, we’re on our way to him.”

I pursed my lips, “Huh. Okay.”

We went deeper through our abandoned tunnel, passed where the Omega Strains were located. Further beyond, a newly built door stationed itself a ways away from every

other experimental chamber. From inside, dim shouting echoed out. I turned to Torix, “What’s in there?”

Torix interlocked his hands behind himself, “Let us find out.”

The door swung open, and an expansive concrete room unveiled itself. It was larger than a football field, having steel pillars dispersed throughout it. Closer to our side of the room, Spear stood with his chest out and spear at his side. He planted it down, and a battalion of super golems followed suit. Spear roared,

“I serve my master. His will is my will. His goal is my goal.”

The super golems made a telepathic shout, repeating his words. After finishing that statement, Spear looked towards us, his Sentinel armor still cracked over him. Spear pointed back towards the super golems, “Meditate on the depths of your gratitude as I speak with your masters.”

The golems thought back, “Sir, yes, sir.”

They sat down in unison, crossing their legs and meditating as Spear liked to. I gawked at him,

“So, you’ve been busy, huh?”

Spear walked up, “Yes. I gave these things the course we Sentinels went through, but I replaced Schema and the system with the Harbinger and his guild.” Spear peered at the group of nearly fifty super golems, “It has worked well enough.”

I peered at the disciplined group, “No kidding.” I waved my hands, “Anyways, I need these guys to help me get some stuff on Blegara. Can you warp me there?”

“Yes. When will that need to occur?”

“As soon as you can make it happen.”

Spear turned and shouted at the golems, “Everyone stand. You have a new mission effective immediately.”

They did as he said, standing into position. Spear stepped aside, “This man needs no introduction. He’ll brief you on the mission, and you’ll do as he says. Understood?”

A thought roared back, “Sir, yes, sir.”

Nervousness crept up my spine as I coughed into a hand, “Ahem, ahem. So, uh, I’ll need you to harvest Omega Strains from Blegara tomorrow morning. Torix will show you them, and you’ll just put them in your personal pocket dimension. They have very little mass, so it’s more so a speedy harvesting mission than anything else.”

They spoke out with an awe-inspiring level of unity, “Sir, yes, sir.”

I spread out my hands to Spear, “Holy shit. You’re good at this.”

Spear took a deep, satisfied breath, “It comes naturally to me. I love this feeling. Discipline, honor, and gratitude – that’s all a soldier really needs.” Spear stared into the distance, his mind wandering to a different time,

“By Schema, I loved boot camp. Those were the days.”

Staring at Spear, I realized I would never have been a great soldier. I was too stubborn and defiant, and though I recognized those qualities as strengths, the military wasn’t the place for them. In this case, the golems’ single-mindedness made them far more effective as a unit. So much so, they intimidated even me.

Lacking any kind of complaints, I messaged Amara, detailing the contents of our new mission. Handling everything I needed doing in the day, I went by my living space, the personal suite at the top of Mt. Verner. Surfing her obelisk and relaxing on our bed, Althea peered up at me. I grinned at her- and she returned the gesture.

We rested together for a while, relaxing and enjoying some time off for once. A bit later, I ordered a few foodstuffs, and a chef from the lower floors had them delivered. Waiting and talking, Althea told all about the mission, focusing more on how she felt during it rather than stating facts. It affected her more than I think she realized.

The encounter with the Spacial Fortress stuck out as particularly traumatizing. I waited on addressing my concerns until after our evening meal for that, wanting her to have a good time. We got two glasses of wine, two steaks, and a cilantro soup dish I enjoyed. I didn't make it for me, though. That soup had been her favorite from when we did these dates all the time before we killed Yawm.

Ever since killing him and coming to Giess, quiet moments like this came less and less frequently. I tried staying in the moment, really soaking the meal and time with her in. Despite not wanting to, time passed as we sat at a glass table for two. Before we knew it, we watched the sunset in the distance, talking all the while.

It was the most relaxing day I'd had in a long time.

As the night settled down, we cuddled on our bed. Althea looked stressed out, and despite my curiosity, I took my time, trying to exercise some patience. I leered at her while asking,

"Hey."

She muttered back,

"Hey."

"So, I don't mean to pry, but you seem stretched thin. Is everything okay?"

She looked up at me as I hugged her from behind, "I...I think it is. At least it is now."

She cuddled closer, and we sat there for a few minutes. Thinking I resolved the issue, I relaxed some. Althea spoke up,

"Maybe I'm not okay. I feel...petrified. It's weird."

"What do you think has you so shaken up?"

Her eyes glazed over, and she relived a terrible memory. She shook it off, “I think it’s... uh, that fortress thing.”

I tried being gentle with my words, “What about the fortress thing?”

“Seeing one up close, it really puts into perspective how powerful Schema is. It also made me feel helpless. I couldn’t have done anything, and we’re lucky we’re alive. In all those missions, that’s the closest I’ve come to death in a while. Maybe ever.”

I didn’t know what to say, so we stayed quiet. Althea stared at the ceiling, taking a moment to think. Her voice cracked a bit, “Yeah...I’ll pull through. It’s just, you know, hard sometimes.”

She blinked back a few tears before I winced. She cried for a while, and I couldn’t think of anything to say. Instead, I took deep breaths, trying to soothe her with my own sense of calm. It helped, but she still shivered a bit from the whole experience. She stared out a window into the dark after settling down, and she murmured,

“Do you ever feel like you’re in over your head sometimes with all of this galactic war stuff?”

I closed my eyes, “All the time.”

She pursed her lips, “How do you get through it?”

“By moving forward. I’ve found that if I overthink about what’s happened to me, I end up getting overwhelmed.”

“That doesn’t exactly sound healthy.”

“Yeah, it’s probably not.”

She laughed a little, more so as a release than out of genuine humor. She whispered, “I don’t think I’m strong enough to do that all the time like you are.”

I shook my head, “No, I don’t think it’s real strength. I think...I think I’m hiding from something. I never look at this terrible monster chasing me, and instead, I keep looking forward. You’re the strong one. You face that monster head-on, even when you know it’s horrifying.”

“You really think so?”

“I know so.”

We lingered there for a minute, and she wore a sad smile on her face. Within minutes, she fell asleep in my arms, exhaustion taking her. I used gravity as I got myself out from around her, and the whole event got me thinking about our circumstances. We were dragged into this after just wanting to avoid our unknown statuses. Even after killing Yawm, Schema wanted more from us.

Now, he got more. Probably more than he ever hoped for, and that left me angry and resentful. Schema had a bad habit of playing a rigged game with people, one where he always ended up on top. I wasn’t precisely boiling with hatred, but some bitterness leveled overtime at the AI. This kind of incessant, constant stress...it wasn’t good for people.

I might handle it via stats and my armor, but most were like Althea, barely holding on all the time. It wasn’t fair, not to her or anyone really. Elysium showed a better way, but they went about their changes via mass murder. Torturing the eldritch and silvers wasn’t exactly right either. I learned that fact from Amara and Other Hod, who helped us and worked within our guild just fine. I was sure other eldritch wouldn’t be so different, at least some of them.

Seeing people struggle like this all the time, it made me think back to my contract with Yawm. He used Etorhma’s cipheric augments to power the deal, and he likely copied a lot of his own contracts formed with the Old Ones. For that reason, it was a guaranteed outcome – I had to rewrite a meaningful change in Schema’s code at some point down the line.

To do so would require more studying, a few Builders like Amara, and luck. If all that did happen, which was a big if, then I’d write down some of the changes Elysium fought for. While I disagreed with their methods, their goal was sound. They wanted Schema to be finished and become fully realized. Routine updates would be even better, but I doubt Schema would allow that to ever happen.

Still, it was worth wondering about.

After leaving Althea to sleep, I went and made golems all night. The routine, fulfilling hustle cleared my head by morning, and I met up with Spear and his super golem armada. They looked ready and trained for the task, all of them knowing how to use their storages. Their own repositories lacked many of my pocket dimension's abilities, but they got the job done.

Ready and waiting, these giants surrounded Amara. The eldritch Builder shivered while around them, and her terror suffused the entire area. As I showed up, she actually relaxed a bit. Amara still gawked at the titanic golems like they were demons, but my presence helped. Her promotion to a follower gained her trust, which was a whole lot better than controlling her through abject terror.

With everything set up, I stood beside Spear, who began waving his dimensional slicers. With a quick wave of his hands, he cut open a downward-facing slice through space-time, and I helped finish the cut. With a torrential portal opened, my golem battalion marched through towards Blegara's liquid surface. We jumped into the portal, landing just above the sea. If we didn't take these precautions, Mt. Verner would flood with Blegara's endless oceans.

We splashed across the surface, sinking down. I stared around, inspecting all that Elysium accomplished in a week.

Yet again, they defied expectations.

Chapter 289: Amassing Potential

While sinking miles and miles from Saphigia, Elysium already set up shop in the Vagni's capital. They constructed a net out of energy to hold in mana pollution. This purple sludge sustained a silver population, all of it grown at the top of this purple pillar. Saysha beetles constructed a landmass of metal, and merjects acted as Hybrid fodder at the top of it.

All of this occurred at the city's core. Outside of this new wall of congealed pollution, the Vagni thrived. They accepted Elysium's rule, and like I predicted, they already set up a system here. That much was evident by the sheer number of aquatic Hybrids swimming with the Vagni. The natives even grew in size and speed. That kind of change happened from enhanced stats, along with a subtle, gray hue to their skin.

Turning gray showed constitution investment, though its intensity varied from person to person. I remembered when I played an obelisk based game once, and it had an ad in it for powders that ‘de-grayed’ a person’s skin. I didn’t care enough for something like that, but I could relate to why someone would.

Sinking towards an aquatic, isolated cliffside, I stepped up and peered at the now Elysium city. They granted breathing equipment and a swimming course for land dwellers, all of it hosted in several classes. They kept the same adventurer’s guild format for completing quests and gaining access to Hybrids. Elysium also erected many buildings, some full of air and others without it, for Vagni and land members alike.

The most massive change came from the upgraded road systems. That was something I noticed about Elysium so far – they emphasized transportation. On Earth, they cleaned the countryside of roaming eldritch for trade routes. In Gypsum, they implanted many teleporters for navigation.

In this case, Elysium implanted Leviathan based Hybrids at various intervals. These colossal creatures channeled mana, creating artificial water currents across Saphigia. This allowed for a better flow of goods and people, granting immediate economic prosperity. Combine that with the clearing out of nearby eldritch, and the Vagnis’ farms and outlook changed for the better.

This was no subtle shift either; it was night and day compared to the Empire’s approach. The albony wanted to rule via suppression, like a heel crushing a neck. Elysium took a more carrot-on-a-stick approach. The carrot was tempting to get, so the Vagni sprinted towards it, and they ran exactly where the Adair’s wanted them to go.

Outside of those direct changes, Elysium managed to reconstruct most of the ruined areas of Saphigia. They used origin mages that molded matter into the collapsed buildings and streets. Since the Vagni’s homes weren’t symmetrical, even a novice mage could get some work done. That assumed their mana reserves held up.

I watched a mage create a wall in the distance as Amara drifted up to me. She breathed in the water around her using one of the rings I made. Breathing out, she peered at the mage as well,

“It would seem that they have chosen a far easier path.”

I frowned, “Yeah, I think you’re right about that.”

Amara gazed at the city, “This place...it is saturated with we eldritch, a world embodied in our image. Those here, they are all composed to the core from my kin. Elysium has taken a far kinder approach to us, merely trimming our numbers rather than calling for systematic extermination.”

I turned away from the city, a giant eldritch rolling over the countryside. I pointed at it,

“Isn’t that monster’s goal the same? It’s just trying to eat everything alive.”

Amara winced at the gargantuan creature, the rolling ball of mouths and eyes grotesque. She shivered, “That...that is not what all eldritch wish to become. Many do, but not I. Not Hod. We wish for something else, something more. It is a tempting goal for most, I admit, but there are those of us that are different in the end. We wish for more than endless consumption and growth.”

Amara turned a palm, eyeing me from the side, “Unlike others, I could mention.”

I shrugged, “It gets the job done. At least I’m not eating someone else, right?”

“To me, it seems no different. We will agree to disagree.”

She glared at my chest, and I knew good and well she was looking at my elemental furnace. I let the issue slide, turning back to Saphigia. Elysium’s approach worked better than Schema’s for this place, and that’s probably why the Adair’s wanted to own this territory.

Their victory wasn’t absolute, however. I walked around a few rural villages nearby, telepathically eavesdropping on a few Vagnis’ conversations. None of them even spoke with the new rulers, many not even knowing what was happening. While I couldn’t make out complex discussions, I uncovered another seed of resentment building up.

The Vagni didn’t like having their old gods suppressed, whether that was good for them or not. It was like forcing medicine down a dying man’s throat. Sure, they needed it, but that didn’t mean they’d like you for it. This eldritch killing provoked some animosity, and it gave me a lot of optimism going forward.

I could suppress eldritch even better than Yawm had before me. Using that tool, I didn't have to actually kill them. Instead, I could intimidate them, which would bolster far greater loyalty from the Vagni than merely eradicating the monsters. My golems acted as the meat and bones of this idea, spreading my presence throughout Blegara. They'd serve as reminders that the eldritch were allowed to live on this planet.

So working within that framework, I planned on instilling a deep fear in the monsters here. Pulling out a mana crystal, I stared at it before flipping it in my fingers. Enough of these could attract a massive swarm of eldritch. Once here, we'd see whether or not my status as a living multiverse would be enough to get the eldritch on my side.

Time would tell.

I brainstormed these solutions while we traveled through the countryside, towards the trenches surrounding Saphigia. We created a long line of members, each of us dedicated to picking up the Omega Strains along a singular, straightforward line. Once diving down, the golems and I began harvesting Omega Strains, hastening as we went.

After fifteen minutes of quick diving and picking up the stones, we finished one of these slices of a trench. Moving further down, we dove down again. This covered the bottom of the indentation like lawn mowing through all the Omega Strains there. We didn't harvest most of them as we passed initially, as we kept ourselves unseen.

It wouldn't be the best idea for the Vagni to see hundreds of lights moving through the bottom of underwater valleys. That's why each member of my golem armada using their abilities to search. I stayed stealthy during the entire operation as well, opting for feelers instead of lights.

I extended hundreds of armored tendrils in all directions as I passed the ground. These felt out my immediate area, and anything that shivered at my touch, I stored in my pocket dimension. A few fish and plants were in that mix, but they didn't exactly fill out my storage. The same could be said for the super golems, who each carried my same abilities.

They covered a smaller area with their feelers, but they quickly learned how to get it done. Having a means and a method, we didn't waste a ton of time, tackling the task at hand. As the process extended out into hours, we got the process ground out to a sublime level of efficiency if I say so myself.

The whole 'feelers' based tactic worked better than eyesight alone. I could tap and check behind rocks that would've taken more time to look behind. The same could be said for the super golems, though they ended up putting a lot more rocks in their storages than I did. Turns out that not giving them a sense of touch resulted in them pocketing more stones than not.

It wasn't too big a deal in the end as they emptied out the stones into the trench once they ascended above Omega Strain depth. Keeping the magenta-colored gemstones, the golems moved on right after. This meant the golems didn't harvest quite as quick as I'd like, but we still accumulated plenty of strains.

At the same time, this monotonous labor gave me plenty of time to think. Using my Congruent Mind Strain ability, I put a little bit of effort into harvesting Omega Strains. All of my other mental abilities focused on channeling my elemental furnace and checking my status. It was about time I dusted off some cobwebs there, so I handled a few of my skills and notifications.

I had a bad habit of letting them pile up, and that penchant only got worse as I got busier. It was still better than some people I saw who checked their status after every update. They'd spend hours pruning and tidying their status every day, and it wasted a lot of time. Either way, I could afford to devote a bit more time to that process. As always, a balance was vital.

Catching up on that, I opened my status and got to work sorting out skills. I found more updates there than I expected. The first part was the creation of two unique skills, each useful in its own right.

Congratulations! By fusing the skills of Runic Programming, Mental Construction, Engineering, Construction, and Craftsmanship, you've gained the Artisan of Danger skill! 105 skillpoints rewarded.

Artisan of Danger(lvl 27) – Others would choose to destroy enemies with their own two hands. You build that which destroys, so the arms of those you created are stained by blood in your place. Allows the superior creation of automatons, such as golems, constructs, or AIs.

Congratulations! Artisan of Danger evolved into the Artisan of Destruction due to Apotheosis's influence. Further enhancements were made due to Craftsmanship being capped at 100.

This unique skill explained how I made the golems so much faster than when I started. I also hadn't checked the entire week, so it made sense the skill was above ten already. It also contained a bit more power than most unique skills, considering how many steps and procedures were involved. The dual enhancements from a legendary skill and a capped normal skill explained that at least.

I was confident that if I handled most of the golems' mental creation and design process, I'd probably already have a mythic skill. Of course, I wasn't exactly good at those things, so I let that issue slide. I couldn't have talent in everything, and despite that imperfection, this was still a great way to start off a system update.

In the upcoming siege, we would need as many golems as possible. Having a unique skill speed up that process was always welcome, and it planted a big smile on my face seeing it. However, there was more to read, so I didn't relish that feeling for too long.

Congratulations! By fusing the skills Telepathic Link, Mental Bombardment, Mental Defense, Strategy, and Mental Adaptability, you've gained the unique Bulwark of Logic Skill! 109 skillpoints rewarded.

Bulwark of Logic(lvl 17) – Many would build their body, wealth, or magic. You've chosen the greatest resource instead; to grow the mind. Grants greater mind magic abilities and gives the user more robust, focused thoughts.

This was the kind of skill that was endlessly useful but hard to quantify. That being said, it didn't bother me that the ability only mentioned ethereal benefits. If anyone, and I mean anyone, could use a mental upgrade, it was me. This entire guild running thing, it was more than a handful sometimes. Making my thoughts better could only help in that regard. Having more potent mind magic was always helpful against the Adair Family's remnants as well.

I took these bonuses to the bank, surprised each of the skills were so pragmatic. Using my more, ahem, focused thoughts, I came up with why. I was doing useful things. Big shocker, I know, but there was more depth behind that line of thinking than the statement implied. It came from a conversation with our resident lich.

I spoke with Torix over the last week while creating golems, and we talked a lot about all kinds of stuff. Gaining skills was one of those topics. Besides discussing how to make some generic, useful skills, we got into more philosophical discussions. At one

point, the chat shifted to a standard growth strategy used by newer sentients: the skill accrual method.

The idea behind it was simple. By gaining many simple, easy to learn skills, you'd build up a considerable base of skillpoints to enhance skill trees. Most of the time, this risk-averse practice involved practicing all kinds of generic skills then leaving a safe spot once you'd gained a certain amount of treepoints.

It turns out, Torix was once one of these skill hoarders. He sat and studied for decades on innumerable subjects, developing the first twenty points of a given skill. This gave him plenty of treepoints, but Torix ultimately regretted his time doing that.

In his own words,

'Learning useless skills requires time. Time, even for an immortal, represents an opportunity cost. I spent an enormity of that resource learning dozens of subjects, none useful to me. In the end, I wish I'd spent my time better. I could've learned skills while accomplishing meaningful tasks. Perhaps I may have had more than one mythical skill before meeting you if I'd taken a different path.'

I tried making him feel better about that, but he was right. Personally, I preferred layering useful tasks with learning so that I got as much out of my time as possible. That's also why I'd argue that Congruent Mind Strains was one of my most valuable unique skills to date. It gave me more from my time, which was priceless.

It wasn't like adding more endurance at this point because I didn't really notice attribute increases any more. That included attributes like intelligence or perception since my stat totals were simply too high. So percentage-wise, even a thousand point increase in an attribute made little difference.

These recent skill gains made a much more significant difference. In fact, that got me thinking about intelligence in general. It never seemed to make much of a difference for my mental plasticity. I could calculate and learn faster, but my generalized critical thinking still suffered. Experience helped me some there, but intelligence did less than expected. Mulling it over, I believed my lack of mental skills was the likely culprit.

Unlike thinking skills, I pursued physical and magical abilities with conviction, and that single-minded focus paid dividends over time. By comparison, I neglected my mind.

That's probably why I never manifested as some genius despite my sky-high intelligence.

I mean, a mind's acuity was a challenging thing to gauge anyway, so I doubted Schema's ability to produce actual, genuine masterminds using only the system. If anything, I think he simply accentuated already existing aptitude rather than created it. I worked with what would be a smaller base than most then, at least in my opinion.

It made me wonder what someone smarter would be capable of given all my attributes, like Torix or Tohtella. Either way, these mental skills meant I could accomplish more tasks with less time. It made me feel a little more like Torix's disciple, considering he had plenty of these thought-based skills at his disposal already.

Looking through my unique and mythical skills, I had more than I thought. In fact, I already had Knowledge Maker on top of these two new mental skills. If I fused them, I'd have an actual mind based mythical skill. That would be pretty cool. I put that on my to-do lists and speaking of which, I poured my treepoints into my Sovereign skilltree.

I ended up with less than 50 points remaining for my class unlock. It wouldn't be long now.

I'd unlock that class after giving our Omega Strains to Torix. That wouldn't be long, considering our harvesting of the Omega Strains was almost complete. I had the golems dump their extra strains into my own storage once theirs was full, and this let them do a few more laps around the trenches. By the time we left, we had harvested over 10,000 of the gemstones. It was more than enough for everyone in our entire guild and then some. I didn't intend on selling them or anything, but extras were always appreciated.

As we finished up, I met with one of the last golems to finish their job, waiting for them to finish. Reaching above Omega Strain depth, I found Alpha, and I gave him a wave, opening up a telepathic link,

"Hey, what's up?"

Alpha peered up at me, seeming kind of down, "I believe that the sky is upwards, based on my current perspective."

“Hah. Anyways, what has you down?”

“I don’t understand. How am I to be asked what is up then told I am down? I am confused.”

I tapped my chin, thinking my way through this, “I’m just wondering why you aren’t as energetic as normal.”

“Oh. I...I was sent on a mission with others. We scoped a dungeon full of monsters. We succeeded in our assignment.”

I narrowed my eyes, “Huh, you don’t sound very happy about it.”

“I am not. I injured one of my teammates. They lived, but I was reminded of many things. One of the harshest of which is my body. I am a living blot of stone and metal. All that exists around me is temporary, yet I am eternal. That is a harrowing concept to realize, and I am grappling with the terms of my existence.”

A sinking feeling went through my stomach, a sense of responsibility brooding over me. Alpha turned towards the trench,

“This, working with my kin, has lifted my spirits, however. It is not that I dislike completing missions with humans. It is simply that I don’t wish to destroy them. I’ve found that task arduous, and for many reasons.”

Alpha shook his head, “They...they are broken so easily. It is a miracle that any of them are still living.”

Hearing the golem’s concerns, I related quite a bit. Dealing with people was always hard, but in Alpha’s case, he struggled for different reasons than most. It reminded me of using Event Horizon and avoiding my own troops. It made something easy into something severe, and I often wondered if I fought better alone. In some ways, I did, but In others, I didn’t. I reached out a hand,

“Just remember that while you’re physically stronger, you’re not necessarily as experienced, tactically sound, or as mentally powerful. A group of mind mages and

tacticians would work wonders at releasing your full potential. I'm the same way. I'm great at tearing things down, but I struggle with a more targeted approach."

A shiver ran up my spine while thinking about Lehesion,

"And you never know when your limits will be tested one day. Learning to work with other people raises your abilities in general, pushing that limit-testing day back. Besides, you won't know ahead of time if you'll be ready. It's always nice knowing someone has your back if a situation falls through."

Alpha peered up at me in wonder, "In that way, I wish I were like you, master."

I raised my eyebrows, "What do you mean?"

"You hold no limit. I am absolute in this, my faith strong like a sun's wind and a star's death. Simply act with confidence, and you shall never fail."

As naive as Alpha was, I wanted to believe him. I put a hand on his shoulder,

"Yeah, sure."

He gave me a bow, following the other golems. I rolled my shoulders, finishing up our trip here. We trekked across the changing underwater horizon until we met with Spear and Amara. Our hacking eldritch already infiltrated their system, and she leisurely scrolled through a few files from their databases. Spear meditated, perhaps reflecting on his gratitude or Schema's code. It was hard to say.

Walking over, I tapped his shoulders, "Hey, you ready to warp us out?"

Spear snapped into action, standing straight up from his cross-legged position, "Yes. I am."

A quick rip through realities later, and we walked through Mt. Verner once more, this time from the golems' training room. Getting a message back from Torix, I figured out he was in his bird emporium. We walked there, and as we did, I talked with Spear.

“I spoke with Helios the other day about warping. He made it sound complicated, but you seem able to teleport anywhere after just having been there. How do you manage to do that? Does it work the same way as normal warping?”

Spear kept looking forward, “Our spears are calibrated with integrated positioning systems. This ties us to Schema’s positional network, and we can use those spots to warp places. The spear does most of the work, tethering the locations while we open a wormhole through time and space.”

“Ah, so it’s that blade there and the cipher inside it then?”

“Yes.”

I stared at the device, “Could I use one of those?”

“You could, but you would be exiled from Schema’s system immediately.”

“Well, that’s a hard stop on swinging one of those.”

“That isn’t the only law you would’ve already broken. When you made Amara a follower, the Overseer and Schema were displeased.”

I frowned, “You know, Schema uses several gargantuan, world eating eldritch to do his bidding. I’m using a small, smart eldritch to help with system issues since Schema won’t help me. Even then, Amara’s put herself at risk for my guild and Schema’s benefit. There’s a point where exceptions to rules should be made.”

“The rules for Schema are different than the rules for you.”

Walking through the glowing fungus hallway, I shrugged, “And that’s why Schema’s fighting this war. He sets the rules then doesn’t follow them. That’s not exactly the best way to incite loyalty.”

Spear crossed his arms, “We shall agree to disagree.”

I opened the door towards the bird's observatory, "Eh, I'm fine with that."

We peered inside, and within the open area, two dozen individuals practiced fighting with the Omega Strains. Using different manifestations of the living crystal, they jousting with their own unique abilities. Some of the gemstones collected around a person's arms, so they used them like blades to gut enemies. Other strains collected over a battler's legs, making them agile and fast.

Further still, some of these new crystals embodied different kinds of fighting styles. Some of them molded over their wearer into the shapes of animals, like snakes or wolves. The user attacked in these forms, working within the bounds of their new bodies. Other crystals created mana amplifying gauntlets and helmets, giving the wearer the ability to channel energy faster and better.

One gemstone even hovered as a floating sword around its user, accentuating the wearer's hand to hand combat. It connected via a tiny thread of crystal, like the links of a chain. It got my blood pumping just looking at these iterations, and my mind raced with possibilities for how to win in hand to hand combat.

Before I jumped down there with them, Torix stepped up to me, his arms interlocked behind him,

"Ah, it's good to see alive and well. How was the mission?"

I opened my pocket dimension, pulling out a dozen or so magenta-colored crystals and hovering them in a circle. Torix cackled,

"Hah, perfect. Is there an estimate on the number of Omega Strains present?"

"At least ten thousand. Maybe more."

"Perfect. We'll be more than ready for strain divisions then, even after our guild's expansion into Blegara. This development suits our plans well."

I raised an eyebrow, "You sound like you've come up with something new to add?"

Torix raised both his hands, primordial mana pooling in one palm and ascendant mana emanating from the other. His eyes flared bright,

“Oh, most certainly.”

Chapter 290: An Archmage

I leaned back, gawking at the two different mana types. Torix moved them back and forth, and I kept my gaze locked on them like they were two headless babies. Ah man, bad similes aside, Torix created a pool of quintessence before allowing all the mana types to wisp away. I blinked,

“So...what the hell happened?”

Torix pointed above his status, and I analyzed it.

Torix Worm, the Harbinger's Erudition(lvl 10,000(Cap: 15,000) | Class: Archmage | Guild: The Harbinger's Legion...)

I spread out my hands, “So you got a new class too, huh?”

The lich beamed with pride and joy, “But of course. It wasn't precisely easy to gain the skillpoints required, but I've hacked away at this for a while now. Unlocking it was only a matter of time.”

“So, I'm guessing the class is how you're making the new manas?”

“It is. While it didn't unlock them all, it did drastically ease the manas production. I, over the last little while, managed to unlock all three advanced types, which gives me an absurd manner of flexibility. I only recently unlocked quintessence, which was by far the most difficult. That being said, I wanted to showcase my strides all at once.”

He puffed out his chest, “Seeing your flabbergasted face was more than worth the effort. Just as well, given my excellent usage of limited resources, I can say with finality that I'll be a force within the guild.”

I imagined him riding on an undead dragon with a legion of zombie wyverns behind him. It seemed right.

“Man, I can’t believe you guys are getting advanced classes before I even unlocked mine.”

Torix rolled his fire eyes, “I’m certain yours is without equal and will likely outdo my own with ease. For now, however, I’m pleased that for once, I surprised you instead of you surprised me.”

I grinned, “Alright, you got me, I’ll admit it...What else did the class give you?”

We both leaned over as he opened his status sheet. He was eager to show me the benefits of his class, just as I was excited to see them.

They were massive.

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

Strength – 2,271 | Constitution – 2,569 | Endurance – 6,479

Dexterity – 1,104 | Willpower –29,578 | Intelligence – 38,215

Charisma – 18,348 | Luck – 13,104 | Perception – 7,429

Health: 1.4 Million/1.4 Million | Health Regen: 2.8 Million/min

Mana: 5.6 Million/5.6 Million | Mana Regen 7.7 Million/min

Stamina: Infinite | Mass: 683,830 pounds |Height: Actual – 9’8 (2.94 meters) | Damage Res – 97.5%

Phys Dam Bonus – 32,735% | Damage Bonus – 45%

Archmage – Allows the fluid usage of all mana types simultaneously. Increases mana regeneration, mana, willpower, intelligence, and charisma by 30%. Spells cast 50% quicker, basic grimoire skills require no charge up period or grimoire use, and forbidden tier spells unlocked for grimoire implementation. Cipher knowledge is no longer forbidden. Forbidden tier research unlocked. Allows the learning of arcane, antimatter, and dimensional magics.

I stared at the archmage description, along with his beefed-up stats. Re-reading it, I pointed at the passage, “Do you mind running this by me real quick? Some of this I’m not familiar with.”

Torix leaned back, putting a skeletal hand on his chest, “Why, I thought you’d never ask.” He coughed into a hand out of habit,

“Ahem, the first ability gives me the usage of these advanced mana types with ease once learned. While I have yet to discover the method of fusing the manas, I have ascertained their individual uses. This should allow me to do many things, such as bolstering my undead with quintessence or creating soldiers with primordial mana.”

He turned his hand in a circle, “That isn’t the only avenue for their usages, however. I could send an army of my summons mad using the wild hunger of ascendant mana. I will use quintessence during my lectures, augmenting my student’s ability to learn. I’ll be able to craft specific teaching chambers using primordial mana, complete with guides made for the sole purpose of teaching.”

Torix’s eyes flared brighter, “I can concoct individuals with minds expressly made with my insights. They shall share and showcase the best nuggets of knowledge I’ve gained, and that will define their existences. I can curate experimental environments for my research, perhaps create plagues that inflict pain or poisons that muddle the mind.”

Torix’s eyes turned red, “And I’ll be showcasing tortures unbounded by my previous limitations.”

A tense moment passed before Torix’s eyes turned blue again, “Though I’ll reserve that for those that deserve said treatment.”

A chill ran up my spine as I gave him two thumbs up, “You got it, chief.”

Torix waved his hands, “All that being said, there are numerous other benefits my archmage class has given me. The stat boost, while simplistic, is appreciated. I can always use more mana and stats. As for the passage regarding specific spells, well, you’ve seen that in action.”

I raised a hand, “Oh, like when you used the mobile silencing aura.”

“Precisely. That is an example of an elementary quieting spell and casting that usually requires the formation of several magical paths and runic configurations. It’s nothing overly complex, mind you, but it’s still a hassle to do without preparation. I believe I’ve done so in the past, but I oftentimes pfrepped those instances.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Always aiming to impress, huh?”

He cackled, “Hah, naturally. What else did you expect of me? Regardless, the other aspects of the class are long term. That would seem to be the meat and bones of an advanced class update – they grant access to otherwise inaccessible things. These new doors can be opened to unveil new horizons otherwise left hidden.”

I slowly nodded, “It’s like you’re tearing down all these walls Schema built around you, huh. That’s cool.”

“I have a penchant for agreeing. These newfound magics will inevitably strengthen my own offensive potential greatly as well. Combine those abilities with my bolstered magical flare, and I’ll become a lich of great renown. And here I believed my magnum opus was used during my first ascension as a lich.”

Torix lifted his hands, “This, this means I will manifest as a galactic presence, given time and preparation. I will unfold an endless night on our enemies, and with my mind, I’ll unleash devastation on those that would oppose us. They’ll howl as their souls are torn and ripped asunder, and those screams will fall on deaf ears.”

The lich steepled his fingers, “They’ll know the terror of a lich unbounded.”

The people around us let off a cold sweat before I crossed my arms, “Hell yes...but I think you terrified everyone here.”

Torix peered around before raising his palms to everybody, “Oh, don’t mind me, everyone. I’m merely showcasing my plans to our guildleader. Continue as you were.”

Everybody hustled, fearful of Torix’s wrath. Even I felt daunted by his energy, but it was good knowing he was on our side. I gave him a nudge, “It’s good to see you’re keeping up with me. For a while, I thought I’d leave you behind.”

Torix shook his head and scoffed, “Oh, I’m certain when your class is unlocked, all comparisons between us will end. Of this, I have no doubt...Speaking of classes, how close are you to unlocking yours? You began your investment long before I did.”

“I’m like, twenty-seven points away or something like that.”

Torix froze in place. An awkward, tense silence passed over us before I murmured, “Uh, you ok?”

Torix jeered, “Twenty seven points or something like that...Wow, Daniel, I understand you can be single-minded at times, but even I am flabbergasted by your ability to close out distractions. In this case, I believe one of those distractions would bolster not only your abilities but our guild’s overall morale. After all, we pulled back from Blegara, and our troops need a reason to continue fighting in this war.”

He threw up his hands, “And you could serve as said motivation. We can brand it as such – The Harbinger was waiting, and his class has arrived. May he have mercy on our enemies. That would explain the solace without expressing weakness. This, this takes priority over everything else.”

I shrugged, “Eh, we needed to get the Omega Strains. This was coming after all that.”

Torix sighed, “Well then, the Omega Strains are harvested and being processed as we speak. This is the perfect place to learn a few new skills, no matter what they are. Let us go and train in anything for the next few hours. That should just about do it for your class unlock.”

I rolled my shoulders, “How about some mental combat?”

Torix interlocked his hands behind himself, “You’re on, disciple.”

We paced out towards the golems' chambers as they unloaded Omega Strains. In this space, a team of mages helped hover the Omega Strains into wooden crates, making sure to avoid contact with them for now. My golems picked up these crates, taking them towards a new, industrialized room down the hall.

I snooped at all of that as Torix and I walked towards an empty part of the golems' training center. Already feeling the pressure, Torix and I bowed to each other before I gripped my fists a couple times,

“So, what’s the intensity this time?”

Torix peered up before staring at me, “Let’s try full force, shall we?”

In an instant, his mind linked to mine, and it extended like a spear into my psyche. My vision blurred before he extended out his grasp, ripping and tearing in all directions. It ached like rusty hooks flaying my skin off. Without pain resistance, I’d of been crippled in the initial assault, let alone the powerful follow up.

But I’d maxed out that skill long ago.

I regrouped my mental base, regaining control of my senses and memories. Torix retreated, and as he did, I lurched out through our telepathic connection. He deflected and darted around my assault, and like a child swinging his fists in frustration, my retaliation proved ineffective.

I wasn’t one for giving up, however. I kept pressuring him, and Torix bounded around my attacks. He repositioned his mind, turning into a squirming medusa. From each piece of his consciousness, he exerted an individual pressure. This multipronged attack combined with his fluidity and dodging, enabling tricky assaults that evaded my own.

At this point in our practice, I’d take an absolute beatdown of punishment before snagging Torix a few times once he exhausted himself. This approach, while a winning strategy, wasn’t exactly the most effective fighting style. It relied on my superior stats, and beating someone who was my equal like that wouldn’t work.

Using my big old brain, I theory crafted a few ideas executing via a different mind strain. I facepalmed after a few seconds. I was literally using the skill I should be attacking Torix with. Bolstered by this new idea, I created several individual, congruent mind strains. These consciousnesses handled different aspects of my mental warfare.

One handled the offensive aspects, the other dealt with the defensive measures. The last mind strain was the smallest fragment, and it coordinated the two. This line of communication kept the two minds working together well. Instead of attacking with all my force, I let out sharper, more precise jabs. At the same time, I deflected and blocked some of Torix's retaliations.

Now, I wasn't going toe to toe with the lich all of a sudden, but I did improve my odds substantially. This effort continued, my minds coordinating better with time, and my mental wounds less substantial as the battle waged on. Torix still remained composed, his hands interlocked behind him, but I could sense more tension in his mental movements. They weren't made with the same effortless ease as earlier. There was a 'flex' to them they once lacked.

That signified effort, and that was excellent. Bare minimum, this meant Torix would exhaust himself faster than on average. I still didn't have the same offensive potential that he did, however. Splitting my mind further, I made a strain that brainstormed ideas for improving my combat. After an hour, I got an idea.

I used another of my skills, Knowledge Maker, and I reviewed our previous bouts as we fought. This required changing one of my split minds into a reviser and a recheck-er. It skimmed our old fights, and it took notes on Torix's patterns or openings. It didn't find many, the ancient lich having kept his game on point over our many spars. Despite Torix's relentless and methodical style, there were still opportunities here or there.

I had two of my mind strains talk with each other, the planner and the note taker. They came up with mini-plans for my other, primary attacking consciousnesses. They then created varied assault patterns that alternated every few minutes. At this point, I pressured Torix plenty, the old lich having unlocked his hands and leaned forward. His eyes flared with fury, his effort spiking far more than usual.

The ancient sorcerer adapted to my new approach, and he implemented unusual attacks of his own. He shifted his offensive patterns, wielding his mind like a pointed spear and a parrying shield. I kept my minds working to their fullest extents, cycling through old attacking diagrams and attempting advanced maneuvers. At some point, all these disparate actions clicked in place, and I pressed that advantage.

On the backfoot for once, Torix used runic work and his newfound grimoire spells to level the playing field. With those new tools and a bit of quintessence, I fell into the pressured side once more. This trend continued, Torix emboldened by his newfound success. His attacks enhanced in volume, each one carrying lethal intent. Torix's defensive and offensive measures fused into one, becoming a cyclone of both.

He ripped holes through my consciousness, his full force unleashed. I never brought out this kind of intensity from the guy before, but I still stood my ground when faced with Torix's mind. I shifted, turned, planned, revised, and disciplined my approach. I worked out my old plans, keeping the best of them, and I improved those approaches, using feints, flanking, and multi-faceted attacks.

We ended up entering a flow to our combat, one that let us lose track of time. By the end of our sparring session, I found myself more taxed than after receiving a complete beatdown. Taking damage was much more comfortable than flexing all these new, mental 'muscles,' so to speak. It left me with a slight, dull headache, one numbed by my pain tolerance.

Finishing up our spar, we leaned against a wall nearby. Torix gave me a nod of approval, "Now, that was an actual match. You've yet to beat me on equal footing yet, but I must say, that was a good attempt. The best so far, in fact."

I rubbed my temples, massaging out some mental fatigue. I'd recover quickly, and even being a little tired, it felt good to face a challenge like this. Torix waved a hand, "So, have you completed the class requirements yet?"

I shrugged, "Eh, maybe. I'll check."

I opened my status, and I found a surprise waiting for me.

Congratulations! By fusing the unique skills Knowledge Maker, Bulwark of Logic, and Congruent Mind Strains, you've created the mythical skill, A Manifold Mind. 92 Skillpoints rewarded!

A Manifold Mind(lvl 13) – You've honed your mind in many ways, exceeding your peers. Now that mind exceeds expectations. A Manifold Mind allows the creation of

multiple consciousnesses, each of them close to full power. Effectiveness and the number of minds increase with higher skill levels.

It was one of those skills I wished I'd made years ago. Holding multiple minds working at the same time, well, that was godly stuff. It contained a mystique about it I couldn't match with most skills, let alone at the mythical level. Even if it acted only as an evolution for Congruent Mind Strains, that was still better than most legendary skills.

Why? Because it would save me so much time.

I showed Torix the skill, and he leaned back in awe, "Now, normally, your mythical skills aren't precisely the kind I'd envy. After all, they tend to be the smashy sort. This one, however, is very different. That is the exact kind of skill I'd like more than any I currently have. Given my mind's limitations, I'd love to see what I could accomplish with that ability."

Torix pressed his hands together as if giving a prayer, "Please, use that to its fullest extent. It would be a shame to see it go to waste."

I grinned at the skill, "Oh, I will. In fact--"

I got to work, thinking up several minds doing different things. One of them hummed the furnace, handling the meditative effort. The other one let me continue talking with Torix,

"I was already firing my furnace, but now the conversion is better. It also distracted me some, so I can give you more of my full attention."

"While that certainly sounds useful, it does beg the question – what else will you use it for?"

I peered up, thinking of fighting, "Well, I know I have a lot of different styles of combat I can use. Normally, I'm limited to using one or two at a time, like gravitational fighting or elemental casting. This will let me use several attacks at once. If anything, this is like a multiplier for my abilities in general."

Torix stared at the empty, concrete room, “It worked wonders during our mind magic battle. Normally, I give you quite the thrashing before your relentlessness overcomes my skill. This time that came to pass as usual, but with far less reliance on the unyielding aspect. I can’t imagine what you’d do in combat with that skill. It sends a shiver up my spine imagining it.”

I opened my dimensional storage over my forearm, like a shield, “I’ll use this more, along with its reversing capabilities. I have a few other tricks up my sleeve too. My ambient auras, pressure-based abilities, gravitation, telekinesis, even my enhanced senses, I could really tear a battlefield up if I used all of it all at once.”

“It sounds rather absurd in practice. I’ll enjoy seeing that used on Blegara. That being said-” Torix leaned close,

“Let’s see the class, shall we?”

I smiled, putting all my points into the Sovereign tree. A message popped up.

Congratulations! You’ve unlocked a rare class variant – The Sovereign.