

## New World 301

### Chapter 301: An Abdication

I sprinted towards the beast, Lehesion's magic channeling even as I tackled into him. I made my shoulder's contact point sharp, telekinetically reduced that surface area further, used gravity wells to speed me up more, and I burst heat into Lehesion as I landed.

My many minds gave me this fluidity. Lehesion's armor cracked while I knocked him back. An annihilating shockwave rippled out from our impact, and I turned to see the others. Chrona slowed down the wave using a block of temporal dilation. At the same time, Krog and his gialgathen troops released a burst of sonic booms, perforating the incoming tide of force. Torix redirected the last inklings of the destructive potential, and they all proved no worse for wear.

It left me in awe but also unshackled. They all thought about fighting Lehesion like this, each and every one of them. Understanding the implications of a fight on this scale, Torix probably helped develop plans that Krog and Spear drilled into our troops. Each member practiced on their own as well, each aware of their roles.

They did that while I handled the building of golems and our political affairs. I couldn't have asked for a better team, because they weren't unmoving. Each of them still progressed even if I didn't see it in person. That progress meant I no longer needed to hold back to account for them.

I shifted forward like a flash, my speed mounting to a blur. Lehesion drove back from my fist's strike. Lehesion charged an enormous incantation. I thrashed through his protection, mauling holes in his side. The sky darkened while we tore each other apart, both of us immortal and undying.

Stars drifted across the horizon, and they fell towards Blegara with an intangible essence. Those wispy clouds condensed before landing, releasing blinding energies and deafening echoes. Over us, my guild members went to work protecting the platform and our territory alike.

Helios was the first to spur into action among them. His elemental furnace revved its wicked cracking of the air. Matter converted to energy, and the albony ruler lifted his arms. Void ice spawned in all directions, smothering the field with its brilliant yet bulletproof hardness. Beyond that shielding, Torix summoned portals nearby. Into those

portals, our gialgathen troops launched bolts and fireballs into shooting stars. All the while, they moved at inhuman speeds.

In fact, all of them did. Chrona sped them all up in a temporal dilation while slowing time around everything else. Chrona had trained since we last fought, and her abilities expanded in scope because of that. This let our team decimate the falling stars before they left our entire city and surrounding countryside leveled.

None of these shining fragments were allowed to even graze our lands, which left Lehesion stunned. He gawked for other reasons as well. The golden gialgathen's magic cast darkness over us all outside of the dim starlight. He and I struck one another with sheening sparks radiating off each of our attacks. I deflected, ducked, and dodged, happy for an opponent that forced me to use those tools again.

It had been so long since I fought an equal, so I cherished this moment.

We poured upon each other punishment abound, our skin and bones harder than metal. From the sparks of our collisions, Other Hod initiated the peak of his offensive potential. Slashes, slices, and swords of darkness engulfed Lehesion. The massive gialgathen plunged into black fires, and Lehesion drenched in the shadowy abyss he created.

Behind him, Althea launched spear after spear, keeping her aim steady. Each time she released a lance, her face grew paler as she drained her life to end Lehesion's. As her eyes glazed over from exhaustion, she grabbed the syringe I left Kessiah. Kessiah had filled it with her own blood, and Althea injected that potent serum into herself.

Her entire being emboldened with the energy of Baldowah, that stringent connection making her into a monster. She put all of her defense down and put on a show. One violet charged spear. Two violet, crackling spears.. Then three life enders in a row. Althea outdid my damage output for a full minute using Kessiah's energized and enhanced blood as a fuel source.

I had to admit it. Kessiah and Althea were more crafty than I thought.

Their combined efforts left the entire field in tatters while I shielded myself with my dimensional portal. No amount of destruction pierced the pocket dimension's veil, even arcane energies. The storage was limited by my mass and mana. Having excesses of

both, I swallowed the incoming waves of destruction, wondering if her new class gave Althea this ability.

Either way, it left Lehesion scrambling for a response. One on one, I wasn't about to contain his ridiculous output of carnage. One against our legion, and we shielded the populations below while goring Lehesion alive. In fragments, Lehesion roared out in pain, unable to even think as he enveloped in a combination of Althea and Kessiah's potentials. I marveled at it, unable to keep close.

As with all good things, the carnage came to an end. Kessiah's blood reached its peak and then dissipated. Althea fell back into her average firing speeds, unable to keep pace with the battle's intensity. From her, minute amounts of eldritch energy poured from our conduit. She was struggling to contain her transformations under the added duress.

Althea rived in agony as her body contorted from ensuing transformations. Torix pulled out his new grimoire in response, channeling magic that settled Althea's mind and her metamorphosis. A super golem picked her up and shielded her while the group kept tight-knit.

It was already more than enough of a contribution. Lehesion didn't understand what or how anything could output that kind of damage against him. His focus splintered as he peered away from me, searching for what sundered his entire being with such volatility. It made his melee even worse, and I made strides of progress in the meantime.

One punch couldn't shatter his empowered armor any longer, but many could. Having every bit of my attention on breaking this frog dragon in front of me, I whaled with an intensity unbounded. Each attack mauled the giant, and compressive waves disintegrated my surroundings.

At the same time, my many minds went to work. We needled Lehesion's sanity with mental assaults and Event Horizon. Another of my psyches used my enhanced senses to intercept Lehesion's star using vast singularities. These black blots dotted the skyline around us, curving clouds and breaking starbombs.

In all viewpoints, the aftermath of our clash manifested. The clouds near us rippled into fragmented, shifting spirals. They left enormous spheres of emptiness that then dispersed into faint mists above and below. The ocean cried out as it took more force than it was ever meant to. It sizzled, boiled, shivered, and generated tsunamis that would travel for hundreds of miles.

I thanked that sea for protecting the Vagni and our city. The water acted as a kinetic buffer, stopping us from liquifying everyone below. Even more so, it prevented heat from scorching everything to fire and lava. Instead, the water vaporized while pouring in from far-off places. This gave us leeway to make our mark on the golden gialgathen.

If I alone made him weak with fear, my guild and I made him tremble in terror. Lehesion gained no ground, his form undulating like a drum. Incessant, annihilating magics, blows, roars, fiery breaths, and punches meant he couldn't comprehend all that came his way. Where he landed, the ground melted. When he tried to fly, the sky turned to ice. He breathed in to use a beam, but Torix turned the air to tar. Every move, every direction, it all came at Lehesion in an outpour of uncompromising, unyielding ruin.

We came together with a fluidity few guilds could match because we were a group few in number but elite in teamwork. Even the super golems worked like a charm, all of Spear's training coming out as they supported our members and helped me strangle Lehesion physically. Within half an hour, the enormous rock platform I gave us turned to a patchy place of void ice and stone. That scarred landscape duplicated the scarred hopes of Lehesion. They were both decayed.

Lehesion had aimed to prove his worth to his puppeteers, but now they would understand that he could not stop us. They'd need something more than raw power to overwhelm our guild because we had that in spades. Even then, we used what we had better. Lehesion used little of his strength as he was unable to fully manifest his powers. Since our last few fights, he'd developed no new strategies, meaning all of our counterstrategies landed without a hitch.

Without the looming threat of Lehesion, the other Elysium forces would be leveled. Their armies would fall. We were a guild of few but had the might of many, and Lehesion experienced the full brunt of that crushing potential. All the while, Elysium fought for control of their mana battery, needing him to prop up their system. Each mind-shackling cuff and soul-crushing chain they scrounged up only weakened Lehesion, his vast mana pool being turned into upgrades for other people.

So when he faded and another voice spoke through him, it left me more than simply empowered.

We were left triumphant. We had won.

Lehesion flew backward before speaking in a cold, calculating voice, “I see that your guild and you have achieved an admirable military presence. I salute your efforts, even if they go against ours.”

It was Tohtella Adair, her composure calm despite the enormity of damage we enacted on her faction. I crossed my arms, switching to The Rise of Eden for the boost in charisma. I made sure it also got to my guild,

“Stop with the chatter. What do you want to talk about?”

“It’s good you don’t want to waste time. I don’t as well. I’ll get to the point then – I want to make a truce.”

I raised my eyebrows, “What kind?”

“A simple one. You can take Blegara and continue your actions how you like. Obviously, you want this place, and while we did as well, we have other war fronts we can focus on. Considering the resource sink this has become, I don’t wish to facilitate further hostilities.”

I frowned, “You killed an entire species. Your hostilities aren’t limited to just attacking us.”

“We did not eliminate the gialgathens. We simply took the majority of them for Hybridization. The rest have been taken to a different planet and allowed to breed like normal. Giess is now too volatile for life there, but the other gialgathens have continued thriving in a less hostile area.”

“So they’re livestock? What a huge improvement.” I clapped, “Real nice of you. Wow. Great job.”

Lehesion’s brow rose, “We have cloning facilities for that purpose, and they are far more efficient. The gialgathens that we’ve put into habitation are simply being allowed to repopulate.”

“You’re not convincing me of that unless I see them, and it wouldn’t matter either way. You still killed nearly all of them. That’s more than enough for me to know what you and Elysium are all about.”

Lehesion smiled, an eerie gesture since I knew it came from someone else, “We’ve done what we’ve had to for a far grander expanse than merely Giess. As for seeing the gialgathen’s habitation, we can have that arranged if you’d like.”

I pinched the brow of my nose, “Look, I don’t trust you guys. You’re going to ambush, assault, or kill me. It’s just too obvious, so no, I’m not going.”

Lehesion’s face leaned back, and his tail pushed up invisible glasses, “There’s been a misunderstanding here. We do not want to have enemies we cannot beat. This is especially true for enemies that can be reasoned with. Unlike Schema, you are not a brick wall that cannot speak. You are a sentient with a mind of its own.”

Lehesion turned a palm to me, “We can find a compromise. I am sure of it.”

I crossed my arms, “Alright, compromise time. Free the gialgathens. Stop converting species into mindless monsters. Quit turning eldritch into pawns for other people. They’re ‘people’ too...Some of them, at least.”

Lehesion’s eyes deadpanned, “You’re unreasonable. Those demands undermine our war effort entirely. You’ve seen what the Sentinels and Overseers are capable of. The moment we relinquish a measure of our assaults, their forces will further compound with opportunistic classers joining in on the spoils of a battle against us.”

Lehesion’s eyes narrowed, “Therefore, we cannot do that. Name different terms.”

I spoke without a change in expression, “Then we’re done here.”

She raised a palm, an odd gesture coming from a colossal gialgathen, “Let’s put a hold on that, hm? There are definitely arrangements that can be made. For one, we understand that moral grounds appeal to you. We derived that from your verbal clash with Lehesion earlier, at least. We wish to point out several of our moral virtues and reasonings to you.”

I narrowed my eyes, “Ohhh, I’ve seen some of them. We all have.”

I gestured to my guild members behind me, tilting my head to Krog and Chrona, “Especially those two. They’ve seen what your ‘morals’ are all about.”

Lehesion sighed, “We began this journey of stopping Schema for several reasons. You know many of those reasons, such as the cullings from Schema’s rough transitions to a systemized world. He offers little support, so newer worlds become subservient to older ones. The Empire you ally with, is one such guild that abuses this system to their favor.”

Lehesion peered at Helios with disdain, “That is why twelve species are enslaved by them.”

I turned to Helios, and the albony peered back and forth between Lehesion and I. He coughed into a hand, “It’s eleven, and it’s not enslavement...merely indentured servitude.”

Man, I had to admit, that was a pretty awful response. I let it slide as Lehesion smiled at him, “If that is your defense, Helios, then I will let it speak for me.” The big gialgathen turned to me, “As you can see, many species are belittled into servitude to enact the will of Schema’s system. We’ve freed thirteen different races from this servitude, and we’re working on the fourteenth here.”

Through Lehesion, she gestured to my golems with a tail, “You’re doing an admirable job here, and we are willing to renounce our claim given your effectiveness. You’ve even found a way of managing the eldritch threat here.”

Lehesion spread his wings like a person spreading their arms, “We only want to expedite the freedom and progress of different species. Particularly fringe species that have been left abandoned by Schema’s policies. It is Schema that attacks without end against us. We simply retaliate as we have to in order to survive.”

“Then why the hell do you keep launching attacks on my damn city?”

“You’re raiding one of our territories, whether you believe you are or not. That gives cause for our assaults. We’re now offering a ceasefire. If you don’t accept our generous conditions, understand that subsequent death on both sides is your fault exclusively.”

A chill ran down my spine as Tohtella continued, "That's why we're willing to forgive your previous transgressions, even the bombings on Giess, where you killed millions."

That unnerving pressure mounted on me before it faded to anger. I pointed to her and shouted, "Bullshit. Those deaths aren't on me. You wouldn't stop converting the gialgathens, so I did what I had to so we could save some of them in the countryside. Don't forget that. And even then, you don't care who dies. You're just afraid of me, so now you don't want to fight anymore."

I frowned, "You just don't want to lose."

Lehesion sighed, "Hah...In essence, you are correct. You are worthy of fear. Why does that change the dynamic of this talk?"

I threw my hands up in frustration, "Because you wouldn't have stopped attacking us if you were winning and the situations were reversed."

Lehesion spread his wings, "That is simply untrue. We aren't looking to wipe out a new guild with promise. We want to have Elysium be a bastion for disparaged species, worlds, and one day, even the eldritch. That is how we gained many massive eldritch to help us defend Giess."

Still not trusting her, I raised my eyebrows while diving into thought. Elysium wasn't about to forgive all that I'd done, but they might turn a blind eye to my guild for a while. That alone would be an enormous boon for me. Without that looming threat of obliteration, we could expand far out on Blegara. Hell, we could finally help people on Earth.

It went even deeper than that. The gialgathens enjoyed Blegara, and they could settle down on it. I could help my homeworld after neglecting it for so long, and I even got some free time for Obolis's mission with the Ahcorus. In that way, I still fought Elysium. I just didn't need to put my own people on the line to do it.

And yet, a part of me didn't want to let this go. Elysium terminated a species for their own gain and tortured silvers and eldritch alike. The eldritch did kill people, so it wasn't as if eliminating the eldritch was downright evil. It was more Elysium's methods that disturbed me.

The footage from their camp on Earth flashed in my mind, vivid and wounding. Outside of the Hybrids, mind magic was a tenuous, grisly means of control. These reasons made me want to smash Elysium to pieces and put a stop to all of that. To make that happen, I would need to wage war.

Peering around, the wasteland surrounding me gave me my answer to this trade. I didn't want to sign this ceasefire, but I had to for my guildsmen. They deserved better than this. If I chose to make some moral stand here, then they'd suffer for it, not me. Considering they'd be the ones making sacrifices, I turned to my guild.

Torix already cast his silencing magic as I did, the aura passing over us. He even fogged our surroundings so that our enemies wouldn't be able to read our lips. I raised my eyebrows at my guild members, "Any ideas on what we should do here?"

Krog snarled, "Kill every last one of them. My kin were killed. Elysium should die for it."

I gave him a nod, "Noted. Anyone else have anything to add?"

Chrona chimed, "If anyone understands your hatred, Krog, it is I. I still dream of killing them even while I sleep. But that is why I wish to stop this – I rest little these days. I suffer more nightmares than dreams now."

She grimaced, "Krog, I've grown weary of these relentless attacks. As a species, we have adapted to this change in how we live, but we were not made for prolonged wars. We make our own slowly, and we take pleasure in the arts."

She leaned towards Krog, "If they offer us peace, then I say we let go of revenge. We may turn that desire to destroy into a desire to rebuild."

Other Hod hissed, "You're cowards."

I frowned at Other Hod, "No, they're not."

Other Hod winced, “He spoke of vengeance, but she forgoes it for peace. Is that not cowardice?”

I lifted a palm, “It can be courageous to not fight sometimes.”

Other Hod tilted back, “I...Huh.”

Torix coughed into a hand, “If I may, I’d like to offer some of my thoughts.”

Ready for a calculated perspective, I let my hands down, “Alright, let’s hear it.”

Torix raised a finger, “I’ve decided upon creating a list of the pros and cons of either endeavor, and they are as follows: we’re choosing between Schema’s favor along with Elysium’s ire versus Schema’s ire with Elysium’s neutrality. I’m of the opinion that Schema’s favor means little and that we’ve been used by that omnipresent AI from the start.”

I crossed my arms, “Why, exactly?”

“It’s simple. He’s never offered reinforcements, bonus quests, or even extra experience beyond what he’s offered to other guilds. Considering our central position in this conflict, I believe that is unacceptable. We deserve more for taking on these risks.”

I pointed above me at my title, “I got over five thousand extra levels added to my level cap. That’s pretty crazy.”

“Indeed. However, I researched your bonuses, and they were, in fact, less than those offered to other select individuals during different times of conflict. As an example, there are reports of war with Etorhma’s followers centuries ago. During that time, many individuals were given 15,000+ levels to their level cap along with class sub-titles and the like. Comparatively, you’ve accomplished far more yet received far less.”

That was strange. Schema played hardball with us for some reason. I sighed, “Huh... Well, that sucks.”

Torix swung a hand, “And I have a penchant to agree. Now, there are other reasons to agree to a truce. Elysium’s raids will be defensible while our territories are small as they are. However, in the future, they will be able to destroy vast swaths of our conquered land. I also believe they won’t attack us after an agreement. After all, they’ve stopped Lehesion from going into orbit and simply scorching this land entirely. Of all people, Daniel, you must understand this having fought him.”

I shook my head, “Yeah, he can’t beat us in person, but that doesn’t mean he can’t beat everything around us.”

Krog’s anger waned while he stood with less pride, “I...I hadn’t noticed.”

Torix placed a hand on the gialgathen’s wing, “And that is due to Daniel’s dominance in direct combat. Unfortunately, they know where we are, but we don’t know where their lairs lie. This puts us at a distinct disadvantage.”

Torix shrugged, “We’ll be extremely limited in our guild’s growth from now until a ceasefire of some sort is arranged. Given how little building we’ve managed, our guild is more than due for a rapid expansion, both here and upon Earth.” Torix met my eye, “That is my final point; we can help your native species. I know you’re not human any longer, but surely there’s a lingering attachment, hm?”

I tapped a knuckle on my forehead, “Yeah...It is.”

Torix spread his arms to the others, “As for the cons of forgoing battle, they are obvious. Elysium has enacted great evil against the gialgathens, the eldritch, and likely others as well. We have done great moral good in fighting them and preserving a culture and species. Of that, we can take pride in where we stand.”

Torix steepled his hands, “But does pride put food upon our tables or build roofs over our heads? No. It only gives you a warm, fuzzy feeling when you happen to think about it. In that regard, I believe we’ve done more than enough to satisfy any moral obligation we might’ve had. Personally, I believe we should move on from this conflict and progress our own agendas instead of the agendas of other factions.”

Torix’s eyes flared bright, “And that is why I say we accept the treaty as is.”

I crossed my arms, “Does everyone agree?”

The battered, bruised, and bloody battalion nodded at me. I bit my lip before taking a sharp breath, “Alright, but let’s think about Elysium for a minute. We’ve actually been able to take the brunt of their assaults and withstand them. Even if we can’t see it, their forces had to have come from somewhere else.”

Torix rolled his flaming eyes, “Obviously.”

I gave him a fake smile, “Thanks. Anyways, hear me out – I think they were supposed to be attacking someone else, but they siphoned those troops here instead.”

Torix tilted his head, “Daniel, I think very much of you, but you’re stating the obvious. Where else would the troops have arrived from?”

I raised a hand to the mage, “Yes, but let’s take a step back from that fact. If they’re offering a treaty, it’s because they need those siphoned troops desperately. Having Lehesion’s time taken up like this must be crippling as well, and having their forces get slaughtered without gaining ground, they might not be able to afford to do that.”

I spread out my hands, “Based on offering us a treaty mid-combat, I’d say they definitely can’t, actually.”

Torix nodded, “That is a point of contention. Elysium may stand to gain more than we realize from this.”

I gestured to my guildsmen, “So we’re actually in a point of power here. Let’s not forget that.”

Chrona sighed, “And here I believed we’d gained peace. Instead, we wish for gold and riches at the expense of our enemies. Do you not believe that will breed resentment?”

One of the supergolems deadpanned, “According to my history, our creator destroyed millions of their people. I am of the opinion that resentment is a non-factor, as it should be assumed to already be present.”

Chrona raised her eyebrows in disgust, “These creatures are sinister at times, are they not?”

I pointed at the super golem, “Sinister or not, I agree. I don’t care if Elysium likes us less because I know they hate me already. Knowing that, what can we gain from allying with them besides not being attacked? I say, let’s gouge a little.”

Torix spread his arms, “If we must, then I have a few suggestions.”

“Let’s have it.”

“Elysium has access to many forbidden technologies. I’ve recently gained access to many of these magics, as have you. Despite that newfound access point, we’ve no resource to learn about these magics. Perhaps an exchange of information could be arranged?”

Torix leaned to me, “And also, though you’re tutoring sessions for the cipher have been appreciated, hm, how should I put this... Your teaching style simply doesn’t mesh with how I learn.”

I read between the lines of what Torix said,

“So, I suck at teaching?”

“To put it succinctly, yes. Yes you do.”

I shrugged, “Well, that’s a good point. Does anyone else have something to add that we can ask for? Personally, I don’t want Hybrids or the tech for them.”

Krog whipped his tail behind himself, “They are abominations, and they mar an otherwise beautiful world here.”

Helios spoke up, “I would wish that the Empire’s planets would remain un-sieged. The Empire would pay much for the ceasefire if you could include that in this treatise of yours.”

My mind raced. The Empire's tactics bothered me, almost to the point that I regretted helping them. Sure, Obolis and the Empire treated us reasonably well, but I didn't want to help them take back worlds that didn't want to be ruled in the first place. Based on Helios's mentioning of indentured servitude, well, it was safe to say Obolis used questionable means of controlling their populaces.

But, Helios put himself on the line earlier. Florence spoke well of us. Obolis also seemed like he genuinely wanted to treat us fairly too. Even Caprika helped put me out there on Giess. Those reasons spurred me on as I tilted my head to Helios,

"Do you think Obolis would be willing to compromise a ceasefire with Elysium to squeeze us into the arrangement?"

Helios scoffed, "You would be surprised at the lengths Obolis would go for your guild. He has told me that he sees you as a brother in many respects."

Eh, that sounded like a stretch to me, and Helios's ulterior motives spilled out like liquid silver – evident as could be. I stared the albony down, his dark mask sheening with a glossy stain. Exerting more pressure, I wielded Event Horizon as a weapon over his mind, but I didn't actually drain him. I wielded the aura's mental stress alone while I spoke like iron,

"You're not lying to me, are you?"

Helios's knees buckled for a second, but he kept himself composed, "I...perhaps I exaggerated the lengths to which he would go. Obolis would attempt to help, yes, but he would not jeopardize the arrangement for your gain."

I pulled back Event Horizon, "I'll do the same for him then, and sorry about that. I can't afford subtlety right now." Turning back to Lehesion, I spread out my hands. Torix's silencing aura ceased while I said,

"We can arrange a deal, I think."

Tohtella spoke through Lehesion, "Speak your terms. We will heed them."

“I want you to stop attacking my city or any other world I’m settling on.”

“Done. What else do you require?”

“I’d like you to give us books and files on forbidden technologies and magic, like antimatter, arcane, and dimensional magic, and, hm.”

I opened my status, looking at what my Sovereign-class unlocked, “Anything you have on genetic engineering, the eldritch, AI tech, and warping. Oh, and the cipher, of course.”

Those ancient symbols sheened over my armored skin, “But you probably figured that already.”

Lehesion smiled, “We can arrange that information transfer right now if needed. What else would be required?”

I was surprised they were willing to do even more than this. I cupped my chin, “Huh, well, how about giving me info on Eonoth, Etorhma, Baldowah, planets in this galactic area, solar systems, fringe worlds, terraformable locations, terraforming techniques, fringe clearing techniques, schema, cloning, runes, smithing, all kinds of magic, governance, your reform plans, how you plan to enact said reform plans, necromancy, the Ruhl’s, remnants, primordial mana, entropy mana-“

Lehesion curled his neck out of frustration, “We see that an open-ended arrangement with you is perhaps asking too much. We’ll send that information, but nothing else.”

I pointed my thumb back at Helios, “And yeah, stop attacking the Empire.”

“We will not do that.”

“Why?”

“Their planets are poorly defended, they wish to no longer be under the Empire’s rule, and they show resounding support for our invasions. To my point, this is one of the

most difficult of their planets to take, and you're not the reason for that if you can believe it."

Ouch. I bet Obolis wished he'd paid a bit more attention to how he set up shop now. I waved a hand, "Ok, then stop attacking their worlds that don't want to rebel."

"That would weaken our offenses. No."

"Yes."

"No."

"Yes."

Lehesion's eyes narrowed, "We said no."

I shrugged, "Then no deal. I hope you guys are ready for me when I learn my sovereign skill, cap out my level, get warping down, master mind magic, manufacture hundreds of thousands of golems, learn dim--"

Lehesion seethed, "Fine. We will do as you ask. No more than this can be permitted in this deal. Understood?"

I grinned, "Of course, of course. We won't attack more of your settlements if you do all that for us."

Lehesion took a deep breath, "Then we will do as you ask. Representatives will warp over towards your city via a portal. We ask you don't blow them up when that occurs using your death magic."

I gave the Lehesion puppet a thumbs-up, "Oh yeah, most definitely."

Lehesion turned towards a warp that opened with a golden sheen. He headed towards unseen horizons and uncrossed borders before Tohtella smiled at me through Lehesion,

“Though you negotiate fiercely, you did negotiate with us. We thank you. I hope that our future relations prosper.”

I narrowed my eyes, “Yeah. Sure.”

Lehesion walked onto a world of desserts, reminding me of Gypsum. Before closing the warp, Tohtella stated, “And lastly, a word of warning – Schema will not appreciate this deal. Expect recourse.”

I peered at my guild, “We’ll be ready.”

Lehesion’s portal closed, “As will we. Goodbye, Harbinger.”

They stepped out into a starry abyss, gone for the moment. I turned to the people here, and we stared at each other for a bit. That silence lingered for a while before I spread out my hands, “We’re done, guys. The war’s over.”

Chrona roared, “To victory, our new home, and the end of this never-ending battle.”

As she let out a plume of icy fire, Krog and the other gialgathens joined her. I lifted my hands and roared with them, my other guildsmen celebrating at that moment.

We hadn’t killed or destroyed Elysium, but we sent a loud enough message that they didn’t want to keep fighting us. For a guild of our size, it was an enormous victory. That triumph saturated everyone here, each of them knowing that the constant raids, the endless battles, and this galactic war was over for us. It gave me solace knowing we pulled through with only a few casualties, at least relative to the scale of destruction our battles wrought.

At the same time, we gained access to many technologies, new territories, and I could finally help Earth. We even pulled some pressure off the Empire, and we’d still undermine Elysium in other, less direct ways. It wasn’t like I had to call off my mission of killing Plazia-Ruhl. By the time I finished that and a few other objectives, I’d of amassed a much firmer foundation for my guild and myself. Either way, it was a good day.

No, a great day.

After the initial celebrations ended, I lowered the enormous, floating island back towards Blegara's surface. It landed in a flat plop compared to its thundering rise, and I preferred it that way. Collapsing the structure into a tall mound of stone, it remained as an isolated island amidst the ocean's waves. To me, it was a monument to the battle and a reminder of our victory.

Yet it loomed over a devastated Saphigia.

I walked closer to Althea while we made our way home through that desolation. I watched Althea be taken by the super golem guard I gave her. The colossus stood several feet taller than she did and many times her weight, yet it held her like a fragment of glass, both sharp and fragile. That reflected who she was, beautiful but deadly.

Kessiah would help Althea at the hospital, and I let the super golem take her away after holding her hand for a moment. She'd be fine, but she and Kessiah needed to work out the kinks of the blood stimulant. Being knocked out like that wasn't exactly optimal. Still, they should be proud of its results.

Those weren't the only results we should be proud of. Congregating at Torix's lair, we walked into the city before holding an impromptu council. Krog, Chrona, Amara, Hod, Florence, Helios, and Torix stayed here with me while we took a moment to relax. Not long after, a warp popped open over our blue core's barrier.

I kept several singularities of mana charged in my blood as a shuttle siphoned out. Viewing it from the glass, I peered at the lavender and fuchsia shades, unlike the grim grays and forest greens of their dreadnoughts. Along it, gold and platinum trimmed the paneling, and an excess of windows gave plentiful viewing of its surroundings.

From those windows, stockpiles of ancient texts, tablets, and cipheric etchings piled up high. Sorting the cluttered mess, remnants went about stacking the assortment of rare treasures. Torix nudged me as we watched them from outside his lair,

"It would seem they've made good on our offer."

Rubbing my hands together, I grinned,

“It does, doesn’t it?”

## Chapter 302: Prosperity

Elysium’s vessel landed, its weight leaving a thud even under the ocean. Lifting a hand to the ship, I pulled water from the vessel by generating air and ascending the liquid with gravity. The remnants inside paled as I raised my arm, but they sighed with relief when I made entry easier for them. Moments later, a message from them popped up in my status.

A vessel is asking for permission to enter your city’s perimeter. License granted: Y/N?

I selected yes, and a panel slid sideways along the vessel’s bottom as they passed into our city limits. Emissaries from Elysium paced out on a fancy space platform that hovered down from the ship’s opening. They wore lavender robes with runes glowing under their surface. No matter the enchantments, they exposed themselves to us, any of them death fodder for our guild.

Walking up, I wasn’t the only one aware of that fact. Fear laced in the remnants’ eyes, each of them having a pinkish purple skin tone with white hair. They gawked at me like I was a demon, a horrific monster made of teeth and claws. Wanting to break the ice, I pointed at the goods shown along the underside of their vessel,

“Do you guys need help moving anything?”

They peered between me and the gear before bowing. One of them spoke with a voice like silk, “We will move it. There’s no need to stress yourself or your guild members after such a harrowing battle.”

I scoffed, “Thanks for the consideration, but I’ll be just fine.” I moved my arm in a circle while grabbing a shoulder, “Plus, I’ve got the strength for it.”

I lifted a hand, saturating their gear with antigravity wells. A bit of resistance stopped my magic initially, but I forced through it in a burst. Once cast, the sorcery floated their gear from the ground with a gentle rise. A feather’s weight on the heavy boxes would keep them from floating off. I waved a hand over their vessel, casting the same mana saturating spell over their ship, finding the same blip of resistance at first.

Either way, the ship stayed grounded from the crew members inside, but the vessel would be weightless for a few weeks. I gave them a thumbs-up, “There you guys go. That should make this take only a few minutes, tops.”

Beads of sweat oozed from the remnants’ foreheads as their hearts pounded in their chests. I frowned, “Uh, are you guys ok?”

The talkative remnant spoke up, “I, uhm, yes. We are, of course. We are more than ok. Thank you so much for doing this. We-we appreciate the help.”

I raised my brow, “Alrighty then...I don’t know if I believe you. Both of you look sick.”

The nontalkative one glared at me for a minute, his expression unreadable. Impressed by his grit, I raised a hand to the guy, “My name’s Daniel. What’s yours?”

The glaring remnant bent over and puked out his guts. I scratched the back of my head, “Huh...yeah, you’re sick. Let me take you back to your shi-“

The speaking remnant raised palm as if he were attacked, “No. No. That won’t be at all necessary.” The remnant emissary glared at his compatriot, “He will walk back himself.”

The unspeaking remnant hobbled away while trying to cup his own throw-up. He hacked up his lunch one more time before going back to the vessel, unable to meet my gaze. I blinked at him, “That guy had a nasty breakfast, I’m guessing. Either that, or it was me.”

The other remnant’s eyes widened in abject terror as I finished speaking. His hands locked up as I looked down at him. He murmured, “No...We’re fine. Completely fine.”

He might as well have been the Niagra Falls of sweating at this point. Drips formed on his face in realtime, both comical and absurd. I waved my hands, “Look, there’s been a misunderstanding here. I have no intention of killing you, your friends, or destroying your ship over there. Don’t plant any bugs here. Don’t try anything else either. Do that, and you won’t have to worry about any consequences for meeting me. Now, what’s your name? Mine’s Daniel, like I said earlier.”

“It’s Phalanthorixiatocosadoreauy.”

“Damn, that’s a mouthful. What about Phalanth?”

“Anything. You can call me anything.”

I gave his shoulder a light pat, “It’s good to meet you, Phalanth.” I gestured to the ship, “What did you guys bring me?”

Phalanth scrambled with his status, the red screen popping up. He coughed into a hand, “Ahem, we have everything you asked for, though we took liberties with what information was, erm, given.”

I frowned, “What does that mean?”

“We...we didn’t grant high-level access to certain topics, such as our cloning operations or how we plan to enact reforms on Schema’s system.”

“But you have the general ideas in there, right?”

“Oh, most certainly. There isn’t any locational data regarding where Elysium’s planets are located or the like, however.”

“Well yeah, I didn’t want it. Schema can tell me that if I need it. I just want to know what you guys planned on for improving Schema’s system. I’ve seen a few of your worlds already, and you guys have some good ideas.”

I stared in disgust at the decaying corpse of a Hybrid in the distance, “Just your methods...They make me sick.”

Phalanth gazed up at me, “I, I thought you were a conquerer, some bloodthirsty monster based on the footage and reports. You’re more measured than anticipated, I must say. I’m...astonished. I thought you would despise us.”

“What? You, individually, no. Not really. You didn’t do anything to me or my guild. It’s your military I don’t like and how it’s managed. Your domestic practices seem much more in line with my own way of doing things, outside of the Hybrids and genocide, of course.”

Torix paced up, his hands interlocked behind himself. Even our ancient necromancer, who I stood over, dwarfed the emissaries. I never noticed how big we all were, but now it seemed outright strange. Torix peered down at the emissary, “I’ll trust there will be no enchantments on the information, nor viral data either?”

Phalanth went right back to trembling, “N-no. Never.”

Torix leaned over, an inch or two from Phalanth’s face, “We will make you pay if we happen upon them. Perhaps your corpse will dance in a pool of maggots, or I’ll make trap your soul in a dying body, over and over. My point being, I’ll come up with something that will be quite uncomfortable should you attempt to trick us. Am I clear?”

“Y-yes.”

Phalanth seized up as Torix walked past him. Poor guy. More Remnants showed up beyond the diplomats. Two armored ones strode past me with Sentinel-like paneling, their dimensional slicers not as violent as Schema’s own spears. It still impressed me that their guards had them at all. Those same bouncers gawked at me while they carried equipment from their vessel.

Their hands trembled as well, both of them anxious as a panic attack. It was probably a strange sensation being beside a mortal enemy so soon. I’d killed many of the Elysian forces, and even the Hybrids exceeded these guards in net power. They were the fodder for the fodder, but that didn’t mean I would just murder them in cold blood.

I mean, if someone walks through a person’s kitchen, most people aren’t worried the owner will rummage through a drawer and draw a knife at their throat. To me, being afraid of me now was akin to that. It mounted unnecessary stress on both of them, along with the six other guards behind them. They might’ve seen me in action, though, so maybe that analogy didn’t hold up.

Either way, I figured we needed people sifting through the incoming stream of new stuff. Sending messages, I collected John McSmitty and several other guildsmen who

practiced spyware and the like. They rushed on over, getting ready for some work while I took a portion of untampered land nearby for my own purposes.

Using a spot of sandy stone, I melted the grains into glass while crafting them overhead. Getting the paneling right, I made a sphere of glass for the talks with Elysium, and as I did, my guild chatted away about Blegara and our future plans. It was inspiring stuff, giving me plenty to do in the future. To my surprise, the most excited one of them was Amara.

She arrived earlier, and she already donned the armor I made for her, having grasped intuitively how to wear it. Finishing a curt discussion with Other Hod, Amara walked up to me in metal. The interlocking panels slid without friction, having gravitational augments for them. She stayed light on her feet. Feeling the light rumble beneath her steps, she actually became lighter than before she wore the armor. Perfect.

She even used the wires already, spreading her hair out with a gleeful abandon. With those strands, she menaced those around her like a child just gaining a new toy. Krog glared at her when several of her hairs grazed his wing, and Torix struggled not to pluck the hairs out when she did the same to him.

Amara's fragile image also faded in the dark metal. She lacked eyes, her jawed helm ominous and threatening. It radiated strength, density, and power in a way she'd never had. Amara relished that feeling, standing up taller and straighter compared to her regular clothes. They were just dirty-looking rags by comparison, but it was amazing what a wardrobe change could do for someone.

Those observations washed over me in a moment as she peered at me through a camera without needing to lift her hands,

"Hello, Harbinger. I wish to thank you for granting me your flesh and blood to wear. No eldritch would do the same. It is beyond us."

Oh man, she reacted to the gift oddly like I worried she would. I turned to her, putting my hands up, "It's just payback for helping us get the eldritch here under control. I did the same thing for everyone else in my guild, pretty much."

I lifted a hand and etched with a heated telekinetic point, trying to get the damn glass I worked on to look right, "Anyways, what's up?"

“I would like a few adjustments to the armor you have made me.”

“Already?”

“Yes.”

“Shit. What do you need?”

“The cameras will shatter well before the armor or the runes on it.”

“I figured, but I thought you’d just fight like normal then.”

Her hair reached out with the wires I gave her, cutting through the rock beneath us. She stared at a slice in the stone,

“That is right, but I wish to wear this armor even after the cameras shatter. This metal skin needs panels for my eyes on the palms should the electronics fail.” She raised her hands, showing them from all angles,

“That, or you could perhaps use scrying instead of cameras. That may work better as you are talented in runic magic. If you did so, no new armors would require a helmet or opening for eating.”

She poked where her eyes should’ve been, “Then no one may gouge the eyes and drink deeply from our skulls. With a tongue of some sort...Perhaps an elongated claw.”

I nodded, “That’s a great idea...But yeah, why didn’t I think of that?”

Amara hissed, “An idea is like a delicious meal. It is delectable, but when another tries it, they may easily think of how it could be better. The server of the meal takes pride in it, and that pride blinds them. The eater is without pride, giving them clarity of thought.”

She tapped the glass I made, “Others build on ideas like this, seeing the imperfections with ease. This is why many are more mighty than one.”

“Huh. Cool. I know I got a lot better at pretty much everything by listening to other people. Well, besides punching people, but that came naturally to me.”

Amara wriggled for a second before giving me a deep bow, “I wish for you to know that these imperfections in your design have left me no less satiated. I will treasure the blood and skin you have given me. It will be my most prized possession.”

Oh no, there it was again – the odd reverence. I peered at Amara from my work, “Uh, sure thing. Keep on helping the guild, and there’s plenty more where that came from.”

She cupped her hands together while backing away, “For your flesh and blood, I will work tirelessly. I leave to do so now.”

Amara went to a pile of tech lying under the glass overlay I made. She left me hectic, wondering if anything else I made had holes in it too. Taking a deep breath, I took her input with a grain of salt. Aside from that, Amara enjoyed the armor I made a little too much. To be fair, she gained a lot of agency and control of her life recently, no small part because of that plate mail.

That kind of change could leave someone acting weird for a bit. The reverence would probably fade with a bit of time, and I took comfort in those thoughts. It also helped that Torix directed the remnant workers, leaving me with nothing else to worry about. The lich ensured they organized themselves well.

Thinking on it, Torix was essentially made of my blood and skin too. Amara was right about what she said; it was

blood armor. No matter the origin, the suit gave Amara some genuine confidence, and her appreciation gave me a sense of pride. Heeding her story, I mentally stomped that out. Even after I did, a lightness kept a small smile on my face. I finished the glass building’s steel supports, enjoying the downtime. When finished, the remnants piled up an enormous stock of goods under the glass. They actually carried most of the cargo in a few trips since I asked mostly for information. That reflected in the items given, though plenty of physical equipment made its way here.

The first items lined up were kiosks that detailed different kinds of information. These touchscreen panels acted as upgraded versions of the terminals they used in their secret bases on Giess. Like those terminals, the touch screens offered a wealth of knowledge but on alternate subjects like distant planets, Old Ones, and Elysium's general practices.

Several of our engineers inspected the info-laden kiosks, ensuring they weren't wired or hacked somehow. They kept away from the actual info since it could exile them. As they authorized the goods, I kept peering at other items.

Several chilled tubes lined up in refrigerated, mana-powered cells. Within them, blood from different remnants, eldritch viruses, monstrous bacteria, and undead samples all sat in stasis. Torix eyed these pieces with a particular hunger, the lich ready to dissect and disseminate the knowledge within. Beyond the specimens, cloning tubes and stasis pods made their way under my glass covering.

These vats contained interfaces along with a variety of discs, likely software showcases. A few of the tubes even held the embryos of different creatures, the tanks ripped right out of a lab minutes ago. Following those vats, book after book on magic piled up until I could fill up a library. They held every shade of color, and they came from every age, state-of-the-art to venerable.

Those tomes made several guildsmen nearby salivate at the prospect of learning their contents. In some of the piles of parchment, I even caught glimpses of the cipher. At that, my own curiosity peaked with the best of them. However, as the haul's mass rose, Elysium didn't stop bringing merchandise.

They gave us a variety of unusable but no less fascinating armor and weapons. These plate mails, shields, and blades reflected with a polished sheen, cipheric markings oozing power along their surfaces. Until I understood the engraving's intent, we weren't equipping anything, not that we could; the armor wasn't made for bipedals, to begin with.

Mixed in with those armors, familiar arrangements of the cipher stuck out. Some nearly mirrored the elemental furnace engrained in my chest, but there was no way Elysium just gave us elemental furnaces. Leaning over them, I contained my surprise when I found several in a pile. I stared down at the single one pocketed in the armor of my chest. Maybe they weren't as rare as I thought, and despite that, Obolis only gave us one.

Huh...That was bad.

That thought fell to the back of my mind as I stared at other treasures. I almost felt like I'd accepted a bribe, but you know how it is. We needed to know what was in these containers, so I perused closer, taking on the absolutely essential duty. I found obelisks of all different kinds. They rested along translucent shelving designed for them. The stylish lineup included a few golden obelisks like what the Emperor gave Torix, but other types dotted the mix.

Obsidian obelisks glowed with red details, portentous and evil-looking. Other ruby obelisks opened red statuses instead of blue ones. Legal or not, they gave them to us. Several of these electronic interfaces wiggled in a jelly matrix, having all of their contents suspended within the clear gelatin. Amidst those jellies, a few showed eyes and cute features along with cooing noises to match.

One of them snuggled up to my finger, being downright adorable. Dawww.

Outside of those ones, most of these obelisks had to be illegal. In fact, a lot of this stuff could be forbidden to us. I spotted different metal drives with the words 'portaling skills' over them. Next to those metal monstrosities, a series of discs held skill names under them. They were compendiums, a few of them even carrying mythical tier skills based on their gray coloring.

One caught my eye, in particular.

Primordial Mana – The Magic of Shaping

At this point, I narrowed my eyes as a worm of suspicion formed in my chest. Elysium vastly exceeded any payload we'd ever received from Schema. So much so, I peered at the goods with apprehension. I picked up a compendium, staring at it from all angles. Like, there had to be a bomb stuffed in here, maybe some destructive spirits or something. I couldn't see them giving me this many furnishings otherwise.

It would take weeks to sort this stuff out and get it to the right people, let alone actually derive the useful intelligence stored within. And the piles kept coming while my guild experienced the same rush of bewilderment as I did. Joining the crowd, Kessiah paced up with Althea, both of them talking about the battle.

I sighed in relief, watching Althea step with her usual grace. Kessiah already read a guild-wide message Torix sent, so she paced up while propping her weight on one hip, “What’s up, big guy?”

“Eh, nothing much. I’m trying to figure out all the stuff we got.”

Kessiah squinted at the tubes of blood, “Wait...What are those?”

I waved at them while staring at the compendium, “Go find out. I have no idea.”

She shuffled past items before inspecting several of the chilled cisterns. The tanks were from remnants, and I’m sure Kessiah doted on them, wanting to know more about herself and her heritage. On the other hand, Torix oozed over everything present as if he wished his mind was a hungry beast that could devour all before him in an instant. He darted back and forth from oddity to oddity, his curiosity overwhelming him.

Althea’s curiosity got the better of her as well. She skimmed through cleared kiosks, finding data logs on Old Ones. Considering her experiences with Etorhma, her interest made a lot of sense. She might cure her transformations one day, gain better control, or just learn something she didn’t know about herself. Hell, there could be some info on my whole being-a-dimension-thing. We couldn’t say until we searched.

Either way, my guild poured over the cleared cargo with abandon while others checked the incoming merchandise for enchantments, spyware, and conduits. These members fused into a growing group of my guild’s elite, each staying diligent in ensuring an item’s validity and safety. In that ruckus, a pair of thudding footsteps sounded in the distance.

They walked up to me, carrying no hesitation or fear in them. It made me glance up, finding Spear trotting up to me with his dimensional slicers lining his back. He glared at the stock for a moment before shaking his helmed head. Spear turned and pressed a speartip to my chest,

“What is this? What have you done?”

I set the compendium back in its rack, “We agreed to a ceasefire.”

Spear pushed the slicer against me,

“No, you betrayed us.”

### Chapter 303: Where They Stand

His dimensional slicer revved into action, cackling in the air like a tortured banshee. I lifted a hand, and his arm caught in a gravity well. A crack ebbed from underneath the armor, Spear's bones breaking before I eased the depth of the gravity's drag. A few of the soldiers from my legion stared on while I frowned at Spear,

“Look, that's a bad idea. Don't turn this talk into a conflict.”

Spear turned to his arm, stunned at the magic's might. He nodded, his boiling outrage turning to simmering anger. I waved a hand over to Kessiah, “Hey, can you help him out?”

Kessiah sighed before hobbling over a few trunks of gear. She reached the Sentinel and chided, “Come on, we all know what happens when you fight the big guy. Don't be a dumbass.”

Spear glared at our healer with seething anger bordering hatred, but I stared him down. He understood what would happen if he tried hurting Kessiah right now. Either way, our healer stayed unconcerned, pulling blood as usual. Kessiah's composure under the Sentinel's pressure impressed me, but Kessiah healed our wounded on battlefields littered with Hybrids. Given her position, courage was an inevitable outcome.

So as her blood shifted through a needle prick in Spear's arm, the Sentinel's anger faded. His bones snapped back in place, with Kessiah bracing it in the right direction. Once recuperated, Spear settled down. In the meantime, Torix cast his silencing magic along with the fogging aura, making sure the merchandise was covered as well.

Several of our normal guildsmen were included in that covering, but I didn't mind. It wasn't as if I would change what I was about to say, and most of my guildsmen would be happy to hear it either way. Thinking of all this, I turned a palm to Spear,

“Now, you think I betrayed Schema. Why?”

Spear sparked back into his anger, but it lacked its previous physical edge, “You’ve chosen to cease attacks on Schema’s greatest enemy after all he’s done for you. It’s unmitigated treason. You’ve defied him and his will. You’ve abandoned his cause.”

I raised a hand, “Now wait one minute, it isn’t like I joined Elysium all of a sudden. I’m just choosing to focus elsewhere, for now.”

Spear raised a fist, “And when you decide to stay your hand, you’re leaving many of our enemies alive. Those enemies will kill Schema’s soldiers. You are choosing to put those deaths on our hands.”

I shook my head, “No, I’m not. You can’t just throw responsibilities on me. That’s exactly what Elysium tried to do, and I shut them down just like I’m shutting this down right now.”

I pointed at Spear, “I’m not Schema’s personal bodyguard, and I sure as hell am not paid like it. Torix mentioned it before, but we’re not getting compensated like others have for past conflicts. That’s despite this being a much bigger war.”

Spear raised a hand, “If we speak of appropriate compensation, then let us delve into it fully. I’ve researched your history, Harbinger. You were a monster when you left BloodHollow, yet Schema let you live. According to the documentation, you were reinstated into the system despite a direct culling order. Schema allowed you to continue on, using his system to amass power.”

I winced at being called a monster, but I let Spear continue uninterrupted.

“And Schema spared you despite you showing symptoms of mana devolution. You’d have degenerated into an absolute aberration if you never fully controlled your energies. It was even worse after your armor manifested ascendant mana, the worst kind for your case. Schema let you overcome that by giving you time and opportunities you never deserved.”

I crossed my arms, and I still let him speak his piece while keeping my mind measured.

“Time and time again, you have accepted Schema’s benefits and perks. Without them, you’d have died against Yawm and many others. Schema kept you alive so that this day

and at this time, you would return the favor. With his help, you evolved into this – a being worthy of fear and recognition.”

He pointed his finger at me, “It is time you repay that debt in full. Cancel this truce. Use this technology against our enemy.”

I raised a finger, ready to respond, but Kessiah spoke out before I could, “Pshh, you think Schema is why Daniel’s alive? Why any of us are alive?”

Spear glared at her, “Yes. I know that is the truth.”

Other Hod scoffed, “Oh, is that the case with Amara and I as well, or are you simply neglecting to consider us?”

Spear waved a hand, “You two are still volatile. Would either of you be so docile if not for Daniel’s rewards and posturing? I’m doubtful. There’s even footage of Amara devouring people on Gypsum. Such slip-ups are forgiven in times of war, but what about times of peace? What will the consequences be then?”

Amara hissed, “I have learned that to be treated as more than a beast, I must act as more than a beast. I would not eat and kill unless it was necessary.”

Spear crossed his arms, “You lie. Other eldritch have said the same before peeling their listener’s skin off and wearing it. Like all of them, it is only a matter of time before your self-control snaps.”

Other Hod leaned forward, his umbral flames ushering forth, but I put a hand in front of him. Other Hod sighed, and he leaned up from his lunging position. Spear put two fingertips against the side of his helmet, “My point still stands. Schema is why you all were allowed to live, outside of these eldritch.”

Kessiah’s eyes turned sharp like daggers, “So when we were trapped on Earth with Yawm, was that Schema keeping us alive too? He was over ten thousand levels above us, with ancient runes all over his skin. We didn’t stand a chance in hell of beating him.” Kessiah pointed a thumb at Torix and me,

“You see those two? Without them, we’d all be dead. They pulled us through with sheer dumb luck and a lot of spilled blood. I sure as hell didn’t help either. Now tell me, where does that fit into your whole, ‘Schema saved us,’ propaganda?”

Torix coughed into a hand behind us, “It is also worthy of mentioning that we weren’t allowed to leave, even illegally. That’s a rather unusual circumstance, even for a quarantine. I was caught quite off guard by it.”

Kessiah nodded, “Exactly. We were all unknowns until Giess, too, so we weren’t protected by Schema the whole time. We could’ve been killed at any moment, and Althea nearly was. She still has nightmares about being blown up by a plasma grenade.”

I let out a sharp breath of anger as Althea murmured, “Kessiah, you don’t have to bring that up.”

I was angry for two reasons. One, I was mad at myself because Althea shouldn’t feel the need to hide that. Second, I hated that dead assassin. Either way, I hoped our hot-headed healer would continue. I wasn’t disappointed. A vein pressed up on Kessiah’s neck while her voice rose,

“This asshole needs to hear all of this. I spent my entire life running until I came here. Now, I can finally live somewhere where I’m not hunted down like a dog with a gold collar wrapped around my neck. That’s thanks to him.”

She pointed at me, and a light smile traced my lips, “Thanks.”

Kessiah stared at me, blushing a bit, “Look, this is more about me wanting to set the record straight, ok? I hate it when people talk bullshit.”

Spear turned to all of us, “There were no misdeeds done on Schema’s part. You were forced to grow and prosper.”

Torix tilted his head, “Then think of this as an opportunity to allow Schema to grow and prosper. We wish to treat our allies well, and this is an opportunity for Schema to learn the same strategies from us.”

Spear raised a hand, “The difference is that Schema gave you all the power and means to overcome your obstacles. This deal you’ve made only weakens Schema, which he never did to any of you.”

Amara hissed, “Daniel was exiled while fighting Yawm. I granted him access back into the system until after Daniel defeated the big, annoying plant. He’d otherwise perished.”

Spear took a step back, not knowing that fact. Oh yeah, Schema’s extensive files seemed to have omitted a few key details. Regardless, Spear kept on talking,

“I’m certain Schema simply did what he had to do in those circumstances. And even then, you all succeeded. You’ve been granted an agency that few have ever received. This-” He gestured to the cargo with disgust, “Is how you repay him? By accepting a bribe from his enemy? Or worse, you relinquish yourself to extortion.”

I kept calm, pointing at all of it, “This isn’t a bribe or extortion. Elysium wanted us to stop attacking them, so we agreed as long as they gave us supplies in turn. It’s a deal, and I still intend on helping Schema on the sidelines. I’ll be killing Plazia-Ruhl and getting the ahcorous on the Empire’s side. That’s still plenty of helping; it’s just not all-out bloodshed.”

Spear seethed, “You may justify it as you like, but accepting this is proof of your cowardice. You’re unwilling to take on the price of repayment.”

I crossed my arms, “Coward, huh? You didn’t join us in the fight against Lehesion. Where were you?”

“I...I was training the golems.”

His heart thumped his chest as his blood pressure rose. He lied. I shook my head in disgust, “I know one of your comrades died in battle, but that’s no excuse to avoid the fight. You could apply your words to yourself more than me.”

Spear’s nerves mounted as he pointed at me, “If I am a coward, then let me be judged as such. That changes nothing of what you’ve done.”

“Here’s the difference – I fought long and hard before I gave in. You never even entered the fray. Who are you to judge me? No one.”

Spear stared at his hands, “I am not judging you. I am exposing what you are. These tasks, killing Plazia and expanding your guild, are well below your potential. You could do so much more if you so chose.”

I scoffed, “And so could you. Obviously.”

Spear squeezed a fist until his hand shook, “No...I could not. That is what frustrates me when I look at you. You’ve been given a gift, a might that is monstrous. By choosing to serve yourself, you’ve become beholden to a selfish ideal. You devolve from a paragon of Schema to a creature of convenience. There is shame in that. There is a loss of potential, and the galaxy is worse off for it.”

I threw my hand up, “Everyone could serve the galaxy better, even Schema. Serving the galaxy doesn’t warm our beds or feed the hungry. To survive, we all have our own priorities. Personally, I want to be able to help out those close to me without being shoved into an endless war. A war, mind you, that I’m tired of. I don’t want to battle for eternity. I’m ready to sit back for a while, build myself and my guild up.”

Spear pointed at me, “It will be difficult to build your guild up without Schema’s assistance. You and those that follow you could be exiled for this. You all should be, given this ensemble of eldritch, half breeds, and monsters you call your elite.”

Krog growled, “Yes, and each of us could trounce you in combat without your petty little spears. Fight me with your own fangs and claws, and we shall see how strong you really are.” Krog turned to Chrona and sputtered, “If the coward would even show up to a bout.”

They laughed before Spear put an outstretched hand on his chest, “Don’t think I don’t know where I stand. I know of my limits. I have lived out those limits for centuries, and they haunt me. Your kind is the opposite of mine. You live in lavish potential, coasting off talent. I fought for decades before being given my Sentinel class. Now I must watch a guild lower themselves to selfish desire despite their ability to do great good for this world and many others.”

From that, I learned a lot about Spear. He wasn't a remnant from a pre-Schema era. He was a newer remnant that joined the Sentinel's ranks after a significant achievement. I noted that as Krog rumbled,

"So we must sacrifice ourselves to live for this AI? An AI who gave my kind nothing but air and death. Our entire species was culled because your Schema refused to handle its own dissenters."

Spear stated, "Apathy. Laziness. Disappointment. The gialgathens are all this and more. Your kind sowed their own deaths with your inaction."

Krog and Chrona's eyes both widened before Krog rumbled like a storm, "You speak further, and I will kill you."

Spear scoffed, "Perhaps we should fight in one of your sunspots where your kind spends hours napping during the day? Or maybe you'll have an espen servant show up in your place?"

Krog stepped forward, and I let him vent his anger. Spear pushed him too hard, and he'd pay the price. Spear revved his slicer while simmering, "Fighting me won't bring back your kin. They are tools for an enemy you're choosing to no longer fight. They are tools you're deciding you won't save because you wish to 'rebuild.' Pathetic."

Krog peered away, his breaths turning short and sharp. Those words cut deep like a glass piercing a hand. Kessiah walked over and put a hand on Krog's wing. At her touch, Krog calmed down some. I turned to Spear, "I wouldn't have expected you to talk like that Spear. I'm disappointed you'd demand the gialgathens, a species that's experienced so much pain, fight in this war for you."

Spear took a breath, managing his emotions before raising a hand, "I may have spoken sharper words than I intended. You're right. The gialgathens should be allowed to rebuild, but you are different, Harbinger. That is why Schema and I are asking more from you. You were given many gifts, perks, and a class, but even more importantly, you were given a purpose."

He raised his hands, squeezing his fingertips together, "You can fight to improve our galaxy, to prevent further tragedies like those that befell the gialgathens. In doing so, you enact an absolute, moral good. There is immense pride that may be taken in that. I am an example."

Spear stood tall, “Many look down on the Sentinels and Overseers like we are Schema’s dogs, but we know what we’ve done. We’ve helped usher in an era of prosperity despite the overwhelming threat of the eldritch. We had the decision to sacrifice our individual wants for something more, something greater.”

He banged his chest, “We were not unwilling tools. We decided to become a part of something grander than ourselves. You’re taking the opposite path. By choosing to serve yourself instead of others, you do a great disservice to your guild and its potential.”

At this point, it felt like I was talking to a wall. I talked anyway,

“But I have to choose between helping Schema or my guild. That includes the gialgathens. That’s why I fought Elysium to begin with. It was to save those guys. And even then, you’re not thinking of what we have to give up to continue serving Schema like this. I can’t establish my guild. I’m stuck between constant raids and the looming threat of mass murder from Lehesion.”

I waved a hand in frustration, “We haven’t even been given a quest or the like to offset the losses we get from fighting like this. No protection from any classers either.”

Spear’s hands lowered, “What? There’s been no quest granted?”

“No, there hasn’t been.”

Spear peered at Amara, “She tampers with the system. It’s not beyond expectations that Elysium has done the same. According to the files I’ve read, Tohtella gave you a quest when she was a Speaker. She also planted spyware in your system data. She may have also done more than that.”

I narrowed my brow, “You’re telling me she had time to mess with something that integral to Schema’s system in seconds? Yeah, unlikely.”

“But it is the only explanation for no quest.”

“Ok, then is there any way for me to get checked out by an Overseer or something?”

Spear shook his head, “No. We don’t wish for the transference of viral programs from normal classers to Schema’s elite. You’ll need to remedy the situation yourself.”

I scoffed, “Yeah, that’s about what I expected out of Schema at this point.”

Spear sighed, “Your grievances aren’t entirely unwarranted, but listen to me. Schema is managing a galactic war where they’ve employed tactics he would never imagine using. Schema is learning to combat their methods as we speak, but he needs more time. We can’t expect perfection from him. Like us, Schema is doing what it can for societal good. We must help him uphold the society he created.”

I tilted my head, “I don’t see that expectation being thrown at other guilds. The Empire and my legion are pretty much the only guilds I’ve seen fighting this war. In fact, the Empire only joined because they were attacked.”

Spear took a step back at that, “I...That is correct, mostly. But other guilds shouldn’t be expected to offer the same support, given how yours joined Schema’s system in the first place. You incurred more debt for yourself based on both your abilities and your induction. Your numerous illegal actions since then also garner further debts that you must repay.”

I narrowed my eyes, “Debts, huh? You know, I was thrust into a dungeon without a tutorial. I wasn’t shuttled into Schema’s system smoothly. Baldag-Ruhl summoned me there to use my soul as his armor. I robbed Baldag of that resource to survive, but it was Alfred Worm who saved me then, not Schema.”

I stood over Spear like a mountain, “Since then, every time I’m allowed to live, it’s called a gift. If I go by your logic, I’ll be his willing servant for the rest of eternity. I’m not going to do that for being given a chance to survive, especially when, after all this time, Schema hasn’t spoken a word to me. I’ve had two brief meetings with him. Outside of my happenstance meetings with the Overseer, I know nothing about the AI or this war. The only way to talk to Schema is to use my Sovereign privileges.”

Spear snapped, “Then use them. They were given to you for just this cause.”

I rolled my eyes, “I have to burn through my yearly meeting just to get an update from Schema?” I gestured at the remnant’s ship, “I just talked to them, and they mentioned not telling me where the Elysium planets are. You know, if I take a moment and think about it, why the hell don’t I already know? Why hasn’t Schema sent me a force of Sentinels and Overseers to inform me, let me fight where needed. You know, maybe talk to me?”

“Schema cannot speak to everyone at all times.”

Torix’s eyes flared, “I would beg to differ, based on those files you keep referencing. If they’re that extensive, Schema’s eyes and ears are everywhere. Logic dictates that if he’s listening to us at all times, he may speak to us as well. If he so chose.”

Spear neared exasperation as he tossed his hands aside, “Perhaps communications were split. Elysium could be tampering with your messaging systems and your status alike.”

I crossed my arms, “And if that’s the case, I know it’s up to me to fix everything on my own. If I’m such an important piece of his fighting force, then why the hell isn’t Schema trying to utilize me better? Where’s my support?”

Spear looked around, searching for an answer, “Schema, he is consumed in a galactic war against both Elysium and the eldritch...He is doing all that he can, and you’re just one part of this complicated puzzle he deals with each day. He cannot manage every piece of that puzzle at once.”

My left eye twitched, “But when I forgive him for forgetting us, I lose people. Every day members of my guild die because Schema won’t put in time or effort for my guild. Why should we reciprocate what we aren’t being given in turn?”

Spear looked down before staring back up, “He...That...It is because you’re essential to his cause. You’re the only member of Schema’s system who can fight Lehesion who has chosen to do so. That-“

I snapped my fingers, “And there it is. I knew it. Others could fight Lehesion but haven’t. Why? They wouldn’t be given what they’re due for fighting Elysium. That’s where I’m at. I’m entrenched in a grueling conflict. In fact, ever since this system started, I’ve never had more than a few months of rest. Every other time, I’ve been consumed with war and death. The worst part is, it’s just an expectation that I continue fighting...Forever.”

Spear stared at me, his voice cracking as he fidgeted, “And you were gifted to have that potential for battle. Others would kill for it. I know that I would.”

I shook my head, “But it’s like I am a machine born to kill, and that’s all I’ll ever be. Schema’s groomed me for it. I know that, but I want to do more than that. Look at my golems and my guild. Building those up helps Schema too.”

The Sentinel continued, his confidence in Schema’s protection absolute, “You are asked to battle because that is all you’re good for. You’re a backwater savage who’s been given a gift that others may use better than you can.”

It had been a long time since someone called me backwater or a savage. The glares at Spear grew hostile around me, including mine. Kessiah snarled, “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Spear dragged his hand down his helmet. He spoke with an acidic edge,

“I’ve been helping you all up till now because you served a higher purpose. Now you serve this oaf, and all he’s ever done is destroy.”

His words hit me like stubbing my toe. Spear shook his hands, “At least allow someone with a sense of direction to guide that destruction. I say Schema should be that force, for he has built more than any other. Perhaps he could make this abomination more useful than merely a mass murderer.”

His words stung more than I expected them to. He could be right. As good as my guild was, I’d fought far better than I’d ever built anything. It’s something I already understood about myself. I came from nothing. My entire family splintered all over the place, never staying in one place.

How my father acted was shameful, and it wasn’t like his grandfather was any better. Those were pretty much the only fundamental influences on my early life outside of my mom, and by now, I could hardly remember her face. Without her, my father went wild. He made sure I understood just how little of a difference I’d make to anyone in life.

He and his 'friends' tried to convince me I was nothing, but they were wrong. I ended up being pretty gifted as a fighter, even before the system came around. I wanted to become a pro boxer, and I held my self-worth in that. Now, I oozed that same fighting potential, magnified by many infinities. It gave me confidence.

Yet, sometimes, that destructive potential did leave me wondering if I could do anything else. My talent in runes and the golems helped, but in the end, I was a breathing cataclysm. Giess and Springfield splintered under my touch, and on Blegara, I tried with all my might to do something different. Staring around, the barren wastes stretched for miles in all directions. This carnage left me numb as I lifted a hand to speak to Spear, but I shrunk back.

What he said shouldn't be wounding me like this, yet it did. I took a sharp breath, not expecting his words to affect me. They threw me off, making me feel weak, something rare these days. Before I could get myself together, a ringing burst filled my ears, making me peer up.

Althea shot a harpoon beside Spear's foot.

The sand and rock caved away from the spear, splitting with ease from the lance's frictionless descent. I found Althea furious. She glared at Spear like a beautiful reaper as she fumed, "Don't talk to him like that. Don't ever talk to him like that. He's done more for us than Schema ever has. More than he ever will."

Her words took the venom out of Spear's message in an instant. My eyes burned as Althea took a step forward. She kept glaring as she smoldered her words like they were hot coals,

"You don't know Daniel. You haven't seen him struggle. I have. I know what he's done and what he's had to do. He's fought till his body was more bone than flesh. He's taken on all of us and never left anyone behind, at the very least no more than he had to. I wouldn't be anything more than a pawn for Yawm without him or worse. Much worse."

Althea tilted her head at Kessiah, "Ask Kessiah, and she'll say the same. She never would've become a healer without Daniel's influence. Even Torix needed his help. Daniel brought our professor out of his shell and made Torix dream of making a university. None of us could've ever imagined doing any of this without him. He's been like a rock to each of us, something we can all rely on."

Althea scorned, “So don’t you talk to him like that. Ever. If you do, I’ll kill you, exiling or not.”

I blinked, my eyes watering a bit from her outburst. It was sudden and startling, like a firework of warmth exploding in my hand – at first frightening, but by the end, a welcome surprise. Amara joined in, hissing,

“I’m more than willing to pull you back into the system, she-wolf. I wish to learn what Sentinel meat tastes like.”

Other Hod flared, “We will never be offered the same treatment regardless. Perhaps we should become what he thinks of us.”

Amara’s hairs sliced stone, “Perhaps so.”

I appreciated them both, but I wasn’t about to forget everything Spear did for us. I gave them a smile, “Hey.”

They turned to me, and Althea muttered, “You want me to take him out? I’ve had bounties before. It’s whatever.”

I shook my head, “Even if he’s a zealot, he did a lot for us. Please, stop pointing that at him.” I frowned at Amara, “And quit drooling.”

Althea frowned but did as I asked, and Amara wiped her mouth. Spear gave our whole party a slow nod, “Then this is it. I can no longer support this guild which acts in service of only itself.”

I shrugged, “You’re in denial about what you’re asking and why you’re asking it. I’m not going to run to my and my guild’s death for Schema.”

Spear waved a dimensional slicer before cleaving through space. On the other side, a metal background showed along with other Sentinels, each of them meditating. Spear chided, “Keep your reasonings to yourself. I don’t need to hear them anymore.”

Before he stepped out, I reached out a hand, “Before you leave, I want you to tell Schema or the Overseer something.”

“What could you possibly need to tell them now?”

“I want them both to know I still want to help. I just need a few things.”

“Ah, so you’d like some treasure that exceeds this so that you may switch sides and reap benefits from both? How very classy of you.”

“I don’t need anything like that. I need Schema to open some communication line with me. That or his personalized AI’s, maybe the Overseer. We were fighting a war together, yet I was given no information from him.”

Spear spit back, “Why would you deserve it?”

I furrowed my brow at him, disappointed in how he acted when cornered,

“Come on, I sent him hundreds of terminals before this revolution started. I gave every log of information my assassins and spies gained to the Overseer. I made every attempt possible to start a dialogue. None of that was ever returned in any way.”

Spear reached up a hand, but he didn’t know what to say. I turned a hand to him, “I don’t like Elysium, but I’m not about to kill my guild, the only family I’ve got, just to help Schema. If Schema helps me out, offers some security, and tells me what’s going on, I’ll jump right back to his side. That’s all I’m asking for. I want to be an ally instead of some tool.”

Spear took a pause, his mind dwelling on something. He gave me a nod, “Yes...I can tell the Overseer all of that. You are owed that much, given your previous service.”

As he stepped out, I grabbed him in a gravity well. I walked over and held the dimensional tear open with my shoulder and foot. I leaned over Spear and placed a hand on his shoulder. I squeezed, his already cracked armor groaning under stress. As fresh splits formed in the graphene, his bones felt soft in my hand,

“You’ve done a lot for us, Spear, so I’m willing to turn a blind eye when you walk off or talk down to me and my guildsmen...But remember who you’re speaking with when you chat to me next time. Understood?”

Spear remained planted in place. He gasped, “Yes...Yes, Harbinger. Of course.”

I released him, and Spear fumbled forward. I stared him down before letting the cleaved space-time snap back together. Once he was gone, I took a breath before turning to everybody,

“I might’ve gone too far there, but I couldn’t help myself. That guy had some serious nerve. Anyways, thanks for saying all that, guys. It means a lot.”

Althea ran up and gave me a hug, my armor bending around her grasp, so she didn’t hurt herself. Torix stepped forward with his hands clutched under his cape,

“It is the least we may do when Spear presents such bleak propositions. They were rather ghastly requests, weren’t they? To sacrifice ourselves for Schema simply because he gave you a chance to succeed...I believe the interest on that debt is rather steep in their eyes.”

I shook my head, “Yeah, and I can’t just throw this all away. I worked too hard for it.”

Torix stared at me with his eyes flaring white, “If anyone knows how difficult this guild was to create, it would be all of us.”

Kessiah raised a palm, “Heh, except me.”

Torix glared at her, “Know that you’re speaking only your opinion, not ours. You’ve toiled endlessly to redeem your concession against Yawm. The matter is settled for all of us.”

Kessiah’s face wrinkled from guilt, “I...Thanks. I wanted to say sorry for that. I never did, not really. At least it doesn’t feel like I did. I can’t remember, actually, but it doesn’t matter. You all really needed me to step up, and I didn’t. I threw everything on all of you.”

I waved my hands, “Now that’s just unfair to yourself. I was mad at the time, but an eldritch literally wore your skin. I can’t imagine what that must’ve been like. Wanting to run and get away from all of that was a totally normal reaction. Any one of us might’ve done the same.”

Kessiah peered off, “But that doesn’t change the fact you guys really needed me then. I’m so sorry for letting you guys down.”

Kessiah’s eyes watered while she squeezed a hand into a fist. Torix paced up and put a hand on her shoulder, “Your drive to heal our injured members has done us a world of good. You’ve faced the Hybrids bravely as well, never running in terror against them, even if you wished to. That is more than enough of an apology. I’d wager we all agree there?”

The lich turned to us, and Althea and I nodded.

I added, “Hell yeah.”

Althea followed, “Of course.”

Torix pulled his hand down, “So take that guilt and perhaps grant it to someone who needs it, such as Lehesion.”

Kessiah smiled, giving the old sorcerer a hug. Torix pulled back ever so slightly from surprise before returning the gesture. Torix murmured, “You know, you’ve grown so much. As a previous master, I’m proud.”

Kessiah pulled back, “So have you. Literally.”

Torix stood a solid two feet over her because I made his new body huge. Kessiah nudged him, “We used to fight like cats and dogs. It’s amazing what war will do for you, huh?”

“Indeed, though there’s plenty we still disagree on.”

“Tell me about it.”

I grinned, “Well, the war’s over for a bit, so we have room to argue. The best time for that? A feast.”

Everyone turned to me as I raised my hands, “I think that it’s time we celebrate.”

Krog rumbled in the back, “I can agree to that. I wonder if Blegara has any boneless fish we may feast on. I love the way cartilage snaps in my jaw.”

I frowned, “Huh...Gross.”

Amara hissed, “I agree. It grinds and pops in such a satisfying way.”

Althea waved a hand, “Blegh, I’m gonna be sick.”

I waved a hand, “Come on, let’s head out. I don’t think I can handle any more sentimentality at once...or cartilage talk.”

We took a few steps before my shoulders relaxed. There was a warmth among our group as Torix receded his sound barrier from us and the packages. By the time we finished our talk, the remnants already stashed all the cargo away, so I lifted it all up by raising my finger. They condensed into organized bundles. Chrona murmured, “It must’ve been torture watching those beings move it all so slowly.”

I grimaced, “Yeah, a little.”

One of those remnants walked up, the talkative one who could speak before. I took a second to recall his name, and the shorthand of it stuck out to me. Phalanth gave me a bow, “We do apologize for any inconvenience while giving you this care package. There’s nothing you’ve found missing?”

I stared at what looked like an ancient library of books, a prominent tech shop of rare gadgets, a lab’s worth of biosamples and studies, and some stuff that I couldn’t identify but our guild deemed safe,

“This should be enough for now. I’ll send you guys a message if you’re missing anything.”

The remnant gave me a bow before staring up at me,

“Do forgive me, but may I ask which planet you came from? I’m quite curious about it.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Does it matter?”

“It most certainly does. Many other diplomats, Elysians, and I have wondered for ages which ancient, space-faring species you’ve derived from. I believed it was from a race that exists outside of Schema-owned space. Others scoffed at the idea, but I think I’m right on the matter. I went so far as to make a bet on it.”

“What makes you think I’m from beyond Schema-owned space?”

“You also seem to be an illegal entity based on your method of battle and your bodily composition. Even the eldritch fear you, so you’re obviously something dangerous and volatile. It only makes sense that you gained enough power outside Schema’s system that once within, Schema tolerated you.”

It always astonished me how people could connect the dots for something and end up with a totally different picture, one far from reality. That being said, this misunderstanding only helped me, so I gave him a broad smile,

“Wow. You guessed it. I’m impressed.”

Phalanth swung a hand with a snap of his fingers, “Hah, I knew it. Thank you for letting me know. I’d love to share the profits with you, but you seem more than well off. Now, may our next meeting be this fruitful and peaceful, Harbinger.”

With a curt nod, I agreed while he walked off. Behind me, Krog, Chrona, Hod, and Amara chatted about the feast’s specifics while Kessiah, Althea, and Torix spoke about how we’d impress the albony. As Phalanth took a step onto his landing pad, he paused.

I wouldn't have customarily cared, but the remnants spike in blood pressure omened something immense.

I walked over, Other Hod having heard the spike in heart rate with me. I stopped the remnant from collapsing with a gravity well before he gawked at me with empty eyes. I snapped my fingers in front of his face and yelled, "Hey, you ok?"

He stared at an invisible screen before his breathing turned rapid. He muttered, "This can't be happening."

Torix stepped up beside us, "Has he been driven mad?"

The remnant stared down, unable to accept whatever horror he'd seen. Placing a hand on his shoulder, I locked eyes with him, "What's going on?"

He struggled to lift his arm, his hands trembling as he interacted with his status. After a few seconds, his interface popped up in my own vision, the outline red like an Overseer's screen. Leaning over, I watched a video without audio on it.

An enormous, reddish blob molded over a sphere. Understanding more of what I saw, it was actually two massive objects, the detail of their collision exceeding something smaller. Plumes of light erupted from the orb's surface as vast, magical reactions took place. Teeth and jaws gurgled on the smaller sphere, its grotesque form ever-shifting.

My stomach dropped while my eyes widened at the sight. Torix leaned to me,

"Are you well?"

I took a deep breath. I stated,

"One of Elysium's worlds...It's being swallowed by a Spatial Fortress."

Chapter 304: A Wake Up Call

Torix scoffed in utter nonchalance, “What else did you expect? Schema’s been aiming to exterminate Elysium since they first announced themselves. The usage of Spatial Fortresses is an integral part of that.”

I blinked, calming myself, “I just...I didn’t think Schema would just kill everybody like that. It isn’t like everyone on those worlds hates Schema after all. It’s, I don’t know, inefficient to kill them all. Isn’t it?”

The footage warped a bit before a golden light appeared, like a star amidst the blot of red. Lehesion landed, fighting back the genocidal rampage of the Spatial Fortress. His beams unloaded in bright, delayed flashes due to the footage’s distance from the event. Empowered by a ritual like on Gypsum, Lehesion razed the outer, spreading limbs of the fortress.

I let out a sigh of relief, and Kessiah stepped up and looked at the footage in disgust, “That’s how Schema does things. Yes and no. Black and white.”

Staring back to Phalanth, he took time to control his breathing as well. I let my hand off of his shoulder while he stood back up straight. He made a circle with his thumb and fingers on each hand, swirling them as if the gesture purged him of all his anxiety. He turned to us, “Excuse me, but based on that footage, I’m needed elsewhere.”

He stomped off, running towards the hovering plate. The space shuttle floated up before he entered the exiting bay. As the lower panel closed, a portal opened, and they crossed onto some unknown planet in the stars. I turned to everyone here, “Alright, well, we need to have a meeting.”

Torix leaned back, “What else is there to discuss?”

I gawked at Torix, stunned by his lack of concern for the fortress’s mass murder. That’s when it hit me – he’s a necromancer. Torix treated us well, but he was by no means a saint. If anything, his callous approach to life allowed him to experiment and perform his duties well. He reminded me of that in full while appearing bored of any further discussion.

Not taking that trait as a fault, I peered at him, “I...I never thoroughly thought about the implications of, hm, Elysium losing this war. You obviously have, but I need a moment to digest this.”

Torix leaned back, “Well then, I suppose that isn’t, uh, illogical. It seems rather strange you never considered it. For me, that is.”

I shook my head, “Maybe I just didn’t want to.”

Understanding washed over the sorcerer, and he leaned over to me while his eyes dimmed, “Disciple, there’s much you must learn about in life. One of those lessons is that not every consequence or event is under your control. Elysium took this risk onto themselves, and now their bet has fallen through. The death of billions is on their hands, not ours.”

I stared through Torix, “But I’m pretty damn sure our fight is why that happened.”

Torix cackled then said, “Were we supposed to just let ourselves die then? And besides that, only a fool puts all of their resources onto one entity like that. They are at fault for making Lehesion fight us in the first place, and they are paying the price for their folly.”

Torix waved a hand in an infinity symbol shape, “It was, hm, how to put this. Ah yes, it’s cause and effect.”

For some reason, Torix’s cutting logic sounded insane to my ears right now, even if I knew he was right. I stuck with his argument, mulling it over in my mind. I couldn’t control Schema and Elysium, even if I was strong in my own right. It wasn’t only unfair to me think I could; it was arrogant as well. I wasn’t some diety, and I needed to remember that.

I gave the sorcerer a nod, “Thanks for the reminder. I needed that.”

The necromancer locked his hands behind himself, leaning back upright, “Always a pleasure, disciple.”

Taking a breath, I spread out my hands, “I still want to discuss this. I don’t want any of Elysium’s other worlds swallowed.”

Amara stared with her expressionless helm, “That complicates things, doesn’t it?”

Torix, bolstered by his earlier help, paced back and forth, “If I may interject, I’d say that while difficult, a Spatial Fortress’s attacks are by no means inevitable.” Torix gestured to everything around us,

“Blegara is a pristine example of this. Our landing here prevented this world from being tainted by the living abyss that is a Spatial Fortress. In that manner, we may save other worlds.”

Torix snapped a finger, spreading his silencing aura and fogging magic yet again, “That would be the case on Earth as well. It’s by no means too late to save that planet.”

Helios stepped forward, “Our imperial worlds are no different. We still stand strong on them, and that presence prevents the mass genocide Schema wishes to enact. If you want to save worlds, then helping us get the ahcorous on our side is integral to that. The fact you stand to gain from both your ethics and my Emperor’s deal is a pleasant circumstance.”

I frowned, “Ethics, huh? I wouldn’t give me that much credit. Either way, those are both good points. The Spatial Fortress’s attack doesn’t change any of our plans, outside of us getting rid of Elysium’s presence on Earth.”

Torix tilted his head, “For that, I’ve no idea how we’ll dislodge them given our ceasefire.”

I stared at a roaming eldritch on the outskirts of Saphigia. It shepherded Vagni towards our camp, servicing with an impressive loyalty given the desolation surrounding it. I raised an eyebrow, “Huh, we’ll have to see if something comes up. I’ll keep my eyes peeled for an opportunity.”

Amara leaned back, raising her hands in disgust, “Why would you peel your eyes?”

Other Hod murmured, “It is a customary saying for diligence.”

Amara gasped, “But, but why would that assist diligence? Their eyes would be left so maimed, you’d no longer be able to see.”

Other Hod crossed his umbral wings, “I don’t know what to tell you. Humans...they are difficult to understand.”

I cracked a smile before we headed out. We still had a feast to attend to, and I wasn’t about to miss it. Sending a message to Florence, the graceful albony responding in seconds.

Florence Novas, Of a Golden Tongue and Honied Words(lvl 9,000 | Class: Speaker | Guild: The Empire) – Of course, I’d love to organize the feast. I’ll ensure the correct members are invited and that our entertainment will match your guild’s standards. Food, lighting, glassware, there’s much to do, so I’ll see you by tonight. Good luck.

It alleviated stress having someone manage situations like this. That relief compounded from knowing Florence would do an excellent job too. Having that handled, we walked to the center of Saphigia, where my city still stood. It was a silent but long journey, each of us peering around and inspecting the fallout. At the blue core’s barrier, we all took one last long look around.

Most of our last week’s work disintegrated into a shadow of its former self. The new roads, houses, and artwork I commissioned turned to ash under our battle’s might. Even beyond those nearby settlements, we left much of the capital ruined. The coral homes and ancient temples melted into enormous sheets of dirty, mangled glass and igneous stone. Even the outskirts carried large bricks and boulders of debris, most of it ravaged to some extent.

But it wasn’t all bad either. The gialgathens saved many of the Vagni here, flying out during the first part of my battle with Lehesion. My super golems assisted that effort, along with eldritch deferential to my cause. It stunned me when the giant, roaming eldritch helped panicking Vagni escape into the countryside instead of eating them. Our global transmission turned their hunger for meat into a desire for status.

That wasn’t always the case, but having an eldritch, especially the wilder ones, help me out bewildered my preconceptions. It gave me hope that I’d find some way to coexist with them, even if fear would be my primary tool for that approach. Either way, abject terror was a more benign weapon than Schema’s elimination or Elysium’s Hybridization.

Progress on that front gave me something to look forward to, instilling more motivation for the act of building up my guild. In fact, this general desire for building up gave me something to anticipate instead of just incessant fighting. Sure, a good battle was fun every now and again, but building an empire, one I could be proud of, motivated me more now.

So, we treaded into our new unnamed city, and a crowd of my soldiers peered on. We came with all the packs of goods from Elysium, along with our own smiles and relief. I raised a hand as the crowd shouted, and I boomed,

“The war is over. Let’s celebrate.”

A chorus of cheers returned my announcement, filling me with purpose and enthusiasm. Spatial Fortress or not, our guild moved mountains in the year or so since we formed it. Now we aimed our sights at shifting orbits and altering tides. With so much to look forward to, I built super golems with an air of quiet expectation. We always needed those, and it passed the time while Florence organized the party.

To my surprise, it took him only a few hours. With his many contacts in tow, the sociable albony converted the massive grimoire creation chamber into an enticing souriee. He covered the floors in blue, green, and dark gray carpets, masking the cipheric markings. Florence called in hundreds of chairs and tables, keeping a minimalist approach to dining ware and the like to match our guild.

I read the progress from a stream of messages as I finished a constructor golem. Just as well, Florence picked up a few augmentation crystals from me, each of the stones saturated in antigravity wells. The amber glow of augmentation calmed an area instead of washing it in sterile, white light as quintessence did. That relaxed the room’s ambiance, and that suited a celebration well.

Unlike the austere cutlery, the food funneled in from all over the Empire, and Florence spared no expense for everything needed. Alien meats of all kinds came pouring in along with albony servants distributing the meals with the same type of variety. Inspecting closer, none of the servant species were also being served on platters. I took a deep breath after that one, fearing the worst after my conversation with Elysium.

As the affair came together, Florence didn’t hold back in his invitations, making sure many relevant parties arrived. Obolis, Ophelia, other albony royalty I didn’t know,

several razor queens from the ahcorous, and many others came in droves. It mounted the party from a small get-together to a social opportunity.

Florence gave me name cards in list format through my messenger. They came with descriptions of the guests, including their occupations, names, and more. I used one of my manifold minds to memorize it, another for my elemental furnace conversion, another to organize gear from our trade deal, and a final mind to think during all of this.

From this battle and the fallout, I learned a great deal. The first lesson was that I couldn't control as much as I thought I could. Even if I positioned myself well, my reach and scope were limited. Even in only Schema's universe, I enjoyed a spot in the upper echelon, but I wasn't above that elevated ring of sentients.

Yet.

The second lesson I uncovered was that the consequences of my actions rippled out further than I could see. Foresight would be my friend from here on out, and my efforts needed a more measured touch. Otherwise, I'd end up toppling societies or destroying worlds without even meaning to. That happened to Obolis because of his methods for subjugating worlds. I wasn't about to let that happen to me.

And finally, I understood how lucky I was to have this armor over my skin and in my blood. Peering down, I saw my clawed hand and the plates over it. This dark metal gave me the opportunities I had now, and while it was challenging to get reigns on, I eventually conquered this memento of Baldag-Ruhl.

If anything, this granted me more abilities than Schema had, all things considered. Without being a living dimension, I'd be an average person. It's something I never fully appreciated before my talk to Spear. He wanted power to enact his moral code and thinking. I needed none of that, as I lacked any principles I tried to play out. Despite my lack of direction, I ended up with this awe-inspiring artifact infused to me. It gave me the potential for immense change.

That's why Schema called me the Harbinger of Cataclysm, even from day one. I was an omen of upheaval. He understood that from the initial scan that this armor put me ahead of the pack. Now I decided the fate of my own species and many more. That pressure often haunted me, but now it stuck out as an opportunity.

I could make a difference.

Getting to that, I opened my messages to see what piled up after our ceasefire with Elysium. Many notices repeated themselves, from 'thank you' to 'congratulations' to 'about damn time...sir.' They came from my guildsmen, but a few critical communications intermingled in the mix.

Spear, despite our disagreements, proved his loyalty to Schema. Swallowing his pride, he already contacted the Overseer who sent me a message.

Overseer(lvl 20,000) – Hello, Harbinger. It's been brought to my attention that you and your guild haven't received quests from Schema. This isn't standard protocol, and whatever Schema had planned, he never shared it with the Speakers I work with or me. We're willing to facilitate communications between us, but several specifics need to be worked out before that could transpire.

Is there a time and place where a talk between us would be appropriate? I will be busy for the next three months, minimum.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm(lvl 18,719 (Cap: 26,000) | Class: Sovereign | Guild: The Harbinger's Legion) – When you're finished being busy, we can talk. We'll just stick with three months from now since that's when you're free.

Overseer(lvl 20,000) – Then it's settled. Good luck during your ceasefire. May it serve you well to pull your guild from the ground and into clearer skies.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm(lvl 18,719 (Cap: 26,000) | Class: Sovereign | Guild: The Harbinger's Legion) – No hard feelings, huh? After Spear's response, I must say I'm surprised. I guess you were pretty torn up after our last meeting, mentally and physically, so you probably understand where I'm coming from.

Overseer(lvl 20,000) – If anyone in the galaxy understands how brutal this war has been, it is I. To want an escape from it is only to be expected. Instead of despising your choice, I merely envy that you have one.

Good speaking with you. I cannot continue messaging. Goodbye.

The Overseer took that well, all things considered. I scratched my head as another message arrived from Obolis.

Obolis Novas, the Finder of Secrets(lvl 24,027 (Cap: 27,000 | Class: Founder | Guild: The Empire) – Helios gave mention of many valuables you’ve received from Elysium. Most of that merchandise is very much illegal, and I’d love to scrutinize it with you and others. It would make for a splendid afternoon along with good drinks and fair food to pair with the event.

We may even be able to trade should we feel like doing so. On another topic of note, I know your guild’s inner workings aren’t mine to judge, but this ceasefire was a superb idea. To follow through with it after the heat of combat, I can only imagine the strain. You showed wisdom despite mounting pressure, and know that we fully support your decision.

Ah, what a pleasant surprise; Florence has already sent me an invite to your banquet. I’ll be there with others. I look forward to seeing you then, Daniel.

Sincerely, Obolis Novas.

The formality and general warmth of Obolis’s message stuck out like a painting on a bland wall, probably because of reading the Overseer’s short memos. Either way, it left me with a lot to look forward to tonight. I prepped that while thinking of different ways to smooth out my tasks. The reason for those thoughts spawned from staring at a pile of books and documents.

I needed to study all of this – every last page. It looked like it may take years to fully digest it all, but I lacked time for something that all-consuming. The books themselves required physical editions too. They worked with the cipher, a three-dimensional language. Taking pictures or even footage only got me so far. To understand the information within these books, I’d inspect each page from many angles in real-time.

That reasoning developed from the unique imagery of the texts. Enchanted with magic, the pages showed models of the cipher that visualized on the page. When touching one of the books, anyone could tilt, turn, and tumble these markings to view it in any way you wanted. It reminded me of advanced engineering software that allowed the onlooker to peer into the center of a device.

That utility sped up my learning, but it meant the actual physical book was required. Manifold Mind allowed me to read while talking to someone, and my senses amplified enough from my skills and levels that I lacked any need for direct sight of an individual. My other discernments compensated well for that, so I could read all the time if I wanted to.

My problem stemmed from people's reactions to it; everyone enjoyed eye contact and general attention. Staring down at a book during a conversation enraged some people, and even if I responded like usual, a party or event wasn't the time or place for studying. Wracking my brain a little, I uncovered another solution to this problem.

I took several of the books about the cipher inscriptions, the ones deemed safe by my guild. I pocketed them into my personal dimension outside of a single text. At the same time, I pulled my helmet over my face. It radiated with my current mana of choosing, quintessence. This white light blocked any display of my facial features.

Now, normally, I pulled this helmet back when talking to someone face to face. It was rude to do otherwise and not look someone in the eyes after all. That being said, Obolis and most albony wore masks all the time. It wouldn't be that out of place to do the same. With my helmet on and the masking glow, I shifted the hidden text over my skin until it reached into my facemask.

It plopped in front of my sight, held in place by the face mask's paneling. To me, the book appeared exposed for the world to see. That might not be the case, however, and I needed a mirror to verify. A reflection proved simple to find. Several of our soldiers kept them handy in their tents or pavilions. I asked for permission before stepping into one and using their spare looking glass.

Inspecting my idea's results, my plan worked without a hitch. The book disguised itself completely, hidden in a white glow. Trying out Event Horizon, the sanguine sheen also covered the helmeted volume in its entirety. This omni-helmeted appearance might throw people off, but it didn't matter. The time-saving benefits of this strategy superseded any social angst other people experienced from it.

Knowing the book didn't stick out anymore, I changed my efforts to actually reading the material. With a book right in front of my eyes, I reached a hand into my mask and opened it. It took a moment to adjust to the wall of words in front of me. My size helped me here, as I could hold a dictionary in two fingers, let alone two hands – I was that big now.

Blinded by the book, I used my gravitational sense, smell, and hearing to scope out my surroundings. Subtle temperature fluctuations helped, along with shifts in air pressure. I dedicated a manifold mind for this purpose, and all my other psyches drew from this precise picture. As I hoped, I no longer walked in the dark. I walked through a world of subtle pulses and fluctuating gravities.

Testing everything out at once, I walked around in the raised tent, bent over, so I didn't snag the roof. I read for a minute like this, and a problem cropped up. I couldn't turn the pages, and the book itself jiggled around in my helmet with each step. Using a few armor tendrils, I held it in place and turned the page in my face mask.

Voila, I read like a champ now.

This masked reading allowed me to study magic while talking, working, doing anything outside of fighting, really. It would take getting used to, but the benefits outweighed its weaknesses. Stepping out of the war tent, I waved my thanks to the two soldiers who let me use it. They gawked in awe at me, each of them half my height.

They weren't the only ones impressed, however. Each of them wore the Omega Strains that we harvested from this world. These multicolored, living gemstones gave them a colorful yet deadly bearing, one a deep violet and the other forest green. Each soldier leveled plenty from killing Hybrids as well, each of them capped to level 5,000.

This, combined with my rings, meant these soldiers scaled to respectable levels of ability. Several thousand soldiers like them walked through this camp. It showed how our density approach to the guild assisted us in the long run. I intended on maintaining that approach going forward, and I skulked off to the party, reading the whole time.

Florence pre-emptively called for a preparatory gathering with me. He mentioned not wanting me to walk in without some kind of plan. Hearing him out, we met at the entrance of Torix's lair above, right above the party grounds. Florence stood there on the steps of a Vagni temple, organizing messages in his status.

The flamboyant albony wore stylish, flowing robes of several colors. It gave him the air of an Arabian prince. Seeing me stand over one of the shorter coral buildings, Florence spread his arms,

"Daniel, it has been an age since I last saw you."

He ran up and hugged me, and not wanting to be awkward, I returned the gesture. I didn't realize we were this familiar, but maybe that's part of the reason why Florence was so charismatic. His enjoyment of others ended with their enjoyment of him. It was kind of like a self-fulfilling prophecy, one where he kept control of its fruition.

In line with that prophecy, Florence kept a hand on my shoulder while speaking of the party with enthusiasm. We stepped up the temple's walkway, reaching into its depths, and he gestured to a far-off room in the Vagni's ancient temple. In an unused chamber, Florence set up a tailored suit for me, along with a variety of jewelry.

I stared at it, but, really, I stared at a book in front of my face. I was getting to the good part of a description in it, so I didn't want to set it down. I rolled a hand at Florence, "What about I just wear my normal armor? I think it will make me look more intimidating and earnest."

Florence scoffed, "You're a guildleader of an S ranked guild. Do you honestly believe that such meager accommodations aren't necessary?"

I shook my head, my armor rippling over my skin, "Eh, my last suit got shredded against Lehesion. I'm, you know, superstitious, so I don't want that to happen again."

Florence put his hands on his hips, "I never took you for someone who believed in fairy tales or the sort. Odd."

"Really, it's just this one thing. That's all."

Florence tilted his head, smiling at me, "Ah, you're hiding something, aren't you?"

I stiffened up, surprised he figured it out so quickly, "Pshhh, what? No. Of course not. Never."

Florence raised his palms, "Do not fret, do not fret. I'm enough of a gentleman to know when pressure should no longer be applied. Simply walk-in as you are – you'll still wow them all, no doubt. Perhaps without the helmet, however. It's something I wished I didn't have to participate in–"

Florence tapped the side of his mask, his claw pattering on the black wood, “These accursed masks ensure our relations with other species will always be...strained. Who wishes to discuss anything with someone who won’t show their face after all?”

Today was the day that Florence had to bring this up, huh? Shifting the conversation, I put my hands on my own hips, “I’ve been meaning to ask, but how have you and Helios’s researches been going? I know he planned on giving me some portalling lessons. What have you figured out in the meantime?”

Florence took a step back, peering back and forth, “Oh, quite a bit. Very much in fact... oh, very, very much let me tell you.”

I narrowed my eyes, “Uh-huh. Do you mind sharing?”

He spread his hands, “I’ll drop the helmet and attire conversation if you drop this probing of my duties. Does that sound amicable?”

I smiled, “It’s a deal.”

Florence puffed out his chest, “Then let us go forth to our guests.”

We stepped back into the temple’s inner hallways, walking until we found Torix’s main lair. The sorcerer stationed himself amongst several piles of books, his eyes parsing the pages with his analytical eyes. He raised a hand to me, unable to peer away from the pages,

“Do excuse me this evening. I already have a rather lovely date that I simply must attend to.”

I frowned, “Tell me, is the date not alive like you?”

“Yes. Quite unliving.”

“Is it full of information like you are?”

“Indeed. Absolutely chock full, some would say.”

“And does it enjoy teaching as well?”

Torix peered up at me, “Why, I believe you and my love interest may have already met.”

I turned a page of my own book in my facemask, “Eh, on occasion.”

If he had lips, Torix would be giving me a wily grin. It proved difficult not to laugh at our conversation because I was reading as he talked to me. Either way, I relinquished our necromancer from his social duties, so he could read as he wanted.

Florence and I stepped past him, working our way towards a downward exit, finding the supplies from Elysium stacked here. Four super golems guarded it with unwavering resilience and attention. I turned to Florence,

“What’s all this for?”

“To send a message of your dominance and prestige.”

I furrowed my brow at it, “Doesn’t that seem, I don’t know, overt?”

“It is, but it’s necessary. Your guild is small and compact. That serves as an advantage in many cases, but other guild leaders could look down upon you for it. Just look to the meeting area I procured. It’s not an example of class and wealth. That much is certain.”

I stared at the expansive room with the pillars of steel, “Huh. It’s nothing like Obolis’s Nebula Drifter was, but it definitely gets the job done.”

Florence gestured to all our merchandise sprawled out in elegant displays, “And that is where this display of goods comes in. It allows you to signify your abundance in other ways outside of the location. It also enables you to understand more about the goods therein.”

I crossed my arms, “How?”

Florence raised a hand, “I’ll give you an example. I’m certain that Obolis wished to trade some of these goods with you, correct?”

Florence was a mind reader. I nodded, “Yeah, he did. Did he send you a message or something?”

“Of course not. I know Obolis well enough to derive his motives. He wishes for treasure from the outer reaches of space. Much of this fills that criteria. Armed with that understanding, you may pay attention to his nonverbal cues and what he wishes to trade for. Depending on the messages Obolis sends, you can understand what is valuable and what isn’t.”

Florence shrugged, “That saves you some time when parsing out the valuables thereafter.”

I leaned back, “Damn. I never thought of that. At least I did think of this-” I pointed at four super golems guarding everything in sight with determined conviction. Florence pointed at them,

“Safeguarding possession is a worthy pursuit, and many do so. However, few people gather the wealth of information hidden behind the subtext of every conversation. If you pay attention to a person, you’ll find more than what they simply share. You’ll also uncover what they wish to hide.”

I furrowed my brow, “Florence...Don’t tell people you think like this. They’ll take it the wrong way.”

He wrapped an arm around my shoulders, “And you see my, friend, I don’t. That being said, I value our friendship highly, so I’ll share a few of my own tricks here or there with you. I know that of all the people I’ve been close with, you’re one of the few who will repay me in full.”

I frowned, “What do you want?”

Florence shrugged before dashing off, “Nothing, for now. One day I’m certain we’ll arrange something. Until then, I have a celebration to plan.”

He dashed off before stepping to the entrance of a corridor. He gave a bow along with an introduction,

“And introducing the lovely and stunning Althea Tolstoy.”

Althea walked down, sporting a black dress that slimmed her already alluring figure. She smiled at me, and my heart did a little dance in my chest. Florence walked up the way she came, and he gave us some alone time. I stepped up to her, “Hey, beautiful.”

“Hey, handsome. I see you aren’t wearing a suit this time. Why the change in attire?”

“I didn’t want them to see me in a different light than how I always am. That and the last party’s outcome made me nervous.”

She rubbed her exposed arms, “You and me both. I still get chills thinking about it. It’s a lot like the Spatial Fortress today...Huh, I just thought of something. I wonder why they didn’t attack Giess?”

“If I had to guess, Elysium puts all or most of their defenses around Giess when sending Lehesion out. Otherwise, they wouldn’t be able to use him like they tend to.”

Althea stared down, “Yeah, I guess so...Are you ready for this, uh, party, I guess? I didn’t think it would be like this.”

I raised my palms, “I handed it off to Florence, and you know how he is.”

“Heh, he’s crazy. He seems like a good guy, though I can’t ever tell what he’s up to. I’m glad you’re helping him iron out his issues with his family. I know it really threw me off when I saw it. At first, I thought that maybe it was because that’s how families are. I don’t have much of a reference.”

My face wrinkled at her words. I didn’t know what it was like growing up in a lab, so I said,

“Yeah, I knew a lot of different families before Schema’s culling. Sometimes, they treated each other like they were better than other people. Other times, families treated each other much worse than strangers because those families knew they could get away with it.”

I tilted my head, “I think you should treat the people you’re close to with respect and realism. They have flaws, and you probably know those flaws. That doesn’t mean they’re terrible people. It just means you know more of what they’re hiding than the strangers you meet.”

Althea smiled up at me, “You get to see their good side too.”

I smiled back, “You do.”

We held each other close, slow dancing for a second to a song that wasn’t playing, but we both heard. The moment ended as Florence began shuttling people inside, most of their names I already knew thanks to a manifold mind. I grabbed Althea’s hand, giving it a light squeeze.

“You ready?”

She gulped, “For a huge celebration?”

Obolis stepped out, speaking with two other albony royalty. He raised a hand to us while Althea whimpered,

“Blegh, never.”

## Chapter 305: A Galaxy Unexplored

Althea sighed while letting go of my hand, “I really don’t want to be a part of the politics if you don’t mind.”

I whispered back, “Eh, neither do I. Go attend to some urgent errand. I’ll let them know you couldn’t attend.”

She phased away, escaping the evening while I remained trapped in it. It wasn't the end of the world, however, and Obolis smiled at me with his distinguished bearing and numerous scars, "It's wonderful to see you again, Daniel. I brought extra company for the event, as your absolving from this war is worthy of celebration."

Obolis's eyes passed over the stacks of merchandise, hunger lacing his expression, "As are your spoils of said war. They are impressive." His face stayed set on the gear while his eyes met mine, "Just as well, I'll assume that Althea was needed elsewhere?"

Obolis heard our conversation from across the room, so he helped us with delivering our excuse. I took the opportunity,

"Of course. We just got the ceasefire handled today, after all."

The newcomers reached us, and I gave Obolis a handshake, the albony ruler remembering the gesture from before. Turning towards the two albony behind him, I raised a palm to them, "It's good to see you, Victoria and Alastair."

Alastair went to reply, raising a hand. His voice cracked, extinguishing his efforts to speak. On the other hand, Victoria mimicked the gesture made by Obolis, stepping up with excitement, "It's great to see you as well, Daniel."

We shook hands, and she held my hand a little too long while smiling a bit too wide as well. It was a predatory glance, one I didn't like being viewed from. Looking for a way out of the situation, I found a group of around twelve albony stepping in behind the Emperor. Each of these royals peered around with closed gestures and wary glimpses.

They stared at me like I were a hungry eldritch waiting to eat them. Taking charge of my first impression, I spread out my arms,

"I know this is a relatively humble place to have a celebration in, but we've just ended the war earlier today. Feel free to glance at what we've gained and speak about it. Don't touch it, or else I can't guarantee you won't end up fighting one of the guardians I posted here."

The supergolems peered at the incoming crowd with their unblinking, crystal eyes. I clasped my hands, “They’ll show you something if you want to look at it, and I’ll be talking to everyone at some point during this evening. Refreshments and food are over there, so without any more of a wait, enjoy yourselves.”

Relieved by my lack of hostility, the royals stepped in with their heaviness leaving them. I peered at Obolis, the only member near eye level with me, “You want to inspect the goods here?”

He raised his hands as fists, his giddiness subdued but apparent, “Oh, was I that transparent? Do excuse me, but yes, I’d love to.”

We walked over towards the pile of goods, and Obolis marveled, “This is more than I’d have imagined you’d gain from a ceasefire. Being a military force must come with its perks?”

I nodded, “It does. How’s your side of the war front going?”

Obolis’s shoulders rose a bit, and he gave me a friendly nudge on the shoulder, “Better now, thanks to your efforts. Tearing down Elysium’s system left its mark, even if it was short-lived. They were rendered utterly confused and senseless without any communication. A few of their pocketed defenses were torn apart during that time.”

Even as he spoke of something else, I dwelled on how he treated his planets’ subservient species. I frowned, “That’s good.”

My armor shifted with my expression, letting people read my face despite the covering over it. Sensing my unease, he placed a hand on my shoulder, “I understand your agitation. I’ve seen the footage as well. I’m certain you’re feeling somewhat responsible for the partial glassing, but think nothing of it. Elysium is to blame, and you merely defended yourself. Those deaths lie in the hands of Elysium’s incompetent leadership.”

I shook off the feeling to retort, ‘Your leadership isn’t much better.’ Rolling my shoulders, I took a breath before letting my animosity go. Now wasn’t the time and place for it, and I’d bring these issues back up in full force after killing Plazia and getting my reward for it. Changing the subject, I gestured to the row of obelisks,

“Any opinions on these?”

Obolis leaned over, pointing at one, “May I?”

“Of course.”

I kept my eyes peeled on Obolis as he turned the dark obelisk in his hand, the red lights glimmering. He sighed, “Hm, quite a piece. Would you take it for a few cipheric pieces of my own?”

I reached out a hand, and Obolis tossed the obelisk to me. The dark sphere opened up a red status panel in my vision. Every word, sentence, and phrase worded itself exclusively in the cipher. This could be instrumental for learning more advanced pieces of the ancient language, so I let out a sharp breath while stating,

“No.”

Obolis shrugged with a knowing grin, “I can’t be blamed for trying. Now, I’ve no idea what that’s for, but it’s ancient. So ancient that it likely precurses even Schema. By my estimation, some civilization uprooted itself in the advent of this advanced technology. That parallels the remnants’ fall. Gah, isn’t it fascinating? I’d love to give it to a few of my exiled guildmembers and see what they’d make of it.”

“Exiled guildmembers?”

He waved a hand, “Not everyone who’s attuned to the cipher may rise high enough in Schema’s system to study it. I give these exiled members protection and the opportunity to study the cipher at their leisure. They compensate me with their discoveries and becoming exiled.”

“Huh. Why not work with the eldritch instead?”

Obolis let out a sigh of frustration, “I’ve tried, but the Overseer has refused me any permit for such a situation. Speaking of forbidden access, I know you work with Amara and Hod. How did you gain that kind of access to study with them? Of course, only answer if you’re willing to share?”

I glanced at Amara, who stood by the food. She sliced it apart with her hair strands until it was a fine mush. She scarfed down the mushed bones and liquefied flesh like a vacuum cleaner right after. While I didn't know much about her, Althea mentioned how she was an apprentice to a Builder.

Considering how volatile a position that must've been, it amazed me how Amara made it this far. She bore a weight from those unspoken experiences that gave her a scornful and desperate disposition. Only recently did she open up, and mainly from the armor I gave her. Even with that mysterious nature of hers, I trusted her because of her mission on Gypsum. She hadn't let me down yet.

Schema would never offer that kind faith in her, but the AI allowed her to be a part of my guild. If I had to guess why, it was because of how pivotal she was for my success. Those accomplishments resulted in more eldritch being killed than just her death alone. Like me, Amara amounted to an investment, and Schema wanted the full benefits of his gamble now that it was paying off.

Once it quit giving, he'd likely have her killed. If he'd be able to by then.

I raised my eyebrows, "We're a part of his risk-reward strategy, I'd guess. I know my region's Overseer owed me for killing Yawm too, and he might've given her access. She's still an unknown. Anyone here could kill her for experience if they wanted to."

Obolis let out a hearty laugh before covering his mouth, "And what? Have you barreling after them? There are worse consequences than Schema's bounties and Breakers. You are among them."

"Eh, thanks. I'd probably just smash them to death, though."

Obolis winced, "Yes, you could, but most have seen how you fight by now. It's monstrous, more like an animal or machine than a sentient. With only slight alterations, your capacity for torture would be legendary." He coughed into a hand, "If you would lower yourself to such a practice."

I did have the skill, though I never intended on leveling it. The Emperor straightened himself out, "Now, enough pleasantries. There was a matter I needed to discuss with you before I perused this gathering of rarities."

“Ah, Plazia-Ruhl, right?”

“That’s correct. I know you’ve been rooted in this conflict since its inception, and that has given you minimal leeway. I’ve offered my understanding, and I will continue to do so. But, due to this truce-“

“I have time on my hands, right?”

“You’ve understood my meaning. When can I anticipate your assassination of Plazia?”

“I’ll be leaving tomorrow for it. It probably won’t take long.”

Obolis’s eyes widened, “Hah, excellent. That’s simply superb. I was frightened you’d call off the arrangement at this rate, considering the sheer amount of expansion you’ll be mounting in the meantime. I’d have forgiven you for it as well. I, too, feel the desire to conquer, though for different reasons.”

Being pooled together with the Emperor didn’t sit right with me, but I chose not to fight it out here. I crossed my arms, keeping the subject off comparisons,

“I’d be lying if I said I never considered stopping our deal, but I don’t think Plazia should be that difficult to get rid of, considering he’s stayed small enough on the ahcorus’s homeworld to keep it from becoming fringed.”

“That’s a reasonable point, but never underestimate a Ruhl. They are spoken of in ballads across most worlds as the destroyers of planets.”

I tapped one of my forearms with a knuckle, letting out a metallic ring, “I never would. My first dungeon boss kill was from a Ruhl.”

Obolis blinked, “Now that’s a surprise. Where and why would Schema not warn you of that? Perhaps you could speak more of it?”

“I’ll just say this – Ruhl’s are the real deal. Either way, their intelligence is what makes them deadly, not their combat potential. Considering my abilities, I don’t think Plazia will be able to outsmart the sheer power difference. It’s like me trying to outsmart Eonoth. Positioning and strategy can only compensate so much.”

Obolis’s eyes grew dark, “I’d remind you that is precisely what Elysium has done, according to the reports from Helios.”

“That’s what Elysium would like to think, but I don’t know if you can outsmart an Old One. To me, they appear to have precognizance, meaning they hold all the chips and cards in their hands at all times. If they hand you some chips, it’s because they know they’ll win them back.”

I grimaced, “That means no matter how you interact with them, it’s to their benefit and not your own. That’s why everyone who serves an Old One ends up becoming a corrupted abomination. That’s why even though I’m not a genius, I’m still smart enough to know when to avoid a losing situation.”

One of Obolis’s eyebrows raised, “Are you scared of them?”

“Pshh, scared? No, I’m terrified.”

“Perhaps there is wisdom in that. According to my recounts of historical tellings, encounters with the Old Ones are relatively mixed. Some gain glory unbounded while others are washed into depths of unspeakable gloom. You’ve seen Yawm’s descent and what he became, but you’ve never seen the full extent of an avatar’s rise. They are remarkable.”

I winced, remembering how I was technically an avatar for Etorhma. Obolis misread my expression, “That isn’t to say your own advancement isn’t comparable. It’s simply to point out that there are others like you, anomalies who defy the rules and constraints that others are subject to.”

The last thing I’d be wincing about would be rivals popping up. If anything, that sounded exciting. They might appear one day, but for now, the Emperor clapped his hands, “Now, that’s enough talk of history. I’m going to continue peering through these goods if you’d like to join me.”

I shook my head, “I think I’m going to meet the other guests instead.”

“Fair enough. Enjoy your celebration, as I most certainly will.”

Obolis stepped off, speaking with a supergolem guard. They began walking through each of the displays, the supergolem holding different items for his inspection. Others perused the items under the gaze of my bouncers, so I left them to it. Joining a crowd more kindred to my own spirits, I found Wrath, Hod, and Amara indulging in the food they sprawled out.

The delicacies weren’t originally haphazardly lapped about, but these two gluttons pulled together two vast piles of food as they had on the Nebula Drifter. At this table, Hod faced off once again with Wrath. Other Hod would’ve stood no chance against Wrath in an eating contest, but Other Hod had left long ago when the party first began. His ganglier, goofier version sat beside Wrath.

Hod had returned in full force, and he indulged without end.

Hod licked his claws in his beak, “Ah, Hod respect goop lady. Goop lady eat lots. But, Hod know goop lady lose. Hod outeat anyone besides Hod. It make Hod wonder if Hod versus Hod ever end. Hod not think so. Hod think food end first.”

Hod sat atop his own swollen belly, comical and kind of grotesque. Wrath did the same, though her slime body seemed better suited for this. She struggled on, trying to muster an ounce of hunger for herself. As she did, Hod stared down at her with unblinking eyes. He radiated confidence so absolute that his gaze trumpeted his victory louder than an orchestra.

Without even a morsel of hesitation, Hod downed an oversized animal thigh, bone and all. He leaned towards Wrath, “Hod wonder, is goop lady like balloon. Hod wonder if balloon lady better name than goop lady. Hod also wonder...”

His face got right beside Wrath’s, “Will balloon lady pop?”

Wrath’s face fell forward, smacking into her bowl of food as she passed out. Hod was victorious, and cheers from an onlooking crowd echoed across the commons. My voice was among them, but most of this audience composed of servants, their lower station

allowing them to enjoy something so primal. If a royal did the same, they'd be a laughing stock at some haughty court for months afterward.

But that didn't mean only servants enjoyed this struggle. Beyond these butlers and maids, other razor queens inspected the scene. They carried hulking yet ever-shifting frames, each of the amorphous blobs a different color and shape. One of them shifted like a pool of cerulean water, maintaining no resolute form. Another kept itself covered in a keratinized shell of sharpened teeth, none of its amorphous body exposed.

The other razor queens fell somewhere between those two extremes. It was a feast for the eyes, given their ambient colors, and they stuck out like a rainbow come to life. A lavender-shaded razor queen caught me gazing, so it wriggled up towards me, about half my size. It spoke out, "Your follower is a dichotomy. It leaves its eldritch mind behind, but those instincts remain. It consumes many times its size, yet it hungers forth, as all the eldritch do."

The lavender razor queen shivered, "Wrath has spoken of your hunger as well. She says it is legendary, unending, a void of consumption lasting an eternity...But I know nothing of it. Those tales are but words, and words can mean little."

I shrugged, "Those stories are definitely true, in this case. I could probably outeat Hod if I wanted to."

Hod turned to me. He lurched forward, but his bulbous mass of a belly held him back, "Hod disagree with Harbinger. Harbinger lie! Harbinger not outeat Hod. Hod challenge Harbinger. Hod never lose."

He raised both his winged hands, each arm looking more like a rail than a limb. I walked up and smiled, "Come on, you know I could tear through all the food on this planet right now if I wanted to."

Hod's imposing demeanor deflated as he rested on his previously eaten food. His eyes watered, "But...But Hod want victory. Victory taste better than food. Some food. Ok, most food better than victory, but victory still nice."

He stared up at me in desperation, so I put my hands on my hips, "I surrender. You win."

Hod lifted his hands, the hollow victory meaning no less to him than a real one, “Yes. Hod relish victory forever.”

Without a second of consideration, Hod turned to a different razor queen. Hod puffed his chest out and put his hands on his huge gut, “Hod may not have mentioned, but Hod outeat even Harbinger.”

The razor queen stared at him as if he was an idiot.

Hod nodded, “Hod know. Hod impressive.”

I laughed a bit, his oblivious innocence both funny and refreshing. The guy enjoyed his simple pleasures, taking life on in a literal fashion. I envied that candor at times, and most people could use more of that attitude in general. I knew I could. I turned back to the lavender razor queen,

“Anyways, what’s your name? Mine’s Daniel.”

The lavender slime shifted, its form rippling as jagged teeth spawned over its surface. Eyes bubbled up from beneath its outer membrane, the orbs more mock imitations of eyes than anything. They floated about in an unsettling, eerie way before locking in on me. Those eerie oculi remained off-center.

It was like the slime was trying its damndest to fall in the uncanny valley, and it was doing a great job of it. It said, “I am Envy.”

It created limbs before trying to stand my height. Lanky and thin, it did so with effort. I tapped my sides while trying to manage the situation, “It’s good to meet you too, Envy...So, uh, what are you doing?”

“I am trying to emulate your form. It is invigorating to do so, as you hold combative aggression at all times. I wish to have this for my own.”

“It sounds like you live up to your namesake then.”

Its disturbing 'face' pooled up close to mine, no fundamental understanding of personal space in its mind, "I would take everything from you. Your mind, your metal, that ominous glow of your mask...I wish for all of it, and I would take it if only I could."

It got even closer. The stench of rubbing alcohol permeated its body, dense like a napkin drenched in the stuff. It echoed, "If only."

I pressured it with Event Horizon. It shivered, returning towards its previous blobular shape. I raised my eyebrows, "That's good to know, but you might want to be a bit less candid when meeting someone new. Especially when you have a personality like that."

Envy backed away, "I...Yes. I understand, Harbinger. I meant what I spoke of like a compliment, but it is difficult for me. My urges, they carry me away at times, as if I were but a stick within a river."

"Huh, alright. I get that. Just keep some distance between us, and we'll be fine. No harm, no foul."

Envy skulked away, disheartened by our encounter. Dammit, now I felt bad. It wasn't how I wanted my first talk with a razor queen to go, but if I allowed Envy to pressure me, the others would do so as well. Speaking of other razor queens, I turned to them, "So, does anyone else want to introduce themselves, preferably with more personal space involved?"

The slimes stared at me without a word. They all blanked, their shifting bodies unreadable. One slithered towards me, an emerald-hued razor queen with forest green blotches closer to its center. It murmured, "You speak without riddles on your tongue. It is joyous for us, as many who walk on two legs are difficult to understand. I am simple to comprehend, as I am known as Reason."

"Huh, it's good to meet you. I'll be visiting your homeworld soon to eradicate Plazia. Sorry for the wait."

"It is a battle centuries in the making. To wait further is no tall ask for such a short time. We wonder yet worry what you will think of our home."

"That depends on what kind of place it is."

“It is a darker world than this. It carries little water, plumes of gas crawling along its surface like an ahcorus youngling learning to uphold a form. We live in caverns beneath the ground, ones we carved ages ago. You will find food present, though not like this. It is far coarser and less rich.”

I raised an eyebrow, “You mean rocks, right? Wrath told me that you all ate minerals.”

“She is correct. We serve visitors crystallized mana, as they may consume little else aside from that delicacy.”

I squeezed a hand, throwing Reason a chunk of quintessence, “Like this?”

Reason reached out with a partitioned section of herself. The blob spread about before claws expanded from her outer membrane. They grasped the gemstone, ogling it. Reason rippled back and forth, “Great joy in this gift. Thank you. Thank you.”

The crystal submerged into her body, and it dissolved as the razor queen radiated with white energy. Reason inched closer, “I may host your colony, if need be, within my own domain. From there, you may attack the great besieger and ruler of the underworld. It will desiccate your mind should you allow it to.”

I shrugged, “Alright. Sounds good to me.”

Reason trembled as memories passed through her mind, “That monster is beyond reckoning. Its moves are more than we may understand. Its intentions are beyond comprehension. No matter your approach, it will be the greatest battle of your life. Anticipate a journey that will hollow your soul and leave your life forever altered.”

I blinked, kind of intimidated but keeping my confidence, “Is it hungry?”

Reason jiggled, “Always.”

I raised a hand, “I’ll give it a knuckle sandwich.”

Another razor queen came up, the cerulean one. It spoke with a voice like harmony, “Ah, I know of this sandwich. Are you serving your hands as a poisonous dish. That is quite clever.”

The other razor queens nodded to each other. I gave up correcting them, and they each introduced themselves. They took on various names from common concepts. As with Envy and Reason, those concepts reflected the razor queens’ approach to life and their colonies. It was an exciting conversation.

I even learned that Wrath convinced them of Plazia as a threat worth exterminating. As insinuated by her name, Wrath acted with the most aggression, so it made sense she championed the effort to kill the nested Ruhl. We continued the discussion, our topics revolving around their food and lesser slimes, but before I learned much, a spike in mana nearby lured me away from them.

Stepping back, I found an ark or two of arcane energy amidst a group of albony. I leaned over, curious about who controlled the violet electricity, and I found a familiar face. It was a Speaker I met a long time ago before I even killed Yawm. I remembered him as a skeptilian who covered himself in runic markings. The Speaker turned to me, still covered in the blackened scales of some draconian eldritch.

It was Tera, The World Breaker. I spread out my hands when I saw him, “Hey, Tera, it’s good to see you again. Long time no see.”

The Speaker turned to me, gawking as I loomed over him like a giant,

“I’m sorry, Harbinger, but I don’t think we’ve met.”

#### Chapter 306: Fitting Right In

I leaned back while opening my arms wide, “What? You don’t remember me? I guess it’s harder with my helmet on.”

Tera’s eyes narrowed while he searched his memories, many thousands of people popping up in them. He shook his head, “You’re not like many I’ve met if anyone.”

“I’m Daniel Hillside. You helped me with getting access back into the system because I was messing around with the cipher.”

Tera's eyes glazed over, and they stayed that way for a few seconds. As I began believing he forgot me entirely, his eyes widened as if someone attacked him,

"You're that Harbinger? No, no way. That's impossible. Absurd. You actually ended up killing Yawm?"

I pointed behind me at Hod, who bragged about his food contest cred. Hod's belly jiggled as I scoffed, "No, he did. I helped out, though."

Tera kept peering back and forth, unable to form words for a minute. He gasped, "You've changed. Excuse me for not recognizing you, but you're so different. Utterly changed...Unbelievable."

I gave him a light nudge on the shoulder with my fist, "So have you."

As we spoke, I found myself using another of my psyches to observe him in tandem. This other mind noted Tera's nature-based motif, all of his goods based on organic means of combat or control. Unfamiliar vials of different poisons strapped onto the front of Tera's chest, along with other potions at his side. He took the teeth and claws from his enemies, making them into his weapons. Those tools covered him.

The observing psyche even passed over its own comparisons. The mind mentioned how Tera was like an experienced handyman, just one that dealt in death instead of construction. All that flowed into my acting consciousness while another inspected Tera's titles and status.

Tera, The World Breaker(lvl 9,000 | Class: Speaker | Race: Skeptiles | Origin: Mowak | Age: 47 |...)

This other mind found a staggering difference in information when compared to my first inspection of Tera. Funneling in like some video feed, the anima gave me a laundry list of every detail I could've ever desired, even more than I wanted. One of the more valuable tidbits was Tera only gained a thousand levels since we last met while I'd gained over ten thousand. This other mind decided that I still looked up to the Speaker anyways.

The curious conscious even reminded me that Tera gave me a vial of eldritch energy that accelerated my evolution. It was pivotal at the time. Now Tera was here, wondering about at a party on Blegara. It seemed odd to me and my other mind. Combine that with all the additional insights, and I swallowed in apprehension.

All of this knowledge assaulted me like the crushing weight of the world on my shoulders. I kept talking despite it all,

“Man...it’s great to see you. How have you been?”

I told the other minds to quit sending me so much info as Tera turned, peering around, “I’m doing well. I can see how you’ve been just by peering around. You’ve grown until you’re hardly recognizable. I dwarfed you when we first met, and now you do the same to me. Hah, I remember when Schema tasked you with killing Yawm of Flesh. Now you have exceeded him, and you have a nice little slice of this galaxy to yourself.”

He gave me a genuine smile, “You’ve done very well for yourself.”

His words uplifted me, but at the same time, my other psyches kept funneling in observations. One mind mused that Tera was like my older brother returning from a visit across continents. Now that Tera came back here, I finally showed him all the progress I made. This anima noted the feeling permeated because Tera knew me before I turned into a ruler of worlds.

It made his compliment more sincere because he didn’t assume I spawned from a race outside of Schema-owned space. Tera understood the full extent of my humble origins. That made his current tone of respect feel earned instead of given.

Though I appreciated the insights, having those thoughts flopped into my mind put me on edge. Keeping up with everything proved impossible, and I took a sharp breath. This was too much to take in at once, and it paralyzed me. The Manifold Mind skill carried infinite potential, but its darker showed itself now.

A disparate psyche thought through the reason why – I didn’t use it like this, ever. I automated tedious, meh functions that required little thought. That meant organizing the minds was like coordinating menial laborers. Now, this was like speaking for a council of Daniels, each of them shouting in my ear.

The insights washed me away in a veritable sea of helpful info.

I hid my internal struggle as I smiled at Tera, “Thanks...So, why are you here of all places?”

Tera narrowed his eyes at me, “You ok? You seem like your in pain.”

I was. Being the head of this council of Daniels exceeded my ability, especially when they expected me to understand their counsel and act accordingly in real-time. It left me fumbling for more mental processing power. Stretching out into my mana reserves, something clicked in my mind as I grasped out.

My mana drained, and I found enormous amounts of processing power at my disposal, all of it left unused. As this acuity flooded in, the mana siphoning into my cipheric runes dampened a bit. I undulated these two ends like a scale, finding my mind’s speed correlated with the mana’s changing stream. A realization clicked in as that happened; I could turn mana into mental processing power.

Duh.

I never understood that or used it, probably because of how my blood magic operated. It made mana a more physical activity for me. However, this was likely how most people ‘made’ mana. They sacrificed their mental abilities to generate the tangible forces of mana. Afterward, they tempered the energy into something useful.

I excelled at generating the energy from my own blood, and I tempered it well compared to most. However, since I always sacrificed blood and bone for it, I never made this mental connection. I skipped this step long ago while in BloodHollow. In a moment of desperation to generate mana, I destroyed my own body instead of drawing it from my mind.

I shook my head, stunned at my ignorance. It was a gut punch, one that left me breathless. Tera put a hand on my shoulder, “Are you sure you’re ok?”

“Yes. I’m fine.”

I gulped. If I'd just made this connection earlier, there were many, many issues I could've handled independently. The logistics behind our war, learning quicker than ever, and even just speaking better was all within my grasp. I had never seized this connection or ability, and that left me neutered compared to my potential.

I shook away a wave of guilt, ashamed at how long I'd gone without knowing all of this. Reigning my emotions in, I put this behind me for a second, trying to work with the new ability. Pulling in my mana, my mind responded like a viper's strike. It flourished under the untamed energy's influence.

Using the improvements, my psyche gained a volition I hardly comprehended. Acting out with this bizarre, unwieldy processing, I contemplated all the streams of information at once. Unlike before, the insights soaked in with ease. In that way, I didn't gain any creativity or brilliance from the shifting mana. It was more like memorization and extra time to think.

Still, knowledge was power. Connections snapped into my head as my mind assimilated data. This mental conversion was how Torix operated as he did with so many tasks at once. It was also how the Overseer handled other duties while speaking with me. I could even explain the supernatural observance of the Emperor with it. He noted details and thought about them quickly enough that it seemed simultaneous even if it wasn't.

All those possibilities cropped up in my own mind, but I stared down under strain. My hands shook as the sheer pace of my mind overwhelmed me. Even if I now understood this newfound force, wielding the tool was a different matter altogether. I twitched about, unable to tolerate it all.

Tera gave my arm a light tap, "I'm about to call for help."

Snapping back into the moment, I raised a hand,

"I'm fine, I'm fine. I was trying to use a new skill while speaking with you, but it wasn't working out. That's why I was acting weird."

I'd have to investigate the mana connection some other time.

"You sure? I can have someone check you out. You did just finish a battle, and lingering injuries could be, you know, lingering."

I shook my head with confidence, “I’m fine. Better than fine. I can finally breathe for a minute instead of racing headfirst into death every day. I’m just adjusting to that. It’s a little surreal.”

“Hm...I’ll listen to you for now, but if you start shaking again, I’m going to get someone over here that could actually help you.”

“I’m sure you could give me a potion or something.”

Tera raised an eyebrow, “And lose the credits when someone else could handle that for me? I’d rather not. I need every credit I can get.”

Another observation came in. Tera was poor. I gave just a pinch of mana into my mental faculties so that I wasn’t thrown off in the conversation,

“So, are you struggling to find work?”

Tera sighed, “Quite the opposite, actually. I’ve been handling missions for Schema and the Empire. I’ve been busy this way for years now. That’s why I’ve fallen behind on most recent events. I knew we were going to the Harbinger’s party here, but I didn’t think the Harbinger also killed Yawm. I neglected to do any research beforehand.”

More observations streamed in. Tera was overwhelmed by his current position and often isolated. I kept talking with those facts in mind,

“With your skills, you might’ve been able to get a good offer from someone in my position. Why not do the research?”

“Hah, I’d never find the time to capitalize on the opportunity. This war gives me all the work I could ever need, and I’m sure you understand that. I’m also not in the position to be asking anything from someone from your station. I’m just trying to get by, at the moment.”

That was a loaded statement, but I chose not to pry, “I can relate. Like I mentioned, I’m glad to have finally crawled my way out of the war.” I turned to the display cases, “And with something to show for it. How about you? Any good loot lately?”

His eyes softened, “No, not particularly.”

I raised an eyebrow, not that Tera could see it, “Ah, did Schema not give you a quest either?”

Tera gawked at me, “Schema didn’t even give you a quest? No wonder your guild signed a ceasefire. You’re just throwing yourselves against a wall with teeth and for nothing at this point.”

“I know. I couldn’t justify it anymore either. Its weird Schema didn’t give me a quest, however.”

“That’s not like Schema. It wouldn’t normally fail to seize an opportunity like this. It doesn’t make sense that the crafty AI would miss out when it sees everything either.”

I sighed, “I’m right there with you, but we’re trying to figure it out. I have a meeting with the Overseer planned and everything. Anyways, you’re still getting quests. Anything interesting lately?”

His gaze averted mine once more, “I’ve got plenty of quests, but they don’t amount to much, even when I do complete them. Such is life, sometimes.”

I caught an undertone in his voice. He wasn’t looking away to think or ponder. He peered away out of shame, something I was all too familiar with. I’d seen it happen to people who met up after a long absence. One progressed, and the other stagnated. The comparison put one of them in a dim light as if they stood still while everything moved around them.

At least, that’s what a mind of mine sent over, and I happened to agree with myself. Weird as all that was, I hated seeing an old friend go through this, especially when it was someone who helped me out. I waved my hands in circles, entering my problem-solving mode,

“Are the quests not balanced or something? I know you’re getting a lot done. I mean, you have the title of a world breaker. No way that doesn’t mean something impressive.”

He rubbed his shoulder as if I struck him, “It’s not what you’re imagining. You’re an actual breaker at this point. My past isn’t that glorious.”

Sensing a deep pain there, I dropped the issue while pointing at an exit out of the chamber, “Hey, if you need to talk, I can listen. It sounds like something’s eating at you.”

My concern resulted in the opposite reaction I wanted. It only exacerbated Tera’s unease, his anxiety growing as he murmured, “Daniel, I haven’t changed much since we last saw each other. As I said, I’m just getting by, so let’s not talk about me. Let’s talk about you and your stories. I know you have plenty to share. Let’s talk about those instead.”

Normally, I’d have let the subject slide and did what he asked, but there was an edge to his voice that I didn’t like. Pressing the issue might’ve been a terrible idea, but I couldn’t watch him hide his torment like that. Not when I was in the position to fix it.

And so, my minds shifted into place to accomplish my current goal. One of them inspected his titles further, figuring out he worked under the Empire. I narrowed my eyes at Tera,

“Ok, this is all I’ll say about it. You work for the Empire. You’re accomplishing plenty but getting very little back. Are they messing with your quest rewards or something like that?”

I heard the beating of his heart clearly in my ears, and it sped up as I spoke. Another explanation from a mind confirmed those thoughts, meaning I was on the money. I raised a hand, “They’re gouging you, aren’t they?”

Tera turned side to side, “Daniel, drop it. Please.”

I didn’t use my perception like this as I rarely felt the need. At this moment, the demand arose, however. Drawing from my multiple minds, I considered Tera’s words and motivations. I listened to his pulse, sensed his sweat, and witnessed his gravitational ripples. Another mind spoke out as they all communicated in sync,

“So they’re taking your quest rewards. You wouldn’t do that unless you had to. They’ve got something you don’t want them to take, like a family, guild, a village, I don’t know.”

As I spoke, his heart rate spiked at the mention of family and village. I nodded, “You’re working for them to protect your people.” My eyes widened, “Wait... You’re a servant?”

Tera blinked as I pried information from him he didn’t want to share. He wasn’t the only one surprised. A Manifold Mind synergized with my Hunter of Many skill, a perception-based, mythical tier ability of mine. They gave me a clear picture of everything. With the extra mana working in my favor, I grasped the situation and its inner workings with precision and speed as well.

It gave me an eerie, almost inhuman understanding of what happened around me. It kind of scared me, actually. Tera remained unaware of this inner shift, thinking I was just an ass. He was probably right about that. He whispered at me, but his words fumed like glowing embers,

“Why are you doing this? What did I do to deserve this interrogation?”

I whisper yelled back, “You helped me. I want to help you.”

We kept whispering as Tera snapped, “Yes, you’re right. I’m a servant. That’s all I’ve ever been. Does that please you that the great Speaker who looked down on you is nothing more than a tool? Is that what you wanted to hear?”

I frowned, “No, that sucks. I’m not prying because I want to embarrass you. I want to understand so I can help.”

His eyes narrowed, “Help me for what? My mission was automated from Schema. I didn’t do it because I wanted to.”

I shook my head, “I’m not thankful for that. You gave me that vial of eldritch energy. Without it, I don’t know if I would’ve survived.”

His thorny brows furrowed as he scoffed, "I might as well have thrown you some trash I had on hand. No, I did throw you trash. You know that, right?"

I stared at him with an unbending will, "One man's trash is another man's treasure."

He raised his hands, "You're going to get me punished."

I crossed my arms, "No, I'm not. Besides, you helped me. I aim to repay you because you didn't have to, yet you did."

Tera raised his hands to me in frustration, "Then repay me by ceasing this line of questioning and let me be."

"No."

He shook his hands, "What is wrong with you?"

I parroted back, "No, what's wrong with you?"

"A cataclysmic world ender is scrounging in my business. That's what's wrong with me."

I pointed at him, "What's wrong with you is that you won't let me help you out."

"I'm not going to be put into another contract or arrangement for someone else. Never again. Not for you. Not Schema. Not Baldowah if he calls. No one."

"You think I need a contract to help you here? I'm helping you regardless."

Tera rolled his eyes, "I'm sure the great and mighty Harbinger just gives out gifts like this."

I narrowed my eyes, "Oh, you just wait. I'm going to help the shit out of you."

At this point, our voice rose until several nearby albony stared at us. One of the wealthiest ones paced up, his armor mirroring Obolis's graphene plating. Old and vulnerable, this albony wore a black mask with a noble voice. He turned to Tera, "Is this peasant bothering you, Harbinger? We can have him punished and taken off the premise if you'd like."

He spoke the wrong words in the wrong order, let me tell you. That being said, it was because he mistook our discussion as an argument. Maybe it was, but I wasn't actually mad at Tera, just frustrated. I turned to the old albony, my form looming like the shadow of a mountain,

"No, that won't be necessary. He and I are having a talk."

Under his well-stained mask, the old albony smirked. He believed the social pressure of the situation stopped me from punishing this servant. The albony turned a hand to me, "We assure you, there won't be any complaints from us should we need to have him reminded of his position. Someone, take him outside."

He put a hand on my shoulder, acting like we were familiar. I grabbed his hand with a gravity well, wrenching it off, "Oh no, there's no need to remind him of anything. Actually, he's an old friend of mine, so let me remind you that when you speak to him, you're speaking in part to me."

I stood over a head taller than him, "That means threatening Tera is threatening me. In case you needed to know, I don't require reminders of my position or punishments for speaking. Not from you. Not from anyone."

The old albony flushed in embarrassment as his face flared bright red under his fur. Before the conversation continued further, my minds came together as they had with Tera. They observed close enough that I saw right through this old albony. His shame shriveled into fear as his blood rushed from his face to his stomach.

I could tell by the shifting pressure in his vessels, each beat of his heart pounding in my ears like a drum. He raised a hand with a single finger upright as if he had a witty retort. I called out his false courage, tilting my head at him. My questioning glare fizzled any response he had. My helmet remained on, but the slit shifted up with an expression all its own. This albony, whoever it was, understood my disdain. That killed his courage, and he could no longer speak out.

Even in the heated moment, it stunned me how much information I could gain by listening closely. The albony's bodily reactions, the rate of his pulse, even the tension in his veins, I sensed it all. I mean, I formed a picture of him without needing vision, but I'd simply never understood just how much detail I could render in that theoretical picture.

From that mental image and its intricacies, it became simple to gain information. It was like this with Tera earlier. Florence remarked on this exact circumstance an hour ago; I could uncover what people wanted to hide if I observed closely. I never considered it, but higher leveled people experienced this dominance at all times. This tangible difference in ability, I perceived it now, and once recognized, it became undeniable.

This nobleman, who wielded a high station, was rendered helpless as a child because of my stats. His inner thoughts leaked out in ways he couldn't control, so I understood him. My multiple minds allowed me to inspect those hidden messages, and my increased processing meant I thought out my every action.

By comparison, this albony reacted to me. It was a game rigged in my favor now. Combine that with my physical superiority, and he was at my mercy. This absurd ability gave me an electric thrill from its hidden potential. In other ways, it terrified me. My current actions explained why people treated high-level classes with respect bordering reverence. Abusing this difference felt wrong. It made me wonder what kind of person I'd be if I exploited it. Maybe another Yawm? Perhaps a Lehesion? I listened to those fears in the back of my mind because I didn't want to be that kind of person. Following that instinct, I raised a hand,

"Look, we got off on the wrong foot. You misspoke because you didn't understand the situation. I get that because I've done the same thing plenty of times. Let's just reset."

A wave of relief, palpable as water, washed over the older albony as he nodded, "Oh, most certainly. Do excuse my transgression. I never would've anticipated you two had met. Now Tera, why didn't you speak of this?"

Tera's squeezed a scaly fist, "I...I didn't know we knew each other. I didn't recognize him."

A quiet fury brimmed under the older albony's words, "Oh, of course. We all forget things from time to time. You're more than forgiven for such a simple slight."

Based on his tone, the albony acted as the person in charge of Tera, and I searched through the memorized list Florence gave me. I connected this albony with the name Phillip Novas. He matched the picture and description in my status. He was a general who retired after getting Obolis another planet under his repertoire.

Phillip accomplished the feat by bankrupting the planet instead of fighting it, saving Obolis countless troops. That put him in a very high position in the Empire. There were still members higher up than him, and one of those people stepped up – Obolis himself. The Emperor spread out his hands, casual as could be,

“I overheard the conversation while I inspected the vast number of treasures on display. Excuse my interruption, but is there a problem?”

My manifold minds kept humming at a rapid pace. The treasures. That’s why Obolis was so slow to respond. He oozed over the merchandise so much that his attention lapsed. Otherwise, he’d have intervened well before now, given his general perception. He made a mistake from greed, essentially, and I noted that weakness.

Mistake or not, Phillips exuded terror as he spread his hands, “There’s absolutely no issue to be had here. I spoke out of turn, and the Harbinger gave me a wealth of understanding despite my transgression. I simply must apologize again for my indiscretion.”

Obolis spoke like steel, “As you should.”

If Phillip feared me, he writhed in terror at the Emperor. Obolis kept his gaze on the retired general, melting the older albony like butter in a roaring bonfire. He was the Carnage of Olstatia, after all. He earned that name in Schema’s eyes. Phillip was all too aware, but before Phillip’s skin peeled off, I raised a hand,

“Hey, we’re good. He misunderstood the situation. Don’t worry about it.”

In all honesty, it wasn’t alright, but I didn’t want to press the issue right now. I’d save that for later after I talked things out with Tera. Unexpectedly, Obolis missed my lie as he placed a hand on my shoulder, “Thank you for your forgiveness. I’d have intervened earlier, but I was simply caught up in my viewing of your exotics. Please, excuse me as well.”

He gave me a slight bow, and the other albony gawked in stunned amazement. Their eyes turned back to me, and I raised my hands to my defense, “Hey, let’s let bygones be bygones. I’m going to go talk to Tera, and you guys continue enjoying the party. Please.”

The Emperor raised an eyebrow, “Are you certain?”

I was wrong. Obolis had seen right through my lie and wanted to settle it now. I met his eye, “I’m positive. Besides, we can always talk later.”

Obolis pulled his hand back, “Then it’s settled. Everyone, continue as you were.”

And as if the Emperor cast a spell on the crowd, they did exactly as he said, to the T. I held back my surprise as people chatted away with practiced comfort, some people beginning to laugh at old stories already. The sheer change acted like a surreal reversal.

They obeyed Obolis absolutely. He was the Carnage of Olstatia indeed.

I raised my brows behind my helmet, “Man, they’re good actors.”

Tera mumbled, “It’s much easier to truly listen when your life is on the line.”

I put my hands on my hips, “Speaking of lives, let’s go talk about yours for a minute.”

Tera’s fangs slid against each other as if he ground his teeth together,

“Even if you give me temporary assistance, it won’t change my position. I am under the albony still, and now their ire will end up berating me over the coming months. I will suffer because you had to speak out, and for what? Your own satisfaction.”

He seethed, “That’s easy to do when you’re not the one who will pay the price for it. My family will pay in your stead for this. All of them.”

I smiled, “Come on, let’s go talk somewhere else. It’s time I made good on my offers. You know, help.”

He leaned over, “At this rate, your help will be the death of me.”

We paced towards Torix’s lair, “Oh, we’ll see about that.”

### Chapter 307: The Past and Present

I pointed Tera towards the set of stairs leading to Torix’s lair. Tera followed me in a nervous trot. Once up the stairs, we found Torix still reading with his eyes plastered to a book. Little did he know I did the same. I waved a hand at the lich, “Hey, do you mind casting your silencing magic over one of the rooms in the temple? Maybe one with a view?”

Torix raised his hands and snapped his fingers, “On the uppermost floor, third room on the left.”

I thanked him before Tera and I walked up. The skeptilian mercenary kneaded his hands out of nervousness, but I waved away his concerns, “You’ll be fine to talk as you like once we’re in the room, and there won’t be any consequences for it. I’ll make sure of that.”

Tera listened but chose to stay silent. Whether out of fear or respect, I couldn’t say. We crossed a hallway, a flight of stairs, and reached the room covered in Torix’s silencing magic. Once inside, Tera and I stepped up to a view of Saphigia. It was an ancient opening designed for the flow of water into the building. There, Tera and I rested with a full view of our surroundings.

Hybrids remained in the foreground, but they no longer lingered. Elysium called them back towards vessels siphoning them elsewhere. They carried their dead and dying, along with other on-field supplies. We watched this retreat while I said,

“So, you continue to serve the Empire. Why?”

Tera stared down at the Hybrids, “They own us.”

“Us...You mean the skeptiles?”

“They conquered our planet long ago. We’ve been under their imperial subservience since.”

A manifolded mind searched my memory. Something popped up. After first leaving BloodHollow, I fought two mercenaries scrounging in a low-level dungeon. They hunted for easy dungeon cores, ones they could then sell on the black market for credits. Their status showed they were petty scavengers at the time, so I managed to kill them despite them boasting a level lead.

Unlike them, Tera was different. He was the first classer I ever saw, so I held him in higher regard. In the end, the Empire and Schema found no difference between them. I frowned,

“You couldn’t escape subservience even when you’re capped and have a class?”

Tera gave me a sardonic smile, his teeth like needles, “You would be amazed at how binding contracts can be when desperation and blood are the ink used to sign them.”

I tilted my head, “How’s that?”

“I’m surprised you know so little about a faction you’re allied with.”

I stared down, wincing at his words, “Yeah, so am I.”

Tera waved his clawed hands, “It doesn’t matter. The Empire used standard tactics on our species. We bordered on becoming a fringe world, so they offered protection. We neglected their offer at first, but when the threat of glassing loomed overhead, we signed away our planet and our people.”

He let his palm clap against the stone railing, “And now this is what we’ve been reduced to. Servants.”

I shook my head, “Damn. I didn’t know.”

He shook his head, “You don’t have to apologize to me. I understand your position better than most. You were only a normal person a few years ago. This must all be

unsettling, and the Empire must've been one of the only factions offering anything to you. Of course you'd take their deal. And just so you're aware, most large factions aren't any different from them. You shouldn't judge them too harshly. They are not overtly cruel to us. Not usually."

I guess being a gouging, autocratical asshole wasn't so bad as long as everybody was doing it. Choosing to bring it up later, I nodded,

"What I'm wondering is how the Empire still has you serving them despite your position. I mean, you're a classer. Doesn't that mean something?"

His face contorted in pain, "Ah, you... You lack perspective. I must remind myself of that."

"Did I say something rude?"

"Yes. You did, and you're right. Being a classer means something. I'm tied to the albony because I wished for my clan to be free, as you estimated. For them to remain unshackled, I've pledged servitude to the albony. I work for the albony now, and they pay me a modest stipend."

I gazed at his variety of tools, "Ah, so that's why your tools are from eldritch."

He narrowed his eyes, "I am too poor to afford the proper gear. Thank you for the reminder."

I gave him a thumbs-up, "Hey, it's what I'm here for."

Tera's grim mood cracked, and he let out a small laugh, "Hah. I told you the same sort of thing when we first talked. You even mentioned how uncomfortable my own words were at the time. I guess I deserved that."

I smiled, "Yeah, but you still gave me that vial of eldritch energy. I have to admit, it really changed my circumstances back then. I'm willing to do the same for you."

Tera's eyes narrowed, "What do you mean?"

“I’m willing to offer a new host planet for your village, along with a position in my guild.”

Tera’s jaw slackened. He raised his hands, his claws shaking, “What? Really?”

“Yup.”

“This isn’t necessary. I’m satisfied with my arrangement. You don’t have to do that.”

I raised an eyebrow, “You have no reason to feel fear right now. You helped me once, and I aim to return the favor.”

Tera blinked, “That was a vial of eldritch energy. I held it to throw away for a Fringe Walker I worked under.”

I sighed, “Here’s the thing – you remind me of myself in a lot of ways. I just finished working with Schema, and he gave us nothing for battling his war. We were being taken advantage of, and I wasn’t able to move forward because of that. You’re like that right now.”

I raised a fist, “I don’t have to sit by and watch you wallow in that kind of state anymore. I can change circumstances if I so choose, and I want to.”

Tera shook his head, “I’m worried you don’t understand my position. You’re going to put yourself in another war, but this time with the Empire.”

“Are you that big a player in their guild?”

“It’s as you’ve said. I accomplish a lot but am left with little. They skim off all that excess, and I doubt they’ll want to throw away that advantage.”

I narrowed my eyes, “They will.”

Tera gave up, letting his hands drop to his sides. Resigned to his fate, he shook his head at me, “You’re a raging eldritch in conversation, you know that?”

I peered off, “Thanks for the compliment. Here’s a friend request. Send me the details of your current employer and all that. I’ll hand it off to Torix to get you and your village squared away.”

Tera watched me with a look of wonder on his face, “You’re more kind than you let on.”

I grimaced as Hybrids carried the corpses of fallen Elysium soldiers, “Eh, we can agree to disagree there.”

We gazed off at the view for a while. My reach, despite my lack of sight, was well beyond my expectations. The vibrations in the ground, the temperature shifts from variances in light, even the currents streaming, it fell into my comprehension. I kept my face oriented that way as Tera gave me a bow,

“Thank you, Harbinger. I must be off. My lord is calling. If you don’t wish to follow through with all this, I won’t hold any animosity against you...Unless you don’t stop the repercussions, of course.”

I gave him a curt nod, and he left. Leaning on the edge of the temple’s opening, I contemplated. If there was one thing Tera was right about, it was my lack of knowledge regarding my allies, my enemies, and my everything, really. It left me with a bad taste in my mouth.

I stared down at my hands, as I often did when I wondered about what I’d done up till now. At times, I felt like a fool way in over his head. I allied with the Empire without fully understanding their methods, though I signed on out of necessity at the time. I could’ve at least researched them first and tried to understand what they were trying to do.

Yet, I hadn’t, and because of that, killing Plazia would support the Empire and their methods. Those weren’t procedures I agreed with, though they seemed better than Elysium at least. I also neglected so much of my potential by misusing my mana. I always, at all times, poured it into my cipheric markings. This paid dividends over time, granting me a lot of stats.

But, the price for that proved dear. I stunted my processing speed for tasks all the time up until now. That inability to see past my own nose was precisely why I was so inept. Something that enormous, that groundbreaking, lay at my feet, and I walked all over it instead of picking it up. I was an idiot. An imbecile. An oaf.

I tried punching myself in the face. Forgetting my helmet was on, the echo from steel on steel grated my ears while the force of the tap shook the temple. More frustration mounted. Even that might've interrupted the party below, and my irritation just mounted even more. It was like I was given a gift I couldn't even fully comprehend.

And in my ignorance, I wasted it.

My own powers exceeded my competence to use them. Hell, even my intelligence exceeded my ability to use it, if that even made sense. I mean, I always understood I wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed, but I never took myself for a fool. This and my other mistakes made all of that obvious.

These thoughts about my lack of foresight lingered as I stared at Elysium's retreat. At least with them leaving, I could get this place up and running, along with Earth. I found some peace in that, and my self-loathing waned.

Minutes passed before a pair of footsteps tapped along the cold stone of the Vagni temple. They sounded behind me, but I didn't turn my gaze, inspecting the gravitation and finding the outline of a guild member. More precisely, a soldier, one equipped with an Omega Strain. Turning to them, I got a better look via my other senses.

He wore a ring of my making along with many scars on his face and hands. He was an engineer of some kind, signified by his more conventional clothing, but his eyes hardened from the many battles he'd been through. Even if he stayed in the back to build structures, he still faced the Hybrids time and time again. It gave him a piercing sort of look, one that didn't drift from eye contact.

Taking off his hat and holding it in his hands, he spoke up, "Hello, sir. Are you busy?"

I was always busy, but I had plenty of excess 'mind' left to spare at the moment. I shook my head,

“I’ve got time to talk. What’s on your mind?”

He remained there, nervousness oozing out of the poor guy. Even sitting down, my head rose over his, and I struck an imposing figure, no doubt. That was one of the worst parts of the armor I wore. People never walked up and talked to me, at least not your average person. This was an exception, as this soldier had resolved himself to speak to me.

I wasn’t going to ignore how much will it took just to walk up, especially after my temple shaking head tap. I gestured to the windowsill for him to sit, and he followed through with the nonverbal suggestion as if it were a spoken order. He coughed into his hand, “I heard your argument with Spear.”

“You did? What did you think about it?”

I kept my tone light as I spoke. Getting an average person’s perspective might have given me some insight into the situation. This soldier offered that as he took a breath,

“Well...I wanted to talk to you about what the Sentinel said about you. I know you did your best to talk about our guild and what you’ve done, but it didn’t seem right to me.”

Oh, I was well aware of my shortcomings at this point, but I figured why not add some more to the mix. I turned a hand to him,

“How so?”

“It’s a lot to talk about, but to make a long story short, you’ve done a lot more than you said you did.”

A sad smile traced my lips, “You might be putting me on a pedestal.”

“I’m not. I just know what I’ve seen and what it’s been like since the Schema arrived. I lost a lot of my family during the tutorial, both my grandparents, my wife, and my children. It was a terrible thing. I was lost for a few weeks before I ended up joining the Steel Legion.”

And I thought my situation was hard. My brow furrowed,

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

He rubbed his nose, “It’s still hard to talk about, but it happened. I’m dealing with it, and I dealt with it the best I could by staying busy. The Steel Legion helped a lot with that. We gave everyone a refuge right after the initial chaos of Schema’s transition. That all changed when Yawm landed in Springfield.”

His eyes stared into a distant memory, “It was...it was awful. Horror. Corpses. Infection. I had to put down a lot of good people during those times, and their twisted faces still haunt me.”

“But you had to do it. There was no way to save them. I know because I did the same.”

“I ended up thinking the same thing. That’s what kept me going after it all went down. Back then, we kept losing people in droves before Torix came along and organized our guild. After that, our losses cut to a half and kept dropping until they barely trickled in.”

“Torix is incredible, no doubt.”

“But he wasn’t the only reason our losses cut down so much. I still remember you standing there, telling all of us that we didn’t need to fear the eldritch or Yawm. You told us that they weren’t devouring us. We were devouring them. It was a simple idea at the time. We take in experience when they die, and that makes us stronger as if we ate them.”

“It was definitely simple.”

He pointed at me, “But powerful ideas are in simple packages. I never thought of my situation like that. Having someone larger than life tell me about how the eldritch were afraid of even me? It never crossed my mind, but it changed how I thought about them forever. It took my fear and made it mine.”

I flushed, a bit embarrassed by the compliments, “Yeah. That was one of the more visceral speeches I’ve given.”

The soldier swung his fist, “And it lit us up like you wouldn’t believe. I ran in there, and we killed a whole slew of solar beetles and these abominable painting monsters. It really drove home that even if we were small, we could do a lot if we set our mind to it...That is until we saw Yawm.”

His eyes darkened, “And that’s when I felt hopeless again. He nearly blew us up in atomic fire. He was overwhelming, like a wrath-fueled god walking onto our planet to destroy us. We’d never have salvaged anything from that situation if it wasn’t for you and your team.”

I shook my head, “I’m the reason he arrived, to begin with.”

“I’ve heard it from Torix. He explained it all to us, as did Althea. You did what you had to do to survive. You couldn’t have known. Gosh, we’ve all done the same. And, and since then, look at all the good you’ve managed to do.”

Thinking of all my mistakes, I crossed my arms, “I think there was more that I could’ve done.”

The soldier stood up, his voice rising, “And that’s just it. I can’t sit by and watch you talk about yourself like that. Since we escaped Yawm, you’ve gone to other worlds, saved three species from being tools, and you made sure we were kept safe in the meantime.”

“Three species?”

“Yeah. Us humans from Yawm, the gialgathens from Elysium, and the Vagni from the eldritch.”

I never thought about it that way. The nameless soldier threw up his hand, “I’d never have done what you did, but that’s because I wouldn’t have bothered. You rose above, put yourself at the frontlines the whole time, and you stood up for what you believed in. You shouldn’t feel ashamed about that.”

I never thought of myself like this. It was surprising to hear anyone did. The soldier raised both his hands, reaching out, “I’m sure you’ve made some mistakes, sir, but we

all have. You'd done a damn good job of making up for them, whatever they were. Spear spoke like he and Schema never made a mistake in their lives, but I can promise you--

His voice cut sharp, fizzling out as he squeezed his hands. He shook as he spoke, "I can promise you they have. I lost my family because we weren't worth their time. Now they're asking us to keep giving until we have nothing. If it wasn't for this guild, we wouldn't have anything left to give. We'd all be dead or worse."

His eyes watered before he calmed himself down. He took a deep breath and nodded at me, "I just had to say that. Thank you for all that you've done for us. Thank you for giving me a home."

My eyes burned as he gave me a salute before walking off. I meant to catch his name, but he left before I processed what he said to me. Once away, he left behind a heaviness and lightness all the same. On the one hand, he showed me my actions carried consequences. On the other hand, not all those consequences were bad.

Many of them were good.

I found myself understanding his dilemma as well. He wallowed in guilt from surviving. From the outside looking in, he showed admirable grit and determination. I admired that drive to live, and he shouldn't have felt bad about what happened after Yawm landed. He did what he had to do, and in a way, I think he was trying to tell me the same.

It left me uplifted. Mistakes or not, I'd be able to help out my guild after killing Plazia. I stood tall while walking back into the celebration below. Passing Torix, I walked down the stairwell and found the party dying down. Obolis kept inspecting the goods, being the only one still doing so. The Emperor chatted away with a golem, keeping himself immersed in his fervent study of the items. Florence entertained guests with Hod, the both of them acting as a dynamic duo. That's why the party lingered at all. Other pockets still existed, however.

Amara spoke with the razor queens, discussing the merits of different meats. I paced up to several of the groups, walking back and forth between different cliques. Despite their rocky introduction, I preferred the razor queens to the albony royals. These aristocrats came across as haughty, entitled brats to me, though I decided against telling them that.

However, I admit I cut them off on more than one occasion when they said something stupid, shortsighted, or entitled.

Ok, I might've even relished doing so. Sue me.

Either way, it was amazing how little a person could think when they came from wealth and privilege like that. Of course, not all of the albony acted like this. A few demonstrated determination and grit, going back and forth with me in conversation. I starred those people in my contacts, knowing how valuable certain people could be. Ophelia, Florence, and Helios acted as prime examples.

By comparison, the razor queens stuck out like a quirky, offbeat group of eldritch. This gave them an endearing weirdness, one that instilled in me more motivation to take out Plazia-Ruhl. At a bare minimum, I'd be helping out a group of lovable weirdos. They got me interested in their culture and home planet as well. It sounded like a desolate place, but it would be different at the very least.

These finishing talks made for a successful ending to the event. Florence wrapped it up with an announcement along with taking any offers for the merchandise someone might have. Florence sent me the list, which I sent to Torix, and he'd hand me the best offers of the bunch after doing research whenever he found the time.

All in all, I gained more from thinking during the party than the actual party itself. Counting my victories where I could, I helped Florence lead the albony and razor queens towards our warping pad at the center of the city. Quests or not, the AI still gave us this necessity, so I gave him some credit where it was due.

Before everyone departed, I tapped the Emperor on the shoulder before he stepped through his own portal. He turned to me, his gaze curious, "Ah, what do you need?"

"Do you mind having a quick chat?"

"Not at all."

He took his foot from the polished floor of his study before putting his boot back onto the sandy stone of Blegara. With my own guild busy and his having left, we stood in a courtyard where my soldiers darted around for various tasks. In that throng of activity, I raised a hand,

“I just wanted to touch on my conversation earlier.”

His eyes widened, “Ah, the one with Phillip. I’ll ensure he understands the full repercussions of what occurred. I can assure you of that.”

“I can talk with him in private if I need to. I’m more concerned with the skeptilian I spoke with, Tera.”

“So you weren’t saving his life when you spoke of him being an old friend then? The galaxy is smaller than it appears at times. I didn’t hear the rest of your conversation or its initial parts, as your presence dissipated entirely afterward. Magic, I assume.”

“You’re right. I spoke with him about being contracted under the Empire. I wanted to buy out the contract, along with his village. What’s your price?”

A sly grin cropped up on the Emperor’s scarred face, “Oh, Tera? He’s not for sale.”

#### Chapter 308: A New Dawn

“You’re right. I spoke with him about being contracted under the Empire. I wanted to buy out the contract, along with his village. What’s your price?”

A sly grin cropped up on the Emperor’s scarred face, “Oh, Tera? He’s not for sale.”

I leaned back, “What? Of course he’s not for sale. I’m talking about the contract.”

Obolis rolled his eyes. “The difference between the two is negligible. Tera is an enormous pool of potential value, and while I understand your misgivings with our methods, I can’t offer him to you without excessive compensation.”

Several minds kicked into action, as before. The fluidity of the process came through better this time, making me less clunky and stunted. I turned a hand,

“Then there’s got to be a price you’re willing to accept.”

Obolis furrowed his brow, “That’s the issue at hand; his value far exceeds what you believe it is. For that reason, the prices I’d state are unwieldy for you. At this time, that is.”

I raised my brow, “Try me.”

“Would you offer me all the treasure you gained from this ceasefire with Elysium?”

I took a sharp breath, understanding that he wasn’t playing ‘Mr. Nice Emperor’ anymore. I crossed my arms, “Ok...justify that demand.”

“Gladly. Tera is a Speaker who capped his level. He’s a member of the skeptilian race, giving him a natural affinity for arcane magic. This sorcerous potential gives him a similar combative ability to a Breaker but with the logistical strength of a Speaker. That combination is invaluable.”

I frowned, “You could just send in a Breaker and a Speaker in place of him. Now I’m all for classers and their powers, but I’m well aware their wages wouldn’t amount to that treasure over there. Don’t try to play me here.”

Obolis raised his palms, knowing he was pressing a nerve, “While I understand your hesitation, you must also understand what Tera has accomplished under Phillip’s instruction. Almost single-handedly, Tera gained the Empire another planet.”

Remembering Tera’s misgivings over his titles, I clicked together a few pieces of my previous conversation with Tera. He was a World Breaker. Based on what Obolis just said, the World Breaker title didn’t mean Tera literally shattered a world. He could’ve broken a planet in other ways. Putting two and two together, I gave Obolis a slow nod,

“Ah, so that’s what happened. Tera bankrupted another large guild on a planet. He made the world go ‘broke,’ so to speak, giving him his title. That’s also why Phillip is in the position he’s in; Tera earned it for him. That’s impressive. I’m guessing you came in and took over the world by buying out their debts?”

Obolis’s eyes widened, “Well, well, perceptive, aren’t you? That’s correct. Tera gained us Absolon-78 by collapsing their economy. It was a genuine display of genius, and that’s why I can’t hand him over without absurd payment.”

I tilted my head, “That explains why Phillip didn’t seem that well put together despite wearing a black mask. Compared to Florence or Helios, he’s underwhelming by comparison.”

Obolis winced a bit at my words, the Emperor well aware of that issue, “You noticed that, hm? It’s a shame that he’s misrepresenting the Empire’s lofty impression, but I must reward the subjects who reward me. Otherwise, motivations may plummet, and few would serve me well in turn.”

“Then why not reward Tera? He’s the one who did all of that. Not Phillip.”

Obolis sighed, “Alas, the Empire is constructed with the alby at its center. To maintain order, I give the rights of lesser planets to my family members. Their management allows those planets to prosper, and what their subjects reap goes to the rulers above them. That is why Phillip wears the mask he does, even if his character doesn’t suit its expectations.”

“But by giving the rewards to the alby, you end up in a system where many people succeeding aren’t actually compensated. If you bend that system, even a little, many talented people will pop out of the woodworks. They’d want to achieve more because they would get what they deserve instead of helping those above them. It’s not that complicated, honestly.”

Obolis gave me a knowing smile, “Your idealism is admirable, if not infectious at times. However, you lack the perspective to understand why I do what I do. Until you gain that context, I would reserve judgments.”

I rolled my hand, “Lay it on me then. Let’s hear out those circumstances.”

“To put it concisely, all other large guilds employ these same tactics. If I neglect to use them, I end up well behind their curve of growth. Once behind, my guild would be susceptible to invasion by the eldritch and more. If I wasn’t pragmatic during the Empire’s inception, I’d have lost many of my worlds by now. I fear I would cease to own any planets at all, not even my own homeworld.”

Obolis raised his eyebrows, “And surely you understand how devastating that may be. Once owned, a race may be demoted to subservience, and it is a cruel fate. Through my

maneuvering, I saved my own kind from that outcome. You may need to do the same for your own species, lest they become the prey of some other guild.”

Remembering Earth’s inadequate infrastructure, I nodded, but I wasn’t quite finished with my point. I raised a hand, “Yes, but those tactics may not be necessary anymore now that you’re established. If you think about it, by continuing to put the albony on top, you’ve weakened the loyalty of those you’re ruling. It comes across as unfair. That lacking loyalty is why you’re experiencing a rebellion right now.”

I pursed my lips, “If you took a different approach, then you might not be in this war at all.”

Obolis shook his head, “Once again, your words are put together well, but they neglect the context of our situation. To maintain the Empire at all, I’ve resorted to unscrupulous tactics in the past. While I’ve attempted reconciling with those methods, I could never fully realize my reforms.”

I raised an eyebrow, “So what went haywire?”

He spread his hands, “Eldritch would spiral out of control along with crime and discord. The planets under my wing would become proxy to other factions, and for continued governance, we’ve used harsh strategies. I would mention that we are, in fact, less stringent than many other large guilds. That laxness is why planets such as Blegara were lost.”

We disagreed there. I fought on Blegara, and the Empire never thought of the Vagni as anything more than local barbarians. While they were primitive, the Vagni held a culture with art, buildings, and even religions. Despite those signs of civility, the Empire restricted the Vagni from leveling properly. Many issues popped up because of those restrictions.

Being all too aware of that, I raised a hand, “You sure about that’s why Blegara fell? I saw the Vagni, and they were highly underleveled in Schema’s system.”

Obolis shrugged, “They’d yet to earn our trust, and by restricting them, we stopped their rebellion from being as powerful.”

I waved my hands, “I’m thinking the opposite happened. The Vagni never gained any attachment to Schema or his system because they weren’t allowed to engage in it. That meant when Elysium arrived, the Vagni had nothing to lose when they switched sides. Since you actively suppressed the Vagni, they lacked loyalty for you and your ruling as well.”

Obolis frowned, “The Vagni are only ‘loyal’ to the eldritch. That incessant refusal to move past worshipping monsters is why we restricted them in the first place. Our policies were more lenient in other territories, but we can’t be expected to grant support to a people that serve our enemies. They’d have rallied behind the eldritch and led to Blegara’s glassing.”

Obolis crossed his arms, “And so, I enacted a necessary evil. You do raise a good point of domesticating the natives, but unfortunately, the planet was a mismanagement of resources from the beginning. I shouldn’t have attempted to conquer it at all. That’s one of the reasons I gave this planet to you. Your skillset enables you to control wilder places such as this, just as you controlled the eldritch.”

He wasn’t wrong about that. The eldritch responded to me well, even if they feared me. That alone gave me a different tool kit than Obolis, and those options are why I succeeded where he hadn’t. Obolis put a hand to his chest,

“On the other hand, I am more equipped to dominate developed areas. This is because economic tactics work well in civilized societies. That is also why I value Tera so highly; he’s proven effective at utilizing those monetary means in the past. Given his history of excellent service, he’s likely to do so in the future. These factors are why he’s worth more than most.”

Obolis frowned, “And that is why I can’t hand him over for minor gains. He has won us too much territory for too little investment.”

I raised a hand, “But how much of that territory was really yours?”

Confusion spread over Obolis’s face, “I would imagine all of it, by Schema’s standards at least.”

I gestured around us, “But at the end of the day, you couldn’t command the people or monsters here. That’s because a planet is more than just a place. It’s the people living on a planet too. If you never get those people on your side, then the planet isn’t really

yours. That's why I worked with the eldritch on Blegara instead of exterminating them. I wanted to win over the Vagni instead of controlling them."

I squeezed my raised hand into a fist, "That is what's crumbling your Empire's grasp. You have to get people on your side, not force them under your heel. You understood that with the albony, and they offered you reverence and respect in turn. I've seen that with every albony that's ever been around you. Now you have to extend that to other people, even if it only starts with the talented few who happen to rise up."

I offered the Emperor a hand, "A talented few, like Tera."

A smile crept over the Emperor's face while he narrowed his eyes at me, "Well now, that was a rousing speech. Tell me, what inspired you?"

I put my hands on my hips, "Nothing. I just said what I thought."

The Emperor tilted his head while looking me over, "Oh, but I disagree. You've changed since we last spoke at length. You're putting yourself together far better, and you're more convincing. Did you gain a new skill? Perhaps you unlocked some skill tree for persuasion, hm?"

"I'll leave you with that mystery, but my point still stands."

He scoffed, "Ah, well, I do enjoy an enigma from time to time." He took a breath, "Now, regarding your points, they're interesting. However, my current administration would've never collapsed without the input of Elysium. They are the sole reason that these rebels gained any traction at all. There's little I could've done to prevent this attack."

I shook my head, "But see, I don't think that's true. Those policies you mentioned made Blegara a vulnerable target. That's why they attacked you. You showed them a soft underbelly, and Elysium bit into it."

Obolis raised his brow, "And you believe other factions are different? They, too, would've crumbled under the stress of both the eldritch and Elysium. In the end, our predicament is the result of misfortune more so than mistakes."

I spread my hands, “But that’s my point. If your guild needs good fortune to maintain itself, then you’re relying on luck to maintain it. If no one wanted to rebel on your planets, I doubt Elysium’s current push would be as successful. Those strong-arm tactics are backfiring.”

Obolis leaned back, considering what I said. While he deliberated, I pressed my point,

“So with Tera, you can take this for what it is – a first step to making your guild more solid. It isn’t as if Tera would be ungrateful for this new opportunity either. He could tell his story and inspire others to do the same. I can have Torix show you some of the media practices we use for our own guild even.”

Obolis laughed at that before waving his hand, “We have a media team of our own. We lack the need for oversight from Torix, though the offer’s appreciated.”

“Either way, I’m willing to offer a trade that can help you in more ways than one.”

Obolis pointed his finger at me, “I can see it now – you’ve unlocked a mental skill of some kind. I can’t understand how it works yet, but I will decipher it.”

I sighed before peering at Obolis, “Can you stop deflecting the conversation? Give me some of your thoughts. Come on. Talk to me here.”

Obolis interlocked his hands behind himself. He paced back and forth for a while, contemplating or pretending to. Once sorted out, he came to me and turned a palm, “I do wish to maintain our alliance, and I know you’ve made some kind of promise or arrangement with Tera. That much is obvious, and your pride is on the line.”

“His life is on the line based on what he’s said about Phillip.”

“Regardless, you’re asking me to give away a planet earner for what, exactly? A favor? Perhaps a single treasure? I can’t afford to do that, especially when my own guild is currently being ransacked by an enemy faction, the strongest of which Schema has ever seen.”

His voice rose towards the end of what he said. It was the most riled-up I'd ever seen Obolis. He cooled off, "So, understand what I'm dealing with and what you're asking for. Please, do me that service."

I frowned, "Well, you're definitely not wrong about that. How about this then – I'll take the rights to Tera and his clan in exchange for the ahcorus mission."

Obolis raised his eyebrows, "Really now? You're willing to face a world-eating horror for just skeptiles? You do understand they amount to little more than backwater savages, don't you?"

I winced at the phrase backwater savages, but I pressed on,

"Here's what I do know: Tera has potential. If he does, then there are other skeptiles like him that do as well. Even if they come from some underdeveloped place, that doesn't mean they won't be the next avatar of an Old One."

Obolis smirked, "But based on statistics, we know where an outlier is far more likely to form."

"Sure, but you'll miss some of those outliers if you look at people as just 'backwater savages,' don't you think?"

Obolis leaned back, "Can you name a counterexample?"

I pointed a thumb back, "My whole team, including me."

Obolis inspected my city for a moment, "Touche."

"Remember, there are others like us out there. If you never allow them to showcase their abilities, you'll never know they have them." I rubbed the back of my helmet, "But, you know, I'm not ruling ten plus planets. Take my words with a grain of salt."

Obolis contemplated before giving me a curt nod, "I've thought of this before now many times. Others have even discussed it, but you offer more than words. You are a

living example of your idealism coming to fruition. That's why I'm even entertaining this discussion."

He smiled, "I'll accept your deal of the ahcorus's aid for Tera and his clan. Despite granting you an elemental furnace, we both understood that simply wasn't enough of a reward for facing Plazia. I'd intended on a different payment, but this will do nicely."

Obolis shook his head while furrowing his brow, "So do what you must for them, though don't voice complaints of their worth to me once they're under you. Also, don't expect the skeptiles to be as agreeable or as cultured as my own kin. They are brutish, but you'll uncover that soon enough."

I raised a palm, "I need to know a few things first. How large is Tera's clan?"

Obolis's eyes widened before he burst into a spate of hearty laughter. He chuckled and chortled until tears brimmed his eyes. As he wiped away a tear with a claw, he gave me a begrudging smile, "I must admit, Daniel. No matter what anyone says of you, they must admit you are bold."

I flushed from embarrassment, but my helmet hid the tell. Obolis waved his hands, "Do excuse my enjoyment. It's simply been too long since I've been that reckless myself. I could learn a thing or two from it. That boldness wrought excellent results during your discussion with Elysium as an example."

Obolis straightened himself out, "But yes, the clan that Tera holds is millions strong. You will gain many times your current guild's size from this trade. As I mentioned, I am not unfair to my subjects, and Tera is among them. I would not have him earn me a planet and not grant him a hefty wish in turn."

He opened a portal, stepping back into his study, "That should act as a suitable reimbursement. It's more than the ahcorous may give me, but I haven't forgotten your arrangement with Elysium. By ceasing their attacks on our strongest worlds, it's made our position far firmer. Think of this somewhat lopsided deal as a thank you for that."

He gave me a nod, "It's good we had this talk. I'll have a Speaker draft the contract you mentioned, and we'll sort out the details then. Just as well, do keep that boldness, would you? It's a delight to see in these dark times, even if it should show its consequences soon enough."

Obolis stepped away, his portal snapping shut like a celestial guillotine. Once gone, pondered about the situation. He could be right about the skeptiles being primitive or useless, but I doubted it. In general, the Empire showed severe bias, and that favoritism led to them throwing certain people aside. To me, it was ironic, honestly.

Obolis was a treasure hunter looking for loot on some far-off planet. He chased those stars, hoping for the next big find. All the while, he stood with a fortune right under his feet. He could gain so much from letting people like Tera rise to their proper positions. That might be why his Empire's military might floundered behind their economic prowess.

By cushioning the albony, Obolis made many of them soft and weak. Races beneath the albony hardened over time, but those people never demonstrated their skills. Tera was the epitome of that, his position holding him back. Even with just a few more cases like Tera, a large chunk of the Empire's might was squandered behind arbitrary pecking orders.

It would be like me putting Torix or Kessiah under random humans for no reason. That wouldn't exactly leave those two in the prime position to show me what they were capable of. I banked on those ideas with this transfer of resources. I mean, if Tera took over a planet while under someone like Phillip, imagine what he was capable of on his own. He could topple empires.

Or perhaps help me build one.

But I couldn't know until later on. Even then, Obolis had a lot of experience managing an Empire. My input could be coming from my lack of experience, but I still wanted to voice my thoughts either way. After all, the fastest way to end ignorance was to voice it. Someone could correct me then, and I just had to have the humility to listen. Yeah, the latter was definitely the hard part.

Either way, I inspected my surroundings to get an idea of what was going on. By now, most people slept soundly in their beds or floating over them using my rings. Without the worry of constant invasions, many people got their first night of quality sleep since coming to Blegara.

Others toiled through the night, some of them having chosen the willpower perk so they'd never need to sleep again. I followed suit, preparing for the journey tomorrow.

Along the way, I found the mana crystals of our new hospital flaring fully. I stepped inside, finding Kessiah helping out a few members of the legion.

She stayed lively, her complexion no longer as pale. Kessiah already wore the suit I made for her now, and she tapped a quintessence crystal anytime she exhausted herself, taking bursts of its mana for her use. Walking from patient to patient, she restored the missing limbs of those that lost them in the war.

Unlike me, most people lacked the sheer endurance to restore missing limbs. This was accentuated by contact with the Hybrids. Often, people chopped arms or legs off that contained an infestation of the orange pustules and writhing cords. From those nubs, some restoration might occur, but rarely did full limbs come back.

That's where Kessiah came in. She congealed bones from her blood before moving to skin and tissues. Once formed, she connected vital nerves to restore function and the like. I smiled at the somewhat grotesque process, but I also raised an eyebrow. She toiled with a fire in her eye.

Staying busy, Kessiah only looked up from her work once to hiss,

"I'm not going to take what Spear said lying down. We'll show him what we're made of. I say we start with demonstrating how we treat our own."

That was the right attitude to have about the whole situation. I let Kessiah go about her business before inspecting the center of our unnamed city. At the core of it, Schema installed a warping station and a galactic trader. Even if the AI forgot our quests, he didn't forget this part at least.

Maybe he had a good reason for neglecting us, as Spear said. In the end, my guild and I suffered for it, so Schema's explanations didn't really matter to me. He was cutting us off for some reason, and I aimed to discover why. Warping towards Mt. Verner, I stepped out into the open, forested air.

I floated over toward our base's peak. The crisp cold and thin air swept against me while I sat on an icy stone. Snow surrounded this elevation, one of the few hills in Michigan where that was the case. From this vantage point, I stared at the rolling hills beyond our mountain's reliable peak. Out in the distance, birds flew, and the dew of dawn settled on oak leaves and pine bristles. Between these wooden spires, I found eldritch skulking. Small and underdeveloped, they squeezed between our extermination

forces. I sighed, knowing even here, we hadn't kept the eldritch fully contained. Sending a few golems over here, I smiled at the impact even one of them would have. The countryside would flourish, and we'd expand to the far-off horizons.

I'd finally be pulling this place, my home, up from Schema's culling. Only one task stopped me now, but it wouldn't stop me for long. I stared into that vast distance while cracking my thumb knuckles. As they popped, silver fluid dulled the otherwise sharp, metal cracking of my joints. Those cracks boomed loud into the air around me, causing birds to fly away in the distance.

All the while, I read interesting tidbits on my ciphering. I synchronized another mind, pulling out another elemental furnace from the treasure we gained. The ancient lettering stood out as newer than my current furnace, the gray, matte surface showing a graphene exterior. One of my disparate minds tapped into this furnace in my hand, and from that eternal fire came unbounded energies.

It revved into action, turning bits of generated matter into plumes of mana. That psyche took a small portion of the generated energy, strengthening itself further. Focusing deeper than before, this anima extracted more mana from the furnace by concentrating deeply. Once it unlocked the full potential of the device, the furnace reverberated with power.

I stored that power in my cipheric runes. These two furnaces added billions of mana every minute, but from my storage, I pulled out several more furnaces. Lifting them up around me, manifolded minds synced with one of them at a time—each blistered energy of untold volumes into my cipheric carvings.

The sun rose in the distance, and I stood with it. As I did, my aura trembled from seven furnaces firing at total capacity. A distant, sauntering cloud blocked my view of the gorgeous dawn. It lingered so far away that the massive plume appeared small in my eyes. Despite that distance, I raised a hand.

The cloud warped, wisping to a singular point of water. That liquid plopped to the earth, my view of the sun cleared. I gawked at the display, the range of my abilities far exceeding what I believed of them. Dwelling on what I was capable of, I allowed my mana to effuse ever so slightly. The air around me blurred from it, the dimension around me warping.

I hoped Plazia was ready for me.

Because I was ready for him.

### Chapter 309: The Unfamiliar

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An hour later, and I prepared for the Ahcorus's homeworld with my team. Most of my followers stayed here, our guild needing them for different operations. Torix handled the expanding infrastructure around Mt. Verner and Blegara. He even expanded the policing, education, and conscription duties to various divisions of our guild. That included the Vagni.

On the other hand, Kessiah kept in her realm of expertise, healing many of our troops. Even if our casualties were low, the injury rate was not. Getting them back into shape took a lot of time, and Kessiah went after it like an animal. As for Hod and Althea, they needed a break. Torix and I worked them to the bone during our fights with Elysium, so time to decompress was necessary.

Others fell under similar reasoning. Chrona and Krog began turning the top of Mt. Verner into a neoteric sanctuary for the gialgathens. They named the peak New Rivaria after their ancient refuge on Giess. They began remaking the old with a dash of new. Those acts established tablets etched with poetry, open homes, and even the never-melting ice sculptures they loved.

They performed music with molded glass, which echoed out like wind chimes and gentle winds. The gialgathens played games across Mt. Verner's peaks, showing their aerial mobility off in spades. They even pooled mist near the mountain's surface, offering moisture for their amphibious skins.

It made me smile seeing them and knowing I helped give them a place for this kind of thing. Other members of our guild lived the way they wanted as well. Diesel and other

engineers focused on constructing fresh bunches of buildings, farms, and utilities on Mt. Verner's surface. My constructor golems helped them make changes in real-time, shortening the entire development immensely.

They didn't coat Mt. Verner in a city overnight, but they gained more ground than I'd expected. On the other hand, a few of my battle golems patrolled around Mt. Verner and cleansed the land of any aggressive eldritch. To Amara's chagrin, that meant all of them, but even she accepted that most eldritch couldn't be socialized.

It was just a part of their nature.

Either way, combining all of those jobs and duties took up immense amounts of time. With everything squared away, only three people left with me: Helios, Florence, and Amara. Helios was the most important member, as his warping saved me so much time. He also intended to give me a few lessons on warping while we traveled the ahcorus's homeworld. I looked forward to it, as warping would make me an absolute, utilitarian beast.

Florence came with us as well, the brothers getting along better since they had a talk a while back. The more social albony of the two wanted to speak with the razor queens and learn about their cultures. Florence figured he could create an alliance with trade deals and everything included if we played our cards right. I hoped he was right.

The last to join us was Amara. She wanted to gain levels by eating other eldritch and speak with Plazia. I wondered why, but Amara explained that Schema never gave her attributes for free. Schema simply recorded her evolution, raising her threat level as she strengthened herself.

As an eldritch, she didn't really need Schema to get stronger. That augmentation ability came wrapped into her being, as all she required was organic matter to eat. That growth potential could be why the eldritch were so hated to begin with. Schema preferred people needing him, and if you could avoid his system, he acted dicey.

Schema aside, our group of four readied ourselves along Mt. Verner's edge. We stood at our base's warp site, putting armor, tools, food, dungeon clearing gear, and enchantments into our dimensional storages. My gravity rings floated some of the equipment for them, as I gave each of them an enchanted circlet as I had my own troops. For Florence and Helios, I even granted them some spare, protective plating of my armor.

Even if they brought it to the Emperor for experimentation, I was ok with that risk. I didn't want either of the two exposed while we were fighting Plazia. They could be eaten in a second, especially Florence, and I didn't want to bring an empty casket back home.

Completing the armor and rings required little effort, as did the packing, so I made my minds work elsewhere. Seven elemental furnaces forged matter into energy under my skin, each of them nestled into safe patches of my mass. They channeled enormous plumes of mana into my cipheric carvings, and those detailed etchings gave me attributes in turn.

Knowing their full impact, I inspected the difference even a few hours made on my cipheric augments sheet.

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

+7,121 Constitution

+27,414 Endurance

+5,557 Perception

+6,271 Willpower

+1,777 Luck

+72 Strength

+72 Dexterity

+100% to Effects of Legacies

+ 50% Internal Motivation Multiplier

+1.4 Trillion Ambient Mana]

Over the last few weeks, I generated an enormous amount of bonus endurance. These gains mounted until they exceeded my recent level-ups from Schema. By a lot, actually. With all the excess mana flowing in from the furnaces, it wouldn't be long before my runes eclipsed the AI's gains, and threatening exilement wouldn't be an issue.

Of course, I wanted to remain on good terms with Schema, so I'd stay in line. It was just a comparison I noted in my head. Beyond that, I inspected my status sheet, figuring out the specific amount of mana I generated from my furnaces. As expected, the matter conversion gave me a lot of energy to work with.

The Living Multiverse(Lvl 18,506 (Cap: 26,000) | Current Influence: The Rise of Eden  
| Class: Sovereign)

Strength – 97,153 | Constitution – 121,977 | Endurance – 251,245

Dexterity – 50,992 | Willpower – 208,645 | Intelligence – 129,009

Charisma – 50,715 | Luck – 71,488 | Perception – 39,307 |Awe – 5,201

Health: 1.08 Billion/1.08 Billion | Health Regen: 40.67 Billion/min or 677.7  
Million/sec

Stamina: Infinite | Ambient Mana 5.402 Trillion

Mass: 24.28 Million Pounds(11.0 Million Kilos~)

Height: 18'03 (5.56 meters)

Damage Res – 99.28% | Dimensional Res – 100%

Phys Dam Bonus – 139.5 Million % | Damage Bonus – 40%

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

Mana Conversion(Elemental Furnace Count: 7) – 56.4 Billion mana/min siphoned into runes and armor.

I shook my head in disgust at the furnaces' mana production. The overwhelming amount of mana increase put me at an absurd rate of stat augments as well. Even better, multiple furnaces laid unused in Elysium's treasure. I kept them tucked away in my dimensional storage, handing one off to Torix earlier if he wanted to try using one.

If he blew himself up, I'd make him a new body when he arrived back here from his phylactery. Everyone else simply couldn't handle a furnace yet. If they could, I'd spread them around to more potential members. Unfortunately, most would evaporate themselves and an entire region if they tinkered with one. Keeping them hidden for now kept most of the guild safe from their fallout.

And yeah, maybe I was a bit greedy with them. Eh, nobody's perfect, right?

Anyways, I inspected a few of my skills along with other parts of my status. With how many numbers interplayed together, it became easy to have certain aspects fall to the wayside. I imagined status accountants that helped manage someone's build and upgrades further down the line. Experienced, researched individuals could streamline the process, and maybe Obolis could recommend a few.

My own analysis proved fruitful, however. I found three skills working together that could be fused. The first of those three was A Manifold Mind. It would absolutely be integrated into my sovereign skill because its potential was limitless, and it amplified everyability I had.

The second skill humming along was Matter Conversion, the skill used to power the elemental furnaces. I leveled it quite a bit as of late, and getting more of them operating at once only gave me more potential. If anything, I may one day have hundreds or thousands running at once. At that point, who knew what I was capable of.

The third skill amplifying the others was Hunter of Many. I gained the technique a long time ago, and it drew out clear maps of my surroundings using my senses and powers.

It also gave me some nuance with gravitation and telekinesis. These three mythical tier skills could combine fluidly without much interference, which meant they'd mold into a legendary skill soon.

I simply needed A Manifold Mind to use the furnaces while having that same skill scope out my surroundings with Hunter of Many. That combination granted me a pristine awareness of my surroundings, many furnaces firing at once, and plenty of mental room leftover for other tasks. Considering the sheer utility of a legendary skill like that, it was a no-brainer moving forward.

It did leave me wondering if I should postpone the legendary skill's creation until I unlocked primordial mana. After all, I'd gain the mana type eventually, and I wanted it fused together with my sovereign skill. A bit of arguing between minds, and I dismissed the idea. While primordial mana may be a path of improvement for me, it would never be one of my primary strengths.

It just didn't come naturally to me at all, and that meant learning its advanced techniques would be a desperate struggle as well. Now, I'd push through until I got it, but taping that lagging skill to my affluent ones could be a bad idea. It might not enhance my understanding of primordial mana at all, or worse, it may drag my best abilities down.

Even if that wasn't the case, I'd gain three legendary skill slots once I established my sovereign skill. Primordial mana could be used in one of those three openings, along with some of its advanced techniques like temporal dilation.

Having reached a decision, I ramped up my elemental furnace production while scoping out my surroundings. This gave me a pristine picture of Florence and Helios arguing behind me while Amara bit into some crystallized quintessence. It was her favorite flavor. They already finished while I pushed more food into my own pocket dimension.

Here at the edge of the mountain, the trees wafted in the wind as scents of rich earth, morning dew, and pure sunlight poured in. Tasting the air, I spread out my hands for a second. Having so much perception allowed me to appreciate the beauty of nature in depth. I thanked that boon from my status and skills, just soaking in the sheer thrill of an untamed forest.

And then Helios snapped, “Florence, you’re weak. A speaker is useful elsewhere, not on a fringe world with an ancient, abyssal entity under its surface. You’re going to slow us down.”

Florence rolled his eyes under his dark wood mask, “Pshh, what? I’m plenty strong enough, and with a group such as this, there’s nothing to worry about. Just look at Daniel over there. Imposing, isn’t he? I can’t imagine someone bullying me while he’s around.”

Helios dragged his hand down his mask, “Bullying? An insect will crawl down your throat and devour your organs. Bullying is the least of our concerns.”

Florence pointed two finger guns at Helios, “But you’ll help pull it out of me before it can eat all my insides, right?”

Helios deadpanned, “I will tear it out, along with any guts it’s attached to.”

Florence gave Helios a quick pat, “There you go. That’s all I’ll need. Besides, I’m taking the risk on myself. I don’t need your chiding to remind me of that.”

Helios’s pulse quickened as Florence touched the real issue. I smiled under my helmet, recognizing Helios’s dissent as carefully disguised worrying. Helios let his hands flop against his sides while hissing, “Don’t complain to the Emperor when I pull your liver out then.”

Ahh, now that was brotherly love.

I waved at them both, “Hey, stop that. We’re about to leave, and I don’t want them to think we’re unprofessional.” I stared forward, spotting Amara clanking her teeth on a mana crystal, “Even if we are.”

Helios stood up straight, more than able to play the part of the cold, calculating pro. Florence lacked that same ruthlessness while Amara kept chewing at the crystal-like it was an oversized jawbreaker. It gave us the impression of a rag-tag group of misfits, which was pretty on point. Eh, we usually made our most significant statements with actions anyway.

We reached the warp-drive with our supplies in tow before Helios raised a hand, “If I may offer a counter-proposal, I may warp us directly to Reason’s lair.”

I leaned back, stunned he already memorized the coordinates, “I thought it took you weeks to get a new planet down for warping. What gives?”

Helios raised his eyebrows under his dark mask, “It does take that long, but I was well aware we’d be going here for a few weeks before now. I simply put time into studying those coordinates, so adjusting a few calculations to Reasons’ domain is a simple task.”

I gave him a nod, “Alright then. Let’s go warp directly there.”

With satisfaction, Helios raised his arm and generated a portal. Beyond its veil, a stary sky spread over an empty horizon. A cold, desolate land peaked in from beyond the gateway, and craters lined the surface of its icy grasp.

Air howled into the other planet’s atmosphere, the empty place hungry for our prosperous planet’s air. I scoffed out loudly, “Oh yeah, it’s looking very lively over there. You sure you have the right coordinates?”

Helios raised his unarmored right hand, my ring humming as it granted him better breathing, “I am. This is their homeworld, Svvia.”

I stepped through the portal. Florence, Amara, and Helios followed in my wake. Peering up, the stars glimmered down like silver coins amidst splashes of misty lightning. They carried many colors, this thin atmosphere poor for breathing but excellent for stargazing. Finding different lights, I picked up many of their individual features. Perception aided that process, making great views even better despite it being my lowest attribute.

Below this wide, expansive skyline, the pressure here mirrored a moon more than a planet. It wasn’t as decompressive as space was, though it came closer than Giess or Earth did. The gravity proved looser here and less of a constant pull, more of a slight tug.

I spread my right hand out, lifting one of the stones below us into my hand. I crushed it to powder before the dust lingered in the air. Taking a step forward, the crisp, crunchy ground let out a soft warble of sound. The thin air didn’t carry noise well.

Amara hissed, her voice muted, “This world is uncomfortable. Why they live here is a mystery to me, for there is little here beyond dust.”

I gazed at endless, rolling hills of white stone, “Tell me about it.”

Using my sharp sense of pressure, I created tiny gravity wells over each of my team members, mirroring Earth’s atmospheric pressure. Florence gasped in relief, “That is much better, thank you.”

I rolled my shoulders, “No problem. Let’s go.”

Helios raised his eyebrows, “Where, exactly?”

Peering around, I had no idea. Little exposed itself here, outside of endless wasteland. A piercing quiet crushed in from all angles, creating a heavy cloak both comfortable yet suffocating. It dulled my senses, but I leaned onto my gravitational awareness to compensate. Bending my knees, I pushed my heels into Svia to jump.

The crackling rock crumbled under the pressure of my feet, enormous cracks radiating from the ground. I lifted myself further with gravitation before inspecting at a higher vantage point. Everywhere on this dead rock mirrored what we found below, all except specific burrow openings.

These apertures glistened from the intense solar energy that reflected off their surfaces. Something caused that blinding sheen, but the glow masked the details of the chasms. Landing back below, I stifled my meteoric impact by lifting myself upwards.

This prevented me from hurting my team. Once down, I pointed where one of the burrow openings exposed itself, “There’s something out there. Let’s go.”

Having practiced with my rings, Helios and Amara propelled themselves from the ground. Helios did so with ease, having mastered their use already. Florence floundered behind us before failing his enchantment altogether. Without turning back, I stopped his faceplant into the white stone with a smile,

“You need to practice.”

Florence smiled back, “Oh, but I’m simply too busy working for your guild. There’s no time for developing the ring’s use, and I’m certain you understand the sentiment.”

Helios massaged his temples with his fingertips, his fur bristling along his face, “And to think I ever believed you competent.”

I picked Florence up before setting him down. He ran below us while we hovered above. We slowed down for Florence, but I didn’t mind the downtime. I moved a book under my helmet out of my view for a minute or two while we flew. With my actual eyesight, I relished in the spectacle of stars, galaxies, and nebulae above.

By now, my eyesight mirrored a weak telescope if I genuinely focused. That gave each glowing sphere depth, and I lost myself in those sights. Well, I did that while reading the ancient book hidden under my facemask. And I also channeled the elemental furnaces. Oh yeah, and I poured that mana into my cipheric carvings as well. When I say it like that, it seems like a lot.

But I got lost in those stars, let me tell you.

Anyways, we landed near one of the reflective patches. This sheen spawned from a thin membrane lying over a burrow’s opening. It was the colony entrance for the ahcorus. Considering how thin this atmosphere was, it made sense they wanted some shelter. Around the membrane rested smooth, tan-colored stone. It looked like a patch of polished teeth, both grotesque and pleasing to the eye at the same time.

I walked through the membrane, always leading our group in case traps erupted from the cavern’s walls. I figured if those snares or pits killed me, then everyone would’ve died disarming them anyways. They’d need to be rather explosive either way.

No traps triggered, but the membrane did cover me in a sterile, clean smell like rubbing alcohol. I absorbed the organic sheathing, but the others didn’t. Peering at the tunnel below, I found struts of smooth, flowing enamel interlacing polished stone. It looked like someone installed bones into a dug-out tunnel before smoothing the rock with a chemical.

It lent itself to an alien but fascinating design. I rubbed a palm against this silky stone, the minerals smoother than glass in some spots. That polish exposed the rock's true beauty underneath. The mineral layers piled together like a tall cake of crystal.

Interrupting my inspection, several green blobs rolled up nearby. They showed see-through membranes covering their gloopy centers. Suspended in their bodies, they carried rocks, debris, and some kind of fungus that glowed. That same fungus offered light throughout this expanse and the tunnels below.

Once they sensed us, these tiny green slimes rolled away, their outer membrane circling an immobile center. This moved them along as if they were encompassed by a moving treadmill track. I gawked at the sight, mystified by the creatures. After they disappeared, two enormous, azure-shaded slimes came from the tunnel below.

These monsters stood twelve feet tall, carrying enormous claws, plates of bone, and thin tendrils that served as antennae. They pooled themselves into four limbs, their front paws swelling as they neared us. Those swollen limbs generated spikes and serrated teeth in the slime centers of the beasts. These weapons emerged onto their epidermal linings, likely for smashing us.

The thorny limbs paired well with the acidic drool dripping from toothy openings in their cytoplasmic innards. They charged us, but I encompassed them in Event Horizon. I eliminated the damaging drain of the aura, keeping the pressuring effects unmitigated. Despite the dimensional wake, their will to fight didn't wane in an instant.

The guards of this colony worked with a tireless pursuit, and they kept moving forward until they crashed into my opened hands. Like a child running into a steel wall, their bone plates shattered, and their charges ceased. I leaned over them, their hulking frames smaller than mine,

"I said stop."

And they did.

Their forms shivered before they pulled away from me. I pointed deeper into their tunnel, "Take me to Reason. I'm here to meet your queen."

The two defenders stared at one another, no eyes or sensory organs in place for understanding me. Their thinned tendrils sprinkled against each other before they turned back to me.

Knowing words wouldn't work, I created a telepathic connection with them both, their minds relentless and hungry. It impressed me to find them so defiant despite the overwhelming odds against them. I nodded in approval, sending over my impression of them. They sent vague appreciations back, finding me a fierce warrior in my own right.

Instead of giving them a message to meet Reason, I sent over the urge to see others like them. Understanding the simple statement, they ambled back into the tunnel, urging me to follow. I stepped forward while Florence frowned,

"Hm, they don't seem like a very social sort."

As we wound our way down, we traveled deeper into the colony. With each step, airflow grew denser, and oxygen came with it, along with activity, abound. Jade shaded blobs rolled across the tunnel's surface like a moving forest, each of them carrying a different green coloring. They managed and expanded a complex tunnel structure around us.

This inner sanctum dwarfed Mt. Verner. Even with my height and size, this underground space gave me plenty of breathing room. Many massive tunnels linked into this vast cavern, and with those tunnels came swarms of other slimes.

And the deeper we went, the greater the density became. Most of them were the worker slimes we first encountered, each of them green. These drones always encompassed rock, ores, gems, and enamel sheets. Those toothy sheets coated the tunnel's surface with greater density until no rock exposed itself at a certain depth.

Additional struts and supports offered stability at greater depths. Light radiated from blue, green, and mauve fungi attached to the burrow's ceiling. These lichens symbiotically thrived on several of the slime's oozes, the workers feeding them to exchange light.

Besides these basic, greenish drones, other slimes toiled. Lumbering bruisers, like those we followed, trudged through this underground maze. They carried the carcasses of eldritch, the different monsters covered in slashes and acidic burns. These guardian slimes threw these corpses to the other blobs to feast, who did so in seconds.

More slimes showed themselves in these feeding frenzies. These slimes carried all kinds of colors, and they often led groups of green drones. These specialized slimes applied adhesives, sprayed acid on rocks, or coated eldritch in enzymes for digestion. They always ended up producing something in their plasmic centers, and whatever they made helped the colony in some way.

This made the entire expanse mirror a beehive, fervent with activity but organized by intent. Most of it, anyway. The giant slimes took us to a cavern lined with even more fungi. Here, the lichens expanded with drooping vibrissae. They ended up swollen bulbs of the liquid light, and they waved around as if blown by a gust of wind. When a bulb hit another bulb, the glowing spheres clanked out a bell chime.

This gentle sound contrasted the brutal display below. Many specialized slimes watched an arena of sorts where other blue slimes mauled one another in a carved-out space. Two of them did so now, each of them dripping acidic innards. A brighter, cerulean blob sat along a far wall of the colosseum. There, it generated spikes of enamel and lobbed them out at its enemy.

Facing it, a steel blue slime swung large, blunt hammers of bone at the incoming spears. It deflected the masses of spikes, being pierced many times as it closed the gap. Those gushing impacts made the other slimes slither in appreciation. Even without sight, the living goos experienced the vibrations of power and the series of collisions.

Once the steel blue slime reached its brighter opponent, it swung its hammer down. The other glop splattered across the arena, coating the environment in sizzling acid. The surrounding oozes leaped down, devouring the corpse of their fallen warrior. I gawked at the display, "That's...pretty brutal."

Florence typed into his status, "Noted, casual cannibalism. Fascinating."

A familiar body rolled up to us. Turning before it spoke out, I raised a hand, "Yo, Reason, it's good to see you again."

Reason turned from a ball into a snake shape, slithering the last bit of distance to us. Two large, lumbering guardians trailed beside her. She sent out some kind of pheromone mist, and the guardians bowed to her in reply. They stayed behind her while Reason came up and spoke out in our language,

“You infiltrated my domain via the surface. Interesting. I would’ve estimated our warp would’ve been a simpler point of entry, but perhaps you did so to throw Plazia off your trail.”

Our group stared at Helios, who shrugged, “I never said that warping was necessary. I merely mentioned I could.”

Amara stepped forward, and the guardian slimes beside Reason gurgled out with sizzling spit. The Razor queen swelled up beside her guardians, getting close to our friendly eldritch. Reason chimed, “You are not of the Harbinger’s kin or any sentients for that matter. You are the one who walked about at the party.”

Reason shivered, “Is she your pet, Harbinger?”

I sighed, “No, she’s not. She’s our technician.”

“Oh. I never realized an eldritch could be technical.”

Amara hissed at the arena behind us, “And I never estimated that races could be more primitive than even the lowest eldritch. We are both surprised this day.”

Reason’s inner green markings trembled, “Those are my children. Speak well of them, or I will allow them to speak poorly to you.” The guardians beside her presented their claws for Amara’s viewing. Reason grumbled, “And they prefer speaking with action.”

I raised my palms, “We’re not here to fight. You know that.”

Reason kept her form near Amara as a tense moment passed. My helmet’s aura flared red before mana oozed off my frame,

“Unless you’d like to, of course.”

Reason shifted away from the energy before shivering, “No...Not at all. We’d rather not.”

Florence pointed at the colosseum behind us, “They seem as though they’d love to. Perhaps an explanation is in order?”

Reason coursed her way along the floor, her form stretching into a thin line before collecting back into a more giant ball. Crystalline shards pierced and submerged into her skin as she gazed at two more of the blue guardian’s battle.

Reason pointed with a see-through claw, “They battle for mating rights with me. The strongest of them holds the right to create our next brood. After we have mated, I devour them to fuel the next batch of offspring.”

Amara pointed her hand at the battle, “That seems brutal and unnecessary, hm?”

Reason laughed with a cutting edge in her voice, “No, it is the opposite. Eldritch devour each other for their own gain. We do so for a different reason. You see, there is no greater honor than bringing the colony to greater heights. Many methods exist to do so, but few are as pronounced as strengthening the next generation of our young.”

Reason spread herself thin, making herself appear enormous, “But that kind of sacrifice is lost on your kind, isn’t it? Perhaps that is why you believe it unnecessary, hm?”

Amara scoffed, “The eldritch fight to uncover who is the strongest amongst us. Look to Plazia if you must remind yourself of how effective that strategy may be.”

I turned to them both, “We get it. You hate each other. Deal with it until we leave.”

Florence shook his head, “Gah, right as it was getting interesting.”

Helios spread his arms, “Could we, perhaps, be pointed to the direction of our mission? Is there a colony that is closer to Plazia’s home, or is this the nearest one? I’d like to finish this quickly if at all possible.”

Reason recollected into a ball, her form trembling before she laughed. The snickering expanded and echoed through the cavern, many of the walls rebounding it into a maddening cacophony. As her outburst abated, Florence pulled back some,

“So...what does that creepy laugh mean, exactly?”

Reason rumbled like thunder in the distance, “There is no colony where you will not find Plazia.”

Helios tilted his head, “Does Plazia carry that many spies?”

With a crystalline claw, Reason pointed down, “No. Plazia is the ground beneath us.”

#### Chapter 310: Parsing Pieces of a Puzzle

Florence raised a hand while stammering, “Uh...that’s an exaggeration, right? Hyperbole? Perhaps a saying I don’t understand?”

I winced, “Or Plazia’s a fortress caliber eldritch. That’s a bad situation.”

Florence’s fur bristled over his skin, and he took sharp breaths. I pulled the Rise of Eden over our group, the augmenting aura calming him down. Behind me, another person panicked as well. Well, monster, but either way, Amara gasped in shock.

She took a step back, pointing her palms down. As she did, her hands trembled. The smaller eldritch hyperventilated before putting her hands against her head. Florence snapped out of his daze and walked up to her. He snapped his fingers, “Hey, you alright? Everything ok? You look unwell.”

She couldn’t speak, her emotional unease overwhelming her. Three minds of mine went into action, dissecting the situation. One of them noted this reaction was her being afraid. The sweating, trembling, and shortness of breath sealed the deal on that. Those signs spawned right after I mentioned a fortress caliber eldritch, so the two connected somehow.

My second mind remembered that Amara was a part of the mission to Gypsum. She was almost eaten by the Spatial Fortress there. A third mind clicked those details together, and I stepped up to Amara. I raised a hand with confidence,

“Hey.”

My voice compelled her, and she glanced up to me. I lunged down and placed a hand on her shoulder, “Listen to me. You’re not the same eldritch you were when Yawm controlled you. You wear my skin and flesh over your body, and it gives you strength. If you can’t believe in your own power, then trust in mine.”

I raised a fist, “I will keep you safe.” I peered at Florence and Helios, “That goes for each of you as well.”

Florence waved both his hands like he was psyching himself up, “Of course, of course. I just, you know, was abjectly terrified for a moment. It would be par the course for me if you hadn’t already guessed as much.”

Amara gave me a nod, her legs wobbling still. I stood up, giving Amara’s helmet a tap, “Come on, stand up straight. You’re the Harbinger’s technician, aren’t you?”

She adjusted her helmet, staring down. She took a slow breath, her heart rate steadying. She murmured, “Yes...Thank you. The thought of facing another fortress...That terrified me. I lost myself while imagining what happened before, but I won’t allow that to happen again. I will move past this fear in time.”

Althea let me know she feared the fortresses, so of course, the other Gypsum members felt the same. Armed with those thoughts, I smiled under my helmet, “Alright then. Now, Reason, I want to understand more about what’s going on with Plazia. Is Plazia literally the ground beneath us, or is this just a phrase you’re using?”

Reason considered my question, her emerald form rippling like a stormy sea, “That... that is what we have gathered. If we burrow too deeply, then Plazia’s insects will swarm us from all angles. We believe that insects are the center of the planet because of this.”

I closed my eyes, marveling at Reason’s objective misunderstanding of how a planet works. I took basic science back in, like, fifth grade, and there, I learned that solid planets had molten cores for the most part. Insects wouldn’t hold up an entire mantle of a world, as the pressure would destroy them utterly along with the heat.

That being said, maybe Plazia was pulling some shenanigans with gravity and the like. I didn’t put that past him as I opened my eyes, “Ok...So insects are the center of the planet?”

Reason raised two extended limbs of slime, “Yes.”

“And this is because once you burrow down, anywhere, there are bugs?”

“Yes.”

I gave her a slow nod, “Alrighty then. Is there, uh, anything else you can tell me about Plazia?”

Reason tremored, “What would you need to know?”

Florence took a step up, “When did he land? What’s his favorite color? What does he do in his spare time?”

Reason shifted towards the arena of slimes, staring at another battle, “Plazia arrived on Svia many centuries ago. The exact date of his coming is unknown to us, but we understand that he is an ancient entity. We do not fully understand him, and that is one of his greatest weapons against us.”

Oh yeah, I figured as much by now. Reason continued,

“His tactics are vast and unwieldy. He pits us queens against one another, abusing our most admirable asset – our ability to wage war. This immense destruction of our colonies is why we’ve let him fester as long as we have. It is only recently that our squabbling has finally stopped thanks to Wrath.”

Reason watched a blue bruiser slime get squashed before she dangled a limb over the body. The razor queen slurped up his remains in a disgusting guzzle. As the cobalt ooze disintegrated in her moss-colored muck, Reason pulled back. She sighed,

“And despite our unity, he has evaded us time and time again.”

At this point, something dawned on me – they knew next to nothing about Plazia. I mean, at least half of what she answered with had nothing to do with him. It was the

inner workings of the razor queens' situation, something I already understood. I lifted a hand,

"I got that already. I'm trying to get details about Plazia so that I'm not left squandering at what to do if he jumps my team or me. Do you know what he looks like, at least?"

Reason shrunk away from me, "We have never seen his true form."

I scoffed, "Ok, does he have a favorite slime he likes to eat?"

"He never eats us."

I grabbed the side of my helmet, "Is there, I don't know, any tactic he uses that's most common?"

Reason jiggled, "He has confounded us at every turn, and so, we don't know what his tactics truly are."

Amara seethed, "I think there is more that you don't understand than merely his tactics. It would seem you know nothing of your ancient and venerable enemy."

Reason hissed, "And none of you have faced him. You cast your judgment willingly, and that is simple to do. To face him and experience our dismay is a different task altogether. I heed any of you to investigate below. You will find the depths most unforgiving."

Florence turned a hand to her, "So while you may not understand Plazia, you do seem to understand the razor queens and the Ahcorus. Let's start there and attempt to work our way backward then. Shall we?"

Knowing when to take a step back, I gave Florence the reigns of this conversation. He took them with a pep in his step, "Now, Reason, you mentioned that the war with Plazia began centuries ago. What were the Ahcorus like then? You know, before this hivemind arrived?"

Reason shivered, “We were weak. The eldritch threatened to overwhelm us long ago, and we stood on the brink of extinction. No rival species invested in our world because we lacked resources for them. This cast us into the darkest shades of Schema’s worlds – a planet destined to die.”

It amazed me how Florence could get information out of something like this. I took notes on his strategies as Florence tilted his head, “That’s fascinating. It sounds as though a lot has changed since then. What about Plazia’s interference helped or hurt that process?”

Reason trembled, “He has left our colonies ravaged in his wake. He conquered and annihilated our kind until few of us remained. Those few remaining were our strongest and most powerful. We created a new order of our society in those last moments, and that is when we first manifested a razor queen.”

One of my minds noted that detail. Plazia-Ruhl forced the Ahcorus to evolve. Florence nodded at Reason, “That must’ve been immensely difficult. I couldn’t even imagine pulling through if I was in the same situation. I must say I’m impressed.”

Reason swelled with pride, “And you should be. The Ahcorus rallied with a queen at our center. We established a new social order, one that was stable and functioning. With all of our decisions funneling from a singular point, we beat past Plazia-Ruhl’s established zones. Our kind repopulated Svia, and we regained our homeland.”

Reason pointed a shining claw at the arena, “In that era, we established many of our now revered traditions. These battles began taking place to force our evolution. More razor queens spawned, and they battled to uncover the greatest of our kin.”

Florence put his hands on his hips, “But I’m guessing you guys never figured that out, considering many razor queens exist now?”

Reason deflated a bit, “No, we did not uncover our apotheosis. If a colony has ever grown too dominant, others rallied to dismantle them. Plazia’s attacks also cease that growth and evolution. While we have pushed him deep underground, he attacks at random without reason or purpose. This volatility is the most awe-inspiring aspect of him.”

Reason snarled, “He is unknowable.”

Florence took a breath, “Well, that’s quite the history then. What about your most recent events has made you all stop fighting one another?”

Reason sighed, “It is Wrath’s pleas. She has mentioned that to reach our final evolution, we must first eradicate our most formidable enemy. It is our only path to salvation, as Plazia stands in our way at every turn.”

Florence’s eyes narrowed, his mind clicking pieces together, “And that’s your species general goal – to evolve into its ultimate form then?”

Reason spoke as if referencing a distant memory, “Yes. It is our dream.”

Florence spread his arms, “Well then, that was a thrilling story. I’d just like to speak with my team members alone for a minute. I have a few plans and details I’m hobbling together, and I’d hate to waste your time managing those details. I’m sure you have plenty of colonizing, organization, and other affairs that need attending in the meantime.”

Reason kept moving like a patch of living water, “I do. I will return in time to hear of your plan, and then we shall rally with the other razor queens to face Plazia.”

Florence swung a fist, “Oh, absolutely. I can’t wait.”

Reason and the other slimes stepped away before Florence turned to Helios, “Can you warp us back to Mt. Verner from here?”

Helios raised a hand and snapped his fingers. A portal snapped open, the air no longer howling away as it had before. Florence hopped over towards our warp area while waving for us to follow. We did, and once the portal closed, Florence stepped back and forth. I watched him for a second before I raised a hand,

“So, any thoughts?”

Florence shook his head, “Yes. We can’t trust them.”

I crossed my arms, “Why, exactly?”

Florence sighed, “Several reasons, but even a cursory glance at their history tells me some overarching facts about the Ahcorus that are troubling. Firstly, some events simply don’t line up. For instance, Plazia-Ruhl pushed them to the brink of extinction. Once on that edge, their species innovated, gaining a razor queen.”

Florence raised a finger, “Now, that’s all fine and dandy, but if the razor queens allowed them to take back over Svia’s surface, why didn’t the Ahcorus continue their domination? Case and point, the Ahcorus now command many razor queens and more resources. They should’ve easily been able to take over a weakened Plazia, yet they haven’t.”

I nodded, “Yeah, that doesn’t add up. It’s like Plazia wanted them to have a measure of control. Hm, probably to get rid of his fringe world status, if I had to guess.”

Florence pointed at me, “I’m thinking the same. In fact, most of the Ahcorus’s culture mirrors the eldritch, even. The entire battling arena, the goals for evolution, those are similar to primitive eldritch.”

Amara hissed, “It is true. For a species to look down upon us yet mirror our ways is odd. Perhaps that is why she angers me – she treats us as inferior while reflecting what we are.”

Helios grimaced under his mask, “So the Ahcorus are pawns of Plazia’s then? Considering the Ahcorus’s sheer stupidity, I find that quite believable.”

Florence rubbed his temples with the dull edges of his claws, “Idiocy is a strong word, but your point still stands. If Plazia had this much control of them, it’s reasonable that Plazia is still using them. How, exactly?” Florence lost all his momentum,

“I don’t have the slightest idea.”

I narrowed my eyes, “Huh, interesting. I faced a Ruhl before, and it made sure that everything fell in place at a distance. It was like an evil mastermind of sorts that had planned everything out ages ago. That could be the case here. I mean, it’s not outside the realm of possibility that Plazia organized the Ahcorus against himself.”

Amara's arms flopped against her side, "Why would he turn his own knife against his throat?"

I gripped my hands into fists, "How about we go and ask him?"