

New World 371

Chapter 371: A Scarred Return

A few seconds later, a Sentinel tore through the fabric of reality. I helped pull apart the dimensional fabric, and it stepped through. It tilted its head at me.

"You wish to return to Earth, correct?"

I nodded.

"Aw man, more than anything."

The Sentinel sliced through the veil, and I approached a tiny circle showing Earth. I gazed down at Mt. Verner before I gave the Sentinel a salute.

"Till next time."

I jumped in, and Earth welcomed me. I breathed in an atmosphere sweet as honey. I gazed at the sun, its shine like a campfire's glow. Even gravity's pull embraced me in a gentle hug, the once harsh pull a gentle reminder to stay here. It was one I didn't need but appreciated.

I gazed down at Mt. Verner, my guild no worse for wear. Chrona's void ice castle still gave the place an elegant air, and the growing industry exposed what the site was - a center of trade and prosperity. I flew down, passing several Eltari and Gialgathens, each playing and training in the sun. A few people tended to fields below, the ground rich with life.

It was good to be back.

As I soaked in the sights, I couldn't have smiled harder even if I tried, and I zoomed past everyone while temporally compressing myself. Peering up from below, Chrona and Krog met my eye. I raised a hand to them, and they connected with me telepathically.

Krog clapped his tail on the ground. "It is good to see you again."

I laughed, not meaning to.

"You too, you too. Man, you can't know how good it is to be back."

Krog tilted his head.

"Torix mentioned you were away on some kind of lottery? Did you get lucky in it?"

Chrona gawked at me, horror striking her face.

"No. He wasn't. What...What happened to you?"

I raised a brow, and she shivered. Chrona said, "You're accelerating time, but what are you doing to your mind?"

I stopped speeding along.

"Huh...Think of it as abandoning a set mental form."

She grimaced.

"To me, it seems to be torture...And how can you hold a coherent thought while doing that?"

"I have most of my minds still shaped into a solid, cohesive form."

Krog's eyes glazed over.

"Minds? Like multiple of them? What?"

I moved my hands back and forth.

"Well, I mean-"

A shadow blotted beside me. From nothing, Shalahora arrived in all his glory. He tethered to the gialgathens and I, and Shalahora said,

"These are your allies?"

I gestured a hand to them, "Honestly, they're kind of like family at this point."

Krog peered away. "Ah, that's a heavy-handed title for us, but Daniel has saved our species from extinction. He is more an ancestor to us."

Chrona's eyes widened, "That thing...Is level...65,000."

Krog turned to her, then back to me. He bowed. "I, excuse me, great sir. Oh powerful, mighty-"

Shalahora sent an acknowledgment, one spoken in the gialgathen's native language. I could tell because it took a moment for the system to recognize it. At the same time, Shalahora took the form of a gialgathen and gave them a certain kind of growl. If I surprised them with my time magic, Shalahora utterly stunned them with his greeting.

The gialgathens froze in place. Shalahora tilted his draconic head at them.

"Do you no longer acknowledge a Rivarian greeting?"

I leaned away from Shalahora, "What? How do you know about their old capital?"

Shalahora changed his language to English fluidly as he said, "I inspected their surface-level memories. This is their fondest greeting, one they hold dear."

I waved my hands at them, "Hey, I'll explain everything later. We need everyone to meet up anyways. Chrona, it'll be at your place if you don't mind."

She shook her head.

"Of course. My home is always welcome to any from our guild."

Krog stood up straight. "I-I shall send a message to all and have them rendezvous here immediately."

I waved a hand.

"No, I'd rather do it in person to introduce Shalahora."

Krog furrowed his brow.

"But...But that is far less efficient."

Chrona popped his side with her tail.

"Be quiet. As you wish, guildleader."

I waved them goodbye before Shalahora and I left. I raised a hand.

"Alright, damn, you learn fast."

Shalahora spread his hands.

"I attempted a friendly greeting. Why are they afraid of me?"

"Your level, for one. Also, pro-tip, try to tone it down whenever you meet people. They've lost that capital to an invasion by their old, godlike ruler. It's a painful memory now."

Shalahora murmured, "This is why I tire of conversation with others."

I shrugged.

"I get it. I really do, but they'll get used to you quickly. Come on."

We passed groups of people.

Shalahora said, "That is your species?"

"Yeah. What do you think?"

"You are so different from them...Like another entity altogether."

"Well, different is a word for it. Also, how did you get here so fast?"

"I told Schema to send me here."

"And he did?"

"Yes."

"Well, that sounds smooth compared to my talk."

"It was. Let's find the others."

I followed Shalahora, who weaved into the Mt. Verner compound using one of many entrances. He darted between shadows, no one aware of his presence. An assassin of his caliber could sneak in here without raising any alarm bells and kill everyone in Mt. Verner.

This place needed an update, and oh man, I was going to give it one.

First things first, I landed on the lower industrial floor of Mt. Verner. Machines whirled, and sparks flew. As always, I enjoyed the sight of industry, something I stopped as guildmates stared at me for a bit. I gave my thanks and let them know I appreciated their hard work.

The shadowy Sovereign said, "They believe you are a god."

I remembered the avatar destroying my mind.

"There's nothing that could be further from the truth."

We passed machinery before arriving at the eldritch cages. Amara wrote notes in an obelisk, including recorded audio for later use. Beside her, Hod moved and talked with grand levels of animation, ruining Amara's work.

Hod said, "Hod think pretty woman being hard to get."

Amara growled, "And Amara think Hod is an idiot who should waste his life elsewhere. How hard of hearing are you? I'm working."

Hod spread his wings. "Hod actually have hearing like hawk. How Hod know? Hod explain."

I peered at Shalahora.

"Get ready."

Shalahora tilted his head.

"For what?"

Hod turned a wing to Amara.

"Hod heard that Hod have hearing like hawk. Hod asked what hawk was? Hod get no answers, so Hod find hawk. Hawk look like Hod. Hod know hawk have Hod hearing because hawk like Hod. So, Hod know hawk hearing Hod level. Therefore, hawk have Hod hearing like Hod have hawk hearing."

I put my hands on my hips.

"Ahhhh, good ole Hod."

Hod pointed in a random direction. "Hod hear that. Hod hear everything."

Shalahora and I stood nowhere near where he pointed. I facepalmed.

Shalahora's eyes widened.

"Impressive."

I raised my brow before several of Shalahora's shades erupted from where Hod pointed his wing. I blinked before Shalahora materialized between the two. Amara fell backward before pushing herself away.

She hissed, "What kind of corrupted, filthy aberration are you?"

Shalahora peered through her.

"I am Shalahora, the Sun Swallower."

The guy could make an entrance, that's for sure. Hod spread his wings, "Hey. Hod have shadows. Shadows Hod thing. Shady man take Hod thing. Shady man thief and scoundrel!"

Shalahora molded into the shape of an Eltari and crossed his wings. He bowed, "We both live in shadow, and as one, we fly."

Hod took a step back before mirroring the gesture. Hod said, "As one, we fly."

Hod jumped out of the pose, "Now shady man take Hod looks. Hod looks Hod thing."

I stared at them both, stunned again by how well Shalahora fit in. The shadowy Sovereign put a hand on Hod's shoulder.

"I shall teach you how to wield the absence of light. Even you who skulks beneath the surface, blighted one."

Hod tilted his head in confusion, but Other Hod understood. Shalahora turned, flash-stepping to me with a quick dispersal and rematerialization. Shalahora pointed down, "There are still others to meet."

I nodded.

"Hey guys, we'll be having a meeting later. Be ready."

Hod stuck out a wing.

"Hod always ready."

Amara stood from the ground and brushed off her dirty clothes. She nodded. I turned to Shalahora.

"Alright. Let's go."

I had to keep up with Shalahora as he dove through the insides of Mt. Verner. It was as if he had lived here his whole life, and we reached the side passage where Plazia-Ruhl set up shop at the lowest levels. Once there, we stepped into his de-systemized territory. The ancient Ruhl carved cipheric runes into the side of a wall, having erected many tablets of the archaic symbols.

As we walked in, Plazia's voice oozed from the walls, many faces crawling out of stone.

"I see you have brought another from your journey. Their mind is dark like the depths of an ocean, and they walk without weight in their steps."

The azure, corrupted Sentinel turned to Shalahora. Insects skittered underneath the armor, and Plazia-Ruhl cackled.

"A celestial? I know of you and your kind. You are like dead stars."

I furrowed my brow while Shalahora materialized beside Plazia. The Sovereign reformed into many insects.

"It is good to meet you Plazia-Ruhl. Your fractured memories are palatial."

Plazia finished his runes.

"They are? Hm. Since you are perusing my memories, do you believe they are real or perhaps implanted to manipulate me? I often consider that plight."

"They show no signs of tampering, but I would need to pry far deeper to verify. Whether I do so is decided upon by you."

Plazia let out a sharp laugh.

"I decide no."

Plazia and the faces on the walls turned towards me.

"And you. You've changed much, like a maggot's metamorphosis into a fly."

I'm sure Plazia meant that as a compliment.

I said, "It was over 6 months there. It wasn't easy."

Plazia lowered his hands.

"I ascertained...You walked away with another commitment upon your shoulders to this one. Will the weight of your promises break you?"

I cracked my neck.

"Eh, I'll be fine."

Plazia lifted a hand, centipedes crawling out from the cracks in his old Sentinel armor.

"Don't forget my agreement in the amalgamation of promises you carry."

I turned and stepped outside of his de-systemized domain. I spawned primordial mana, droplets falling from me like goop from a lava lamp. Time compressed over me, splintering my mind, and I gave Plazia a thumbs up.

"Oh, trust me, I haven't."

Plazia cackled.

"Then my knowledge remains yours...Harbinger."

I left the hivemind, and Shalahora stepped from Plazia to me.

Halfway down the hall, Shalahora murmured, "That is a dark force you ally with."

I gave Shalahora a nudge.

"Shal, you're a literal shadow."

Shalahora actually laughed, and it sounded like fire and darkness expressing joy. The shadow pointed an incorporeal limb at Plazia.

"Do you wish for him to attend the meeting?"

"He'll hear everything. After all-"

I pointed around us.

"The walls have eyes. Don't they?"

Plazia's laugh echoed in from all angles.

We flew out of the recesses of Mt. Verner, heading toward the upper floors. We passed by many guildsmen, each giving me salutes. I returned the gestures before we passed one collection of stores in the residential district. In the middle of everything, Florence bought meals for a large group of people, having a feast in the middle of the mall square.

Florence laughed with soldiers, civilians, and ladies alike. As we neared him, the albony stood. He raised a hand to those present.

"Ah, the guildleader is back. Everyone-"

They all stood and saluted me. I raised a palm, "At ease."

Florence smiled, his teeth sharp.

"Ah. Don't worry about them. It's hard taking it easy when the boss himself is back, am I right?"

Before I could answer, Florence walked up and gave me a hug, squeezing hard.

He said, "It's so good to see you walking around again. You were missed. Deeply."

I patted his shoulder, surprised by the sincerity of the gesture. It had only been five days for him, after all. Florence let go before turning to Shalahora. Florence reached out a hand.

"Ah, a world-destroying monster. Just the kind of friend I expected Daniel to bring back with him."

Everyone laughed before Florence gave Shalahora a wide grin.

"I'm Florence. What do you go by?"

"Shalahora."

They shook hands before Florence turned a palm to everyone here.

"My general rule is that when in Rome, do as the Romans do. Let's introduce ourselves."

Shalahora and everyone stared at each other, the tension thick like mud.

Florence said, "If you'd like, I can help you learn the process if that would make you more comfortable."

Shalahora stammered, "I-I know them all."

Florence put an arm around Shalahora's shoulder, shaking his head.

"Come now. No one knows someone unless they've both met. Here-"

Florence grabbed a lady's hand and gently pulled her to Shalahora. Florence smiled at the woman.

"Hey, he won't bite."

The woman gulped before Florence spread his hands.

"Remember who brought this world eater here." Florence pointed at me. "That's someone I think we can all trust."

The lady looked at me before reaching out a hand to Shalahora.

She mumbled, "Hello. I'm Margret."

Shalahora grabbed her hand.

"I am Shalahora, the Sun Swallower. Your eyes are beautiful."

Margret blushed.

We took several minutes to handle introductions, and Florence smoothed the process. As we walked off, he waved them goodbye.

"Everyone, don't mind paying. It's my treat."

I gawked at the albony.

"Man, it's good to see you again. Also, why are you already here? Weren't you in the lottery?"

Florence's left eye twitched. He raised a quavering hand.

"No. I joined your guild the day before the galactic council, where the lottery was announced. Ahem...I have a question for you."

His voice broke.

"Daniel...Were any albony with you in the lottery? Do you know what happened to them?"

My eyes widened. Of course. Florence was close to the Emperor, and he was missing. Not wanting him to stress anymore, I pulled out Valgus's shackles from my pocket dimension.

"Obolis is in here. We got him out, chief."

Florence's head tilted back.

"By Baldowah, thank you...Thank you."

He gave my forearm a squeeze before resting his head against my arm. I leaned down.

"Woah, are you alright?"

Florence lifted his head, and his face wore a smile.

"Of course, of course. I'm sure you wish to meet everyone, so we'll discuss what happened afterward."

I spread my hands.

"I don't mind calling the meeting right now."

Florence shook his hand.

"I won't ruin your return just because I'm a little worried."

With a bit of apprehension, I let it go. Knowing Florence, he'd let me know when to discuss what happened. We went up several stairways before Shalahora touched Florence's shoulder.

The shadow murmured, "I am sorry for your loss."

Florence raised a hand.

"It's nothing. Let's continue."

Florence's voice held a heavy hurt. I was affected as we reached the third floor, searching for other guildmates. I couldn't find anyone, but something stalked me. I peered around, surrounded by bookshelves. An entity resided within my dimensional wake, tapping upon senses I wasn't aware of.

Shalahora tilted his head at me.

"What bothers you?"

Alarm bells rang in my head.

"That's just it. I don't know."

Something spawned behind me, erupting from the ether of the void. I liquified, letting the entity pass through me. I solidified while grasping my hand around its thin neck. Althea turned to me, a grin on her face.

"Wow. You have a strong grip."

I released my grasp and lunged to a knee, holding her in a gentle gravity well.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry. Are you ok?"

Althea tapped her chest, "Ahem, yeah. I'm cool. How about you?"

I wrapped my arms around her, my lunging form far more prominent than hers. I held her in my arms for a moment. I soaked in who she was and that she was here, and man,

she smelled so good, and wow, she looked amazing, and she must have done something with her hair because-

She gave me a kiss, and my thoughts muted. I was home.

We held each other for a while. She whispered, "Hey."

I smiled until my cheeks hurt. Again.

"Hey."

We let go for a second, and I stood up, towering over everyone. Althea put her hands on her hips.

"You look so huge now. Like, wow, big. Too big, heh."

"Huh. You're right. Let me fix this."

I pulled myself down using Mass Manipulation. I shrank some but still dwarfed everyone. I shrugged.

"Eh, that's all I got."

Althea jumped up, landing on my shoulder with ease.

"It's plenty if you ask me."

Shalahora condensed into the form I was most used to, and the shadow gave her a bow. He said, "You are a walker of other planes with a mind of steel. Your will is admirable, echoed one."

Althea scratched her cheek.

"Heh. Thanks. What's your name?"

"I am Shalahora, the Sun Swallower."

She hopped off my shoulder, and Althea landed as if she were the master of gravity and not me. She waved a hand with a smile.

"Hey. I'm Althea Tolstoy."

Shalahora froze in place, his form no longer rippling. He turned to me.

"Harbinger...You are fortunate in this life."

I gave him a thumbs up.

"You know it."

Althea kicked me.

"Hey, don't talk like I'm not here."

I raised my hands.

"What? Me? Never."

She jumped at me, and I darted sideways. Two leaps later, she cornered me between bookshelves. She bolted at me, but I caught her in a gravity well before she could grab me. She windmilled her arms.

"Hey, no fair."

"All's fair in love and war. This happens to be both."

I pulled her to me, and she flipped in midair, landing on my shoulder.

I said, "Come on, let's find Torix."

Althea put one finger on her chin, "Hm. He's having a meeting upstairs. He mentioned that no one interrupted him. Speaking of which-"

Althea peered at Florence.

"Is everything alright? You usually have a lot more to say."

Florence peered at her, pain across him. Althea raised her hands.

"Not that your talking is bad or anything. Like, I personally like it. You know, you're just always making sure everyone's feeling cozy and-"

I put my hand on her shoulder.

"It's not you. It's something else."

Althea peered between the both of us before she jumped down. She gave Florence a hug. The albony gave her a nod.

"Thank you."

Seeing Florence's duress, I sent messages to everyone to meet in Chrona's home. I could have my happy meetups later. Althea let go of Florence and leaped back onto my shoulder. I turned to everyone.

"We'll discuss what happened during the meeting, which we need to have now. I've been gone a long time, and a lot has changed."

Althea leaned on my head, my armor's spikes softening for her without me thinking. She said, "Torix will ignore your messages, probably. We'll have to grab him from the logistics floor."

I said, "If it's so secret, why do you know where he's talking?"

"Because no one else was allowed on the floor today."

Brimming with unanswered questions, we headed to the central elevator. Once at the logistical floor of Mt. Verner, I frowned. My dimensional wake passed over some kind of secrecy magic. Quite a few layers of it, actually. Shalahora's shadows bristled.

"There is someone here who does not belong."

My eyes narrowed.

"Let's go."

We passed through the elevator doors, and no one was present. I leaned through several doorways, each building designed with me in mind but no longer comfortable. After passing several openings, I found the source of the isolation magic. From behind a doorway, Torix stood, his eyes flaring red, and he interlocked his arms behind himself.

The lich sighed.

"It would seem we have company despite my warnings against any interruptions. Who-"

Torix laid his eyes on me. He took a step back.

"Daniel, ah, it would seem you've arrived from the lottery."

I peered around.

"Why are you so nervous?"

I entered the room, finding a remnant in diplomat's clothing. They spread their hands to me.

"Ah, the Harbinger of Cataclysm. I wanted to apologize for whichever agent acted against you in the lottery. We had no clue-"

I reached out a hand, holding the remnant in a gravity well. I pulled his frail body off the ground and glared, my face like cold stone.

I growled, "Who let him in?"

The air grew heavy. Torix's eyes dimmed to a deep blue. He raised his hands.

"Please. Calm yourself. I can explain."

I squeezed the diplomat until they curled into a ball. One of their shoulders dislocated, and they grunted in agony. I stepped up to the remnant.

"Why shouldn't I kill you here and now?"

The diplomat tried smiling but grimaced instead, "It...It seems like whoever broke the treaty truly gave much of the goodwill between us away."

Disgust spread over my face.

"Goodwill? Between us?"

The remnant coughed.

"Ahem. I would hope so, yes."

I pulled out Valgus's shackles. I wrapped a chain around the remnant and gave it some mana, enough to psionically isolate. The diplomat screamed before I put my hand over his mouth.

Torix's fiery eyes flared white.

"What madness has overcome you? They are only a messenger."

My armor leaked ascendant mana, and Event Horizon crawled toward the remnant.

I seethed,

"Why is Elysium here?"

Chapter 372: A Broken Trust

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"Why is Elysium here?"

Torix's eyes locked in on me.

"They landed on Earth quite a while ago. They don't know where this base is."

I pulled my armor back with difficulty.

"You have no idea what they're capable of."

Torix took a moment, looking me over. Torix turned to the Elysium diplomat, his eyes flaring red.

"You. What have you done to my disciple?"

Torix stepped over before raising a hand, and his magic fizzled into nothing. Torix tilted his head.

"What manner of madness is this? Am I losing my mind?"

Torix's anger undid my own. I took a breath.

"The chains. They're from someone called Valgus Uuriyah. They stop magic. Completely."

Torix gave the diplomat a slow nod.

"Ah...Fascinating. I, hm, how to say this. Would you mind giving me a moment to explain? I can guarantee I wasn't colluding with Elysium."

I frowned.

"I never thought you were, but talking with them like this?"

My armor grinned at the Elysium diplomat, and ascendant mana leaked from between my armor's jagged teeth. I pulled my head close.

"We aren't talking to Elysium anymore. If they come here, they die. You can tell them that much, can't you?"

The agent nodded with his eyes. Torix leaned back.

"You're certain you wish to eliminate contact?"

I turned to Torix.

"Yes. I am. They are poison."

Torix nodded before walking over to the diplomat. Torix turned a palm to the chains.

"Would remove them?"

I unwrapped the chains, the effects coursing from the diplomat to me. I numbed as Torix placed a hand over the diplomat's head. They fell unconscious before Torix sighed.

"I certainly have a bit to discuss with you all, don't I?"

I put a hand on his shoulder.

"Before anything else, it's good to see you again."

Torix spread his arms.

"Come now. We're not above a physical gesture, are we?"

We had a light hug before Torix stepped back and looked me over.

"You know, I've long grown exhausted with expressing my surprise at your growth, yet somehow you seem to surprise me each and every time I see you. It's a master's greatest pleasure, I assure you."

Torix reached up a hand, trying to grasp the air.

"And this...It is as if you are omnipresent in this space. How that is done, my mind can only wonder. Fascinating."

Shalahora's eyes widened.

"You can sense his psyches?"

Torix stammered, "Ah, I-I merely have touched upon them with the most minute of senses. It's nothing worthy of mention."

Shalahora stepped up to the lich. The shadow raised a hand.

"It is worthy. I cannot feel them. Are you the Torix I've heard spoken of?"

Torix coughed into a hand.

"Ah, you've heard of me. From whom, might I ask?"

"Your disciple."

Torix stood tall.

"But of course. That is only to be expected, after all."

At moments like this, Torix reminded me of Hod.

Shalahora said, "His words are of high praise to your strategic thinking and methodical mind. He has learned much from you."

Torix stood taller.

"That was from his own observations. He's been a difficult student to guide over the years, but he has found his way and blossomed all his own. My results are derived primarily from his talent, and there can be no doubt about that."

If Torix had lips, he'd be smirking. Torix peered at his status.

"Before anything else, might I ask what your name is?"

"Shalahora."

"Ah, I'm Torix Worm, of Darkhill. Now-"

Torix pointed upward.

"The meetings at Chrona's lair, correct?"

I nodded. Torix clapped his hands.

"Shall we?"

A portal opened, and we stepped through it. The conditioned air inside gave way to the clear air outside. I stepped onto the only solid surface here, the void ice, before I waited for the others to group up. After fifteen minutes, everyone gathered here except Helios and Kessiah.

Torix stood beside me while Althea sat in a two-dimensional gravity well. Chrona and Krog rested farther down the corridor. Florence paced back and forth, nervous energy oozing from him. A cluster of flies congregated over the ice, an unnatural sight foreboding Plazia. Amara stood as far away from Plazia and Shalahora as possible, and

Hod stuck to her like glue. Finally, Shalahora hovered off by himself, being as awkward as a shadow could be.

They were my guild's major players, colorful as a rainbow personality-wise. I stood up.

"Hey, where's Kessiah and Mr. Cold?"

Torix opened his status.

"Kessiah is on Blegara working at their capitol. She's been healing soldiers from different empires for extra income. As for Helios, he disappeared at the exact moment you did."

I bit my tongue.

"Hm. Helios was in another lottery. Kessiah was in a protected zone, right?"

"Indeed."

I let out a sigh of relief.

"Good. She got my message, and so did he. They'll come when they can, but record this. I don't want to repeat it."

Torix nodded. I spread my hands.

"Everyone, I need your attention."

They zoned in. I turned a palm to Shalahora.

"Most of you have met, but in case I forgot, this is Shalahora. He is a powerful Sovereign I met in the lottery. He's helped me immensely during the lottery and has the strongest psionic abilities I've ever seen. He'll be able to help us moving forward."

Everyone clapped for a few moments, and the gialgathens growled.

I glanced at Shalahora and said, "I need you to share the memory of Obolis's magic signature with everyone here. We need to get Obolis out of there so he can hear us. The Empire is probably going crazy right now looking for the guy too. I know Florence is."

Florence stopped his pacing, interlocking his hands behind himself.

"It's nothing. It's nothing."

At this point, Florence couldn't convince me otherwise. Shalahora placed an intangible hand on his own forehead before pulling out a memory. A psionic web dispersed over us, and the memory flashed over our eyes. Torix gawked at the sight.

"This is incredible. Simply a stunning display of mind magic."

Scenes of carnage erupted around us while I crossed my arms. Reliving the battle made me sick to my stomach. I again watched Targask, Alctua, Teraz, Drelex, and Entilla die. My left eye twitched before I covered my face with my helmet.

As the sight faded, Obolis made his announcement once more.

"We've uncovered a pocket dimension within these gauntlets."

Obolis cast the spell.

"I'm passing on the sensation of the magical signature used to open and close this. Use it to let us out after you've made the city safe again."

Still befuddled, I shrugged.

"I can't cast it off just that. Trust me, I tried."

Torix's eyes flared green.

"I...That was simply an absurdly strange mana type. I've never seen anything quite like it. I would need several weeks or months to dissect it for replication. However, it is doable."

I peered at everybody else. Hod jumped forward, wiggling his wings.

"Hod use...HOD BLAST."

Nothing happened. Hod wiped his brow.

"Hod do what Hod can. It up to Hod friends now. Even dry man."

Torix glared while Althea burst into laughter. I held mine in with difficulty, but after a second, I turned to the side, letting out a few chuckles. I brushed myself off.

"Anyone else?"

No one answered, so I shrugged.

"I'll hire a mana specialist-"

Plazia's voice echoed, "I may be able to assist you, Harbinger."

The group peered around. Amara's hair bristled as she leaned over. Hod shivered, and Shalahora locked in on the flies.

Krog murmured, "It is present but not psionically. How is that possible?"

I raised my hand, "It's another friend. His name is Plazia, and he's an expert in this. I'm, uh, I'm learning that about him with you all."

I pulled out Valgus's artifact and offered it to the bugs above.

Plazia hissed, "No. You will construct the mana and gain ownership of this thing."

He calmed.

"The Old Ones will corrupt me, but you are incorrigible in your being. This burden will be yours alone."

Hearing Plazia's distaste, I wondered if Shalahora didn't know how to make the mana signature. I turned to the shadow, and our eyes met. He gazed away, unable to tolerate my stare. That told me all I needed to know.

I grabbed the gauntlets.

"Alright. I'll take them."

A few minutes passed, and Plazia pulsed the mana signature at me. After getting a feel for it, I mirrored the exotic, esoteric thought pattern. It created the mana, and that soaked into the gauntlets. They tethered to me, and I shivered. Something invaded the space around me, so I condensed my wake.

From beyond, some entity put its eyes on me. Peering up, I gazed at nothing, yet I stared at something infinite.

Plazia murmured, "You sense something?"

I put myself back in the moment.

"Nothing. Give me a sec."

Taking the next while, I pried into the gauntlets' secrets. I found the pocket dimension instantly, the space feeling like a watered-down, generic brand of my own. I couldn't manipulate anything within, only shifting things around at best. Magic couldn't enter it, and the esoteric magic signature was required to open, close, or move anything.

Having saved all the rulers, it still had its uses regardless of my criticisms. I pried around for a bit, identifying some strange gear and a few rulers I remembered. Most of them were ones I sent into the tunnels to escape Valgus. Obolis intermingled in the group, so I pulled him out. A violet portal appeared, and Obolis floated out of the stasis like a man in a coffin.

I caught him in a gravity well as he fell, and his eyes popped open. He gasped for air, gazing around. As he saw us, Obolis calmed down. The Emperor deflated like a balloon as he murmured,

"I-I'm alive."

Plazia oozed out his words.

"Uncovering that signature within the heat of battle...I'm impressed. You must have experience with ancient artifacts. Should you offer its visage, I'd love to peruse your collection."

Obolis took several breaths. After closing his eyes, he pulled himself upright and stood. Peering around, he found Florence. They met and embraced before Obolis grabbed Florence's shoulders. The Emperor mouthed.

"How many?"

His voice silenced everyone. Florence trembled.

"All of them."

Obolis fell onto his knees. He shook his head.

"No. No, no, no."

Florence peered away, trying to keep it together. He tried to speak, but his voice broke. The Emperor gawked at nothing, looking lost. He moved his hands before Florence grabbed him. Tears brimmed in Obolis's eyes before pouring down his face. Obolis whispered, "My family...All of them."

Florence broke down, and he held Obolis. Obolis gazed forward, his jaw slack. Florence let out small cries at first, but within seconds, he wailed. He rasped. He squeezed Obolis, who stared at nothing. Florence wept until his voice grew ragged. As if realizing where he was, Obolis peered down at Florence.

He moved his arms around him, and they grieved.

I turned away, struggling to keep my eyes on those two. For some reason, I felt like I failed them. I don't know why it was there, but that feeling crushed me. Althea wept beside me, so I held her close. I didn't know if I could cry, but it still hurt.

Shalahora stepped up to Obolis, and the shadow bent over. He said,

"Let me show them."

Obolis kept Florence close. Shalahora placed a fingertip against Obolis's forehead, and he pulled out a thread. It spread over us, casting a web of memories. Images of open fields popped up, albony children playing on all fours. They wrestled in clusters of white kittens, pouncing at each other while one wasn't looking.

All of them were Obolis's children. All of them were dead.

The children fought over who would be hunted in their game. Another memory flashed, showing albony children excited to wear their first facemasks at a store selling them. Another memory showed Obolis smiling at children while they ate different meats at a festival. The last memory showed Obolis holding his grandchildren in his arms and watching a wedding.

My throat burned, but I kept it together. Althea sobbed beside me while several others broke down. On my shoulder, a group of flies landed. Plazia whispered through them.

"Remember their pain, for it may become your own."

Even if he was rough as sandpaper, Plazia was right. I collected my thoughts over the next few minutes, waiting until Florence and Obolis could converse. Ten minutes

passed before they wiped their tears and dried their eyes. They joined the others, watching me.

I faced everyone.

"You all have questions, and I will give you answers."

I scowled.

"That starts with the lottery."

Chapter 373: An Empire's Fall and Rise

My throat burned, but I kept it together. Althea sobbed beside me while several others broke down. On my shoulder, a group of flies landed. Plazia whispered through them.

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"You all have questions, and I will give you answers."

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"That starts with the lottery."

I explained the setup to everyone while including the messages from Schema verbatim. I broke down the number of rulers, how our time there played out, and what happened at the end. After describing Valgus's death and how I spent the last few weeks there, I finished with Schema's conversation. I kept details of the psionic poison out of my story.

I sighed.

"Yeah, so I arrived here."

I let the information soak in before putting my hands on my hips.

"I'll break down my thoughts for you guys since I've had more time to think about it. After that, we'll flesh out that shared understanding with your perspectives. Sound good?"

I got nods, so I raised a hand, showing three different mana types: primordial, ascendant, and quintessent. I saturated the spells with mana before holding them up as visual aids. I pointed at the blue sphere.

"Schema's the first topic for my thoughts."

Plazia oozed from the ground.

"He has taken his most loyal lambs and sent them to slaughter. Poetry is written in the red that slaughter left behind, and it's obvious to anyone who reads it - Schema is losing this war with Elysium, one failed plot at a time."

I nodded.

"He's definitely taking some losses. I think Schema's equipped to handle low-level individuals in his system, but higher up, his enforcement falls to pieces."

Torix tilted his head.

"To counteract that, Schema's developing higher leveled, more autonomous security personnel...Ah, is that perhaps why he sided with you during your conversation?"

Plazia scoffed.

"It is a calculation. All is with that machine."

I frowned.

"He weighed the risk of me becoming an avatar versus helping pull him out of this situation. He finally decided to help me out, and I intend to use that to its fullest extent."

Plazia hissed, "What allows you to put faith in that menace?"

I raised a brow.

"What are the alternatives?"

Birds chirped outside, several darting between clouds.

I said, "That's my point. I'm not siding with the Old Ones or Elysium, and the enemy of my enemy is a friend. Really, it's that simple."

I shoved the primordial ball to the group.

"Either way, the lottery shows how different forces can target higher-level classers. Each of you will join that group soon, so we'll review rigorous training programs after this meeting. After all, we're surviving this ordeal. For that to happen, we'll need to become bulletproof."

I pulled the primordial orb back, squashing it. I shifted the ascendant ball back over. The red glow loomed over everyone.

"Think of this as Elysium. I have a lot to say about them."

Obolis stepped up.

"May I speak first?"

I sat down in a gravity well. Obolis spread his hands.

"I was informed of the lottery several months beforehand, giving me time to prepare. Many lotteries were held on nearby star systems to Giess, my Empire included. Many of my...My kin were considered rulers, so they were pulled into these lotteries."

Obolis pulled his arms back.

"Elysium also knew of these lotteries, and they planned out assassinations while we were isolated in them. If I assume correctly, my Empire wasn't the only targeted enemy. I believe they planned on killing Daniel long before this lottery occurred."

Torix put a hand against his temple.

"If their plan should fail, they planned on trying to lie to us to prevent all-out war between our factions. That is why Elysium's agent arrived here even before Daniel. They intended to trick us for additional time. It's good I isolated all magic when meeting him, but still-"

Torix threw his hand to the side.

"They are absolutely shameless."

I leaned in.

"No. Malevolent."

The ascendant orb sparked with violence. I raised a fist.

"They wanted to wear me as a puppet and then pretend they weren't trying to take my mind apart. It was a long-term, insidious plan to destroy my free will and my guild. We're eliminating their care package and the resources they gave us in our treaty. Any piece of them remaining on Earth will be purged."

Althea coughed into a hand.

"Uh, what about the people already connected to the Hybrids? Are we going to, er, kill them?"

I shook my head.

"I can use Valgus's shackles to eliminate the psionic connection between them and the Hybrids. After that, we'll surgically remove the augments or whatever they've implanted beyond the basics. We'll clean them up without killing everyone."

Althea sighed.

"Ok, that's good. I was worried."

I pointed at the ascendant orb, and it rippled.

"Yeah, we'll get that handled. We'll also establish absolute security of Earth so that neither Lehesion nor a Spatial Fortress can harm us. This will be an absolute safe haven for all of us. Blegara is next. After that-"

I squeezed a hand, and the ascendant mana disintegrated in a shockwave.

"We're going for Elysium's throat. Any questions?"

Krog showed his teeth.

"No one here would love to tear into Elysium's neck more than I, but how do we intend to eliminate the avatars they ally with?"

Torix stepped up.

"Actually, I've got a few thoughts on the matter. If I may?"

I smiled.

"Always."

Torix swished a hand, moving the quintessent orb over where the ascendant mana once was.

"The Old Ones are a contentious force, but they have weaknesses. Their chaotic natures, lack of unity, and outright arrogance are the most evident. We may embody their opposite by exposing those shortcomings with our diligence and vision."

I raised a hand.

"We already have a few secret weapons on our side."

Torix pressed his hands together with excitement.

"By all means, do elaborate."

I grabbed Valgus's shackles, and I siphoned mana into them.

"These give physical and psionic immunity."

My feet crushed the glass beneath me, and the glass over Chrona's home cracked all. The void ice held, but stones across the top of the mountain crunched while adjusting to the new load on them.

I waved a hand.

"Ignore that. Everyone, attack my mind."

A silent war was waged, one without a battle fought, but many attempted. Torix leaned towards the chains.

"What in Baldowah's name are these?"

I lifted one of the goldish pieces of metal.

"Some kind of artifact made outside of Baldowah's name. Some other Old One constructed them."

Hod spread his wings.

"Harbinger invincible."

I shook my head.

"On the contrary, this is a weak, easily handled set of powers. This eliminates my ability to use magic, and simply running is an easy answer for these shackles and chains. However-"

I pointed at Althea.

"Let me have it."

She peered back and forth.

"Uh, me?"

I grinned.

"Yeah. You."

She took a breath and brushed herself off. She formed a spear of bone before raising it overhead.

"Sorry, honey."

She threw the spear, and I reached out a hand. Instead of deflecting it, I let the bone sink into my palm. It pierced without struggle, getting stuck in my dimensional fabric halfway through. Now, I could've stopped it a dozen ways, but that wasn't the point.

I tilted my hand, the spear on both sides of it.

"We have an absolute destroyer, everybody."

Shalahora's eyes widened.

"She ignores the Old One's law construction? Where? How?"

Althea shrugged.

"Er, I don't know."

I swung a fist.

"And it doesn't matter. We have it right here. We'll give Althea everything possible to make her the destroyer we need." I raised a hand and shouted. "That includes you, Schema, and don't pretend you can't hear this. I know good and damn well you're listening. Well, listen close."

A notification popped up in my status, but I'd square all of that away after the talk. I turned a hand to everyone.

"Everybody. We're a much more able and powerful group than most people give us credit for. We have abilities that large forces dream of having. We'll be exploring those powers and possibilities soon to take us to the next level, and we'll dismantle the threats that be. To make that happen, I'll be helping you, and you all will help me."

I washed the Rise of Eden over everyone.

"We'll rise above whatever anyone throws at us. We have the tools. We just need to use them."

Torix interlocked his hands behind himself.

"How will we protect Earth from a Spatial Fortress?"

I pulled hundreds of blue cores from my inventory. I smiled.

"I'll make every part of this planet a well-oiled machine. It'll be like swallowing a steel urchin."

Chrona stood tall.

"What shall we do against the spies and subterfuge of Elysium?"

I pointed at Shalahora.

"Show them what you can do."

Shalahora connected to everyone on a psionic level. His rigid, absolute control struck fear in me for a moment, but I kept Valgus's shackles close. The Sovereign released us. Plazia seethed.

"What of Schema's meddling?"

I turned a palm to Amara.

Our eldritch Maker said, "I will put restraints on his powers should he get in our way."

I cracked my knuckles, the fluid popping like TnT underwater.

"Plazia, you need to work with Torix to fully utilize the Omega Strains we found on Blegara."

Torix bowed.

"Of course."

Plazia laughed.

"With glee."

I pointed at Hod and Althea.

"You two will be taught by Shalahora how to fully utilize your powers. He is a great resource, so take full advantage of his talents and experience."

Hod flapped his wings.

"Shady man teach Hod, or Hod teach shady man?"

Shalahora flashed over to him.

"We will teach one another."

Hod pointed his wings.

"But Hod teach shady man little more."

Althea phased off this plane before appearing beside them. Shalahora tilted his head.

"You are one who is full of surprises."

She grinned, her smile like a sun. I pointed at Shalahora.

"Hey, as long as you remember who she's dating."

Shalahora's form destabilized, becoming a shadow.

"I, uhm, I didn't mean-"

I waved a hand while smiling.

"I know, I'm just joking. Anyways-"

I turned a hand to Torix.

"Whenever we return to Leviathan-7, you'll be there with me."

Torix's eyes flared.

"Me? I doubt I can assist with facing those, hm, primevals you mentioned. Do you need help with logistics?"

I shook my head.

"No. You'll use your necromancy to make us an army of powerful eldritch. I even have a few primevals in my pocket dimension that you can use for experimentation and that everyone can train with."

I turned to everyone.

"Off of Earth, that is. We can't train with the primevals on this planet. They will destroy entire regions."

Chills ran down everyone's spine. Torix's eyes flared white.

"Hm, that...That could work in theory. However, how could we possibly overcome their minds?"

I gave him a knowing look.

"I have an answer, but that's a closely guarded secret. You'll know when the time comes."

Amara curled her fingers.

"You enjoy being mysterious now?"

I raised my brow.

"Eh, I wanted to join the club."

Krog tilted his tail towards Mt. Verner.

"What of the Elysium captives?"

I clapped my hands.

"We're going to interrogate them. Any volunteers?"

Obolis grimaced.

"I can."

Torix grabbed his chin.

"I could as well."

Plazia cackled.

"Or I may dabble in that darkness if you'd like."

Torix tilted a hand to the disembodied voice.

"He does sound the evilest by far."

Hod swished his arms.

"Hod hit them with wing attack." He poked his beak out a few times. "Hod use peck next." Hod jumped and poked his feet out. "Hod use furious swiping last. Furious swiping always work."

I pointed at the flies.

"It's up to you then, Plazia."

Chrona and Krog stepped forward. Chrona's tail slithered behind her.

"What of us?"

I pointed at Chrona.

"You will teach time magic to anyone with the aptitude for it. We'll also need someone to learn to warp since...Since Helios might not be here."

Florence spoke with a hoarse voice.

"Might? What makes you think that's a maybe?"

I raised a brow.

"You thought Obolis was dead, right?"

Florence peered off.

"Yes, but he was within a dimensional stasis. That isn't the case with Helios. His life force has been snuffed out entirely."

I shrugged.

"That guy doesn't die easy."

Florence winced.

"I pray you're right."

I pulled my consciousness out of my body, and the metal lug collapsed. Everyone gasped before I rematerialized from nothing. I pointed at my corpse.

"I mean, you never know, right? Death isn't as absolute as people think."

Shocked out of his melancholic stupor, Florence blinked.

"Hah...Maybe for you."

I picked up my body, holding it close.

"You're cheering up. That's good because I have a job for you. I have about thirty rulers in these two pocket dimensions. I will need you to find their home empires and establish a relationship with them."

Florence squeezed a hand.

"I...I would be more than happy to, but the Empire-"

Obolis put a hand on his nephew's shoulder.

"The Empire is mine, and I shall clean up the mess I've made. Besides-"

Obolis smiled at me.

"I can lease a few of Daniel's golems to handle the aftermath of this event. I've seen them in action, and they are more than enough. In the meantime, he'll need capital for all his future ventures. The Empire would happily assist with whatever he needs - including any required artifacts in his fight against Elysium."

I gave him a knowing look.

"I'm expecting fair prices this time."

Obolis's words boiled.

"You may have my fortune, my treasures, and my planets. I only require payment in Elysium's blood. Give me that, and you can have my soul."

Plazia laughed.

"Don't tempt him, child."

I cracked my neck, and the echo sounded like steel cables tearing in the ocean.

"Eh, I'll take good care of you guys either way."

Amara pointed her hands at me.

"What of you then?"

I squeezed my hands.

"I've got a status to attend to."

I opened it.

"Now, everyone, let's get down to business."

Chapter 374: What is to Come

Plazia laughed.

"Don't tempt him, child."

I cracked my neck, and the echo sounded like steel cables tearing in the ocean.

"Eh, I'll take good care of him either way."

Amara pointed at me.

"What of you then?"

I squeezed my hands.

"I've got a status to attend to."

I opened it.

"Now, everyone, let's get down to business."

I stared at many, many notifications before scrolling down. I took a moment, filing them into different categories. A primary message arrived over it all.

Hello there Harbinger! Schema would like to personally apologize for the lack of prompt system updates over the last interim. Your system and skills have been updated and will continue to be updated regularly for the foreseeable future. That means no more pesky bugs for you!

A perk will be awarded free of charge based on your contributions and consistent performance. Consider it a sincere apology for any issues you've suffered from glitches.

Perk unlocked!

Schemic Amnesty

+Allows association with illegal entities.

+Allows low-level tampering with the system. *See the guidebook for further details.

+Allows the user to eliminate 5 individuals' unknown statuses.

The benefits let me talk with Plazia in the open, and they helped get me out of shady situations. In general. Cool. I began reading my unique skill notifications, of which there were plenty.

Unique skill unlocked! Primordial Mana | Level 10 - Many walk the world and maneuver through its thorned paths. You have chosen to remake the world in a different image. From blighted to beautiful and from sinister to sublime.

From theirs to your own, the progenitor of a new world.

+10% to ease of primordial mana generation.

Finally.

Unique skill unlocked! Dungeon Core Manipulation | Level 10 - Some use cores for skills or income. You've harnessed their power directly, and their untold energy is spoken of in what you make. With your creations, speak with a legend made in your image.

+10% to core crafting and manipulation.

Using cores in crafting wasn't that uncommon then.

Unique skill unlocked! Anima Creation | Level 10 - Many spend their life harnessing the power of their mind. You've decided to become the architect of a soul, and from your vision, sentience blooms, a flower amidst the dead.

+10% to ease of anima creation.

Ophelia would be proud.

Unique skill unlocked! Temporal Contact | Level 10 - We all pass through time and feel its omnipresent pull. This never sated you, and now you touch upon its essence, your mortality intermingling in eternity.

+10% to temporal awareness.

Many of these skills I recognized from my time on L-7, though I gained primordial mana well before. I moved on to the unknown skills.

Unknown skill unlocked! Dimensional Saturation | Level 10 - Many bend to circumstances or people. Others bend to rules and laws. No matter a man's will, all bend to reality.

All but you.

+10% to dimensional saturation speed.

+10% to dimensional saturation efficacy.

Unknown skill unlocked! True Incorporeal Recomposition | Level 10 - Many feign this feat. Many construct it with tricks and lies. Your skill isn't a fanciful construction.

It is pure. It is undeniable.

+10% to ease of incorporeal recomposition.

+10% to the speed of incorporeal recomposition.

From the skill description, Schema had downplayed my reconstitution in our conversation. He made it sound like a common ability, but an unknown skill implied otherwise. On the other hand, Dimensional Saturation had to be an unknown skill. It involved soaking my mind into my dimensional wake, a feat few likely ever imagined, let alone attempted.

Mythical skill unlocked! The unique skills of Temporal Contact, Primordial Mana, and Mass Molding(Previously: Mass Manipulation) fuse into a mythical skill: Temporal Compression | Level 10 - To touch upon time's grasp is a feat in and of itself. To effect it is a prodigal demonstration of skill. You've done more.

You bend the intangible, and in the ether, you find you are eternal.

+10% to ease of time manipulation.

+10% to effect of Temporal Compression.

Oh man, I would soon turn this into a monstrous legendary skill.

Mythical skill unlocked! The unique skills of Artisan of Destruction, Core Manipulation, and Anima Creation fuse into a mythical skill: Golemic Progenitor | Level 10 - Many construct mindless hulks of earth or metal for their bidding. You have mastered this art and, in doing so, transcend the discipline's limitations.

For war is your garden, and in battle's midst, your warriors are born.

+10% to ease of golemic creation.

+10% to golem's innate skills, abilities, and attributes.

These were the big boys of the bunch, and two more mythical skills gave my legendary skill all it needed to be made. The question was now what skills to put into it. Temporal Compression and Matter Conversion would be included for obvious reasons, but the last skill could be many things. However, I had a few ideas in the works.

In a far-off future, I may even write my own furnace inscriptions. At that point, I could turn myself into a living nuclear furnace that fed on my flesh for infinite fuel. It would again evolve my mana generation, something that may catapult me ahead. I would need many of those leaps forward to kill the Old Ones.

After having squared away my skills, I peered at my tree menu. I found the missing notification I was hoping for.

1,625 tree points awarded!

That was more damn like it. I placed some points into my Creator of Armies tree.

Your glow becomes a new dawn for those under you. That light offers guidance, purpose, and resilience to your chosen. What is a beacon to some becomes a burning insignia to others, and so, you will be hated. They will writhe and thrash against you. That is until they are broken under an unending march.

For who are those that stand against a creator of armies?

+100% to effect of Legacies. +10 to base stats of all guild members. +25% to experience gain for your guild. +25% to the learning speed of skills within your guild. +10% easier skill creation for guild members.

While not a huge personal bonus, the tree allowed my guild to progress faster. Considering how ahead I was of almost everyone, that was exactly what we needed.

Select Talent tree for distributing points. Requirements met. Additional trees unlocked.

Owner of Worlds(Own a habitable world)(2,500) | Anomaly(Be singular in nature)(2,500) | Immortal(Have a possible lifespan of over 100,000 years)(2,500) | Conquerer(Take a city by force)(1,500) | Schema's Champion(Prove yourself worthy of my personal attention)(5,000)

I eyed my options with care. Schema's Champion tempted me for many reasons, and it would likely give me privileges that other guilds drooled over. That wasn't what bothered me about my current position. I had to solidify the lives around me and my planet's security.

Otherwise, I'd be the last one standing. Again.

Thoughts leaked into my head. I remembered gazing at Leviathan's center after killing Valgus. Everyone died. It heralded a dark future where one day, I would be like Obolis as he learned of his family's deaths. I would be an all-enduring yet all-destroying force, like Leviathan.

I wouldn't let that happen. During the lottery, everybody passed except Shalahora, and he kept some people alive. I came close to death, but I had many ways of avoiding its gaze aside from my trees. In fact, leveling and absorbing red cores would be enough for me for a while. I could always funnel energy into my cipheric inscriptions for infinite stats anyways.

Time bottlenecked that process, but that was a problem I hacked away at by leveling Temporal Compression. My sovereign skill, legendary skills, and titles also added to my personal progression. It left me wanting to invest in the people around me instead of myself.

Besides, the trees always awaited after I gained a few to help my guild.

After doing some research into the trees, I found no information about them specifically. Schema's info lockdown still had its vice grip intact, but similar trees did pop up in my searches. Any trees revolving around planet-owning strengthened cities, trade, and planetary defenses. Considering my worries, I selected Owner of Worlds and placed my points.

A part of any society involves ownership. Who owns the means of production? Who owns the land? Most importantly, who owns the people? These are questions long asked and long answered with blood. You spilled rivers of it, so you own all there is.

+25% to City Barrier Strength

+25% to City Barrier Efficiency

+10% to City Barrier Size

+10% to Credit Income Multiplier from owned territories

+10% to Experience Multiplier from owned territories

+25% to Bounty Payout in owned territories

+25% to Bounty Experience Reward in owned territories

-10% to Warping Costs in owned territories

Sovereign Exclusive: +6% to World Perk Efficacy

You conquered the land until there was no more to be taken. You seized all production until nothing was made. You fought dissenters until groups, cities, then countries bent to your will. None bend to it now.

They live and breathe by it.

+50% to City Barrier Strength

+50% to City Barrier Efficiency

+20% to City Barrier Size

+20% to Credit Income Multiplier from owned territories

+20% to Experience Multiplier from owned territories

+50% to Bounty Payout in owned territories

+50% to Bounty Experience Reward in owned territories

-20% to Warping Costs in owned territories

Sovereign Exclusive: +12% to World Perk Efficacy

Unlike most trees, this one specialized. It granted specific but powerful bonuses, all of them easing world ownership. The city barrier bonuses let me establish far better defenses moving forward. The credit and experience multipliers allowed me to gain resources faster, and the bounty bonuses gave me better passive governance here.

After all, the more bounty hunters made, the more bounty hunters would appear. They acted like a force of vigilantes, and while not ideal, they shored up my lacking security. Well, golems could also handle any ner do wells, but that could backfire. Having those juggernauts kill ordinary people mirrored a dystopia.

An Average person would never resist one, let alone defeat a golem. Crimes of any kind would result in a swift death. By having ordinary people dish out justice, I integrated them into the process. People on my planets also retained free will, something I didn't want to interfere with outside extreme cases.

I leaned back, stunned by a sudden realization. Schema did the same thing with his Sentinels. For a second, I wondered if I was turning into what I once hated, but I let that go. We happened to align here. I was sure there wouldn't be that much overlap moving forward.

Anyways, the warping bonus from the tree resulted in more trade and money over the long term, which was always good. I did raise my brow at the Sovereign exclusive because, yeah, I got perks for the planets I owned. Speaking of which.

Congratulations! Your guild has been promoted from standard filings up to the imperial category. This eliminates any cap on ownership of worlds and allows the user to claim ownership over solar systems and the resources within. Get ready to roll up your sleeves, find some ores, and crack open some planets!

Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Solus system gained!

Schema's messages always carried a strange contrast. They embodied a happy, winning raffle tone that opposed the brutal reality of earning the rewards. Still, the second part of this update made me smile.

[Sovereign Update: Big news, Sovereign! You now officially own a planet(s)! You've gained a resulting perk(s) from your ownership of that planet(s) based on the world (s) owned.

Your perks are as follows:

Planetary Perks Gained -

Mercury's Maker | +11.2% to temperature multiplier.

Venus's Allure | +11.2% to aura pressure, control, and radius.

Earth's Immortal | +11.2% to regeneration stats.

Mars's Madness | +11.2% to Ascendant Outflow.

Jupiter's Juggernaut | +11.2% to Mass.

Saturn's Star | +11.2% to Gravitational Potency.

Dominator of Uranus | + 11.2% to Quintessant Outflow.

Neptune's Navigator | +11.2% to Primordial Outflow.

Solus's Saviour | +11.2% more exp, credit gain, and awareness within the Solus System.

Blegara's Borne | +11.2% more damage against eldritch.]

I gawked at the perk for Uranus. It was a great perk, but, uh, the naming was a little off. All the other perks read better, even slotting their bonuses into the planet's significance for our solar system. All in all, they compiled into a notable increase in my abilities. They also omened how much the Ruler of Worlds tree might affect me if I owned many planets. It might not be as much of a personal sacrifice as I expected.

I moved on.

[Self Augments(Previously: Modifications) - The dimensional fabric composing this structure has been modified with code from the dimensional cipher. The changes are as follows(Pre-multiplier values):

+17,231 Constitution

+87,827 Endurance

+13,728 Perception

+21,278 Willpower

+11,777 Luck

+13,901 Strength

+12,490 Dexterity

+9,019 Intelligence

+7,154 Charisma

+9,032 Awe

+100% to Effects of Legacies

+50% Internal Motivation Multiplier

+34% Dimension Size

+34% Dimensional Wake Density

+34% Dimensional Wake Extent

+12,342 Trillion Ambient Mana]

I staggered at the sheer volume of stats thrown my way. I imagined stat gains from the fight with Valgus, but this defied all expectations. Every stat skyrocketed, even stats I lacked an inscription for. My ambient mana tripled, and the other bonuses helped me realize my dimensional potential.

Checking the math, I added my skill bonuses from leveling up and my dimensional augments. My augments outpaced my level-ups by volume, though Schema's multipliers still outworked what my modifications accomplished independently. This omened the magnitude of my future changes.

Inspecting those changes, the dimension size bonus affected my pocket dimension. That's part of why I had the extra space for primevals on returning to Earth. I hadn't noticed the density or wake size yet. First, I reached out with the Rise of Eden for a moment and verified it. My dimensional wake dwarfed its old size, now encompassing Mt. Verner.

I hadn't noticed on L-7 because the planet's scale exceeded Earth's by leaps and bounds. The difference between a square kilometer and a square mile meant nothing there, but I had actual references for comparison on Earth. As for the dimensional density, that could be why I sensed Althea within my wake.

Moving onto level-ups, I peered at 5,000 as Schema promised, but that was it. I expected some exp from the lottery's monsters, but I reviewed the terms. Schema set the lottery outside of both Schema-owned spaces or a rift. That meant we received nothing from killing the primevals or Schema's enemies.

Despite that technicality, I piled up plenty of points to spend. 20,000 of them. I put all of them into endurance and stared at the finalize screen. After clicking this, I'd gain the tree bonuses, the planet perks, and the attributes. A bit antsy, I clicked the button, and a wave of mana crashed from afar.

I brimmed from the energy flow, glowing before I stood up. The glass near me melted. It bubbled, boiled, and splattered as my guildmates began panicking. Althea leaped away. Hod flew off into the distance. Torix cast cooling magic, and Chrona roared ice breath.

I condensed my wake, stopping the energy flow for a moment. As the heat dissipated, I cooled the area. I left a burned spot over Chrona's home, so I winced.

"Ah, my bad, guys. I forgot how much energy my status updates send out these days. I'll fix this later."

Torix sighed.

"Patently absurd."

I walked over to the edge of the building and leaped up. I pulled myself along with gravity, flying high into the atmosphere. Above the clouds, I soared until Earth's gravitational pull lightened. Once far away from anyone or anything, I allowed Schema's reconfiguring to take place. As it happened, I slowed it down with my wake's density.

This let me appreciate Schema's changes. From a flashing moment to a loaded minute, my anatomy and mind changed. I leaned in, putting every part of my mind on understanding the shifts. I uncovered a few of his secrets as I did.

Schema couldn't increase my strength via normal means anymore, so he used other methods. The primary difference arrived from mana-based muscle fibers. They operated off of constructed segments of my armor. Whenever mana pulsed through them, they pulled together or apart. I had no clue how Schema did it, but I'd get Torix and Plazia on that case after this.

Unlike the physical changes, I struggled to dissect the mental differences. Even Schema would probably shrug at what he did, as little about my thought process or cerebral

acuity changed. Thinking about it, I wouldn't know what to do either. After all, how much can you change about someone's mind before it wasn't theirs?

Schema couldn't interfere with free will, so he kept the mental changes on simple, easy-to-articulate conditions. He improved the computational proficiency and processing speed of the psyche. That let him increase the amount of thought someone could dish out, increasing their mana and regeneration.

However, the natural ingenuity of the mind remained stagnant. Hell, even coming up with a strict definition of intelligence was difficult, and people always argued about it. Schema evaded all that by focusing on the simplest, most determined explanation possible.

It wasn't a poor answer.

Regardless of my breakdowns, Schema's augments were razor-sharp and precise. No matter how I criticized him, Schema used as little mana as possible for the most benefit. His efficiency far and away exceeded my own, requiring far less mana for better additions. It left me in awe, and I had a long way to go before I could do the same.

As the changes settled in, I raised my arm, moving my new hand with my improved mind. Not bad. Not bad at all.

[Status]

The Living Multiverse | Level 23,767 (Cap: 39,000) | Current Influence: The Rise of Eden | Class: Sovereign

Strength – 190,917 | Constitution – 212,632 | Endurance – 451,956

Dexterity – 115,926 | Willpower – 396,395 | Intelligence – 257,229

Charisma – 121,399 | Luck – 154,656 | Perception – 86,756 | Awe - 16,943

Health: 3.60 Billion/3.60 Billion | Health Regen: 278 Billion/min or 4.621 Billion/sec

Stamina: Infinite++ | Ambient Mana 12,402 Trillion

Mass: 2.2 Billion Pounds(1 Billion Kilos~)

Height: 37'11 |11.56 meters | Actual: 21'9 (Temporal Compression)

Damage Res - 99.532% | Actual: 99.672% (Temporal Compression) | Dimensional Res - 100%

Phys Dam Bonus – 22.6 Billion% | 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: 41) - 239.2 Billion mana/min siphoned into runes and armor.

[Previous]

I hadn't checked my status in a long time, and the numbers increased to absurd quantities. My periphery attributes exploded, my weight ten-folded, and so did my physical damage. My damage resistance also inched up, and Temporal Compression increased it. Reasoning through why I peered at the skill's creation.

It devoured Mass Manipulation. Well, Mass Molding but whatever. Same thing. Whenever a mythical skill absorbed unique skills, they improved them. At a certain point, condensing my matter resulted in a more rigid, more robust material. Therefore, leveling that skill would improve my dimensional fabric.

Hell yeah.

And, of course, I didn't forget the most important measuring stick of progress. You know it. I know it. We all know it. The big daddy. The penultimate peak. The absolute apex. The only real value that mattered in the grand scheme of things. That's right.

Health regen.

Sarcasm aside, it nearly quadrupled, with all the multipliers going crazy again. The planet perks helped with that, as had all the endurance from level-ups. Peering at my hands, I snapped my fingers. A singularity erupted afar. I snapped two fingers, and two singularities detonated. I kept adding more until I capped at nine of them. Ridiculous.

I quit exercising my mana because I kept causing clouds to whirl below. Moving around, it was challenging to know the exact physical differences without something to test on, especially this high up. Peering down at the blue marble below, I flinched. At this point, I could shatter mountains or rive rivers with my hand.

I'd test myself elsewhere in a less precious place. Heading back down, I whirled through the wind. Heat built over me, and I passed through a raincloud. The water evaporated as I passed, and I got into view of Mt. Verner in seconds. While getting close, I ignited several birds that exploded like aquatic grenades.

I gawked in horror at the charred remnants and sifting steam. Slowing the hell down, I took a few minutes getting back while cooling myself. While passing a cloud, it dropped blocks of hail. I was too cold. Great. In fact, all these temperatures seemed the same to me. I rubbed my temples, trying to come up with a solution. In a minute, I did.

I kept a bubble of water beside me, and I kept it from freezing, boiling, or evaporating. It gave me an accurate temperature gauge, preventing me from flying down while radiating the heat of a furnace or oozing the cold of space. Once below, I landed in Chrona's icy home.

The others spurred into action. Shalahora, Hod, and Althea trained in the mountain's shadow. Torix talked with Plazia, a metal skeleton talking to a horde of flies. Chrona sat still, using her temporal prowess on Amara and Krog. Obolis went back to his Empire and tended to many matters.

I flew over to Plazia and Torix. Torix pointed a hand at the flies.

"The issue with bodily integration with the Omega Strain is that it will result in an unknown status for our guildmates. We'll lose more fighting power than we gain."

I raised my brow.

"Huh, not worried about whether they'll go insane?"

Torix tilted his hand.

"Ethical arguments wouldn't work well against Plazia as they are the least of his concerns. So I used what works - pragmatism."

I raised my brow.

"You don't want a win when it's the most impressive?"

Torix scoffed.

"If my words are a knife, then I slice where the enemy is softest. That being said-"

Torix interlocked his hands behind himself.

"What is needed of us?"

I pointed at the lich.

"I need you to organize everyone in Mt. Verner. I'm going to be rebuilding this place from the ground up."

Torix nodded.

"Consider it done."

I pointed at Plazia.

"Get a good understanding of the Omega Strain and come back with detailed reports. There's plenty of latent potential there. I can feel it."

Plazia's insects rippled.

"I shall trust your intuition."

I turned before bending my knees. Torix's eyes brightened.

"Where are you headed?"

"To Blegara. I'm getting Kessiah some new bodyguards."

I flew over towards Mt. Verner's warp drives. As I did, I sent Shalahora a telepathic message.

"Keep them safe while I'm away."

He said, "As your shadow."

"Hm?"

"It means yes."

"Ah, ok...Do you need anything?"

"For you to survive."

I nodded.

"As your shadow."

I raced past several groups of people, waving my hand without stopping. I headed to Mt. Verner's warp drive before talking with Schema's receptionist. A quick chat later, I stepped into a metal tube. Ionizing clouds poured over me before I shifted position. I stepped out into Saphigia, the zone protected by a blue core.

Around me, the endless ocean of Blegara covered a reinforced barrier, schools of fish passing by overhead. Beams of light leaked between the waves like an endlessly rippling panel of glass overhead. In the distance, a wispy barrier shielded some of Saphigia, and I winced at it. The thin, light shielding wouldn't survive a single primeval, let alone a group of them.

I had to fix that.

I pulled myself up, peering down at a city in development. A constructor golem or two would make a world of difference here. I spent a few minutes making two of them and putting their cores in place. Heading towards the city's center, I found a monolith sitting there and ebbing an aura of buffs.

Terrible buffs. I cringed at the sight of it, its unstable design and poor output being my fault. After flattening it, I made a new pillar of my dimensional fabric. I added a few premade cipheric etchings from my grimoire and planted ten blue cores into the monolith.

It generated a barrier around the city, far vaster than before. It included underwater sections of the city, creating a psionic web that anyone could contact. Many did, whether by accident or not. From those connections, awareness spread over me, giving me some idea of what happened in the city from nearby Vagni's thoughts.

I sifted through mundanities before my eyes widened. In a panic, I flew up, dashing across the ruined cityscape. Passing into the submerged portion of the city, I extended my dimensional wake outward. A chill ran up my spine as I peered around. At Saphigia's outskirts, a military ship had landed, one from the Empire.

They established an air zone under the waves using mana batteries and machinery. Within the area, Kessiah healed soldiers. She channeled blood from her prepped pouches, reconstituting even lost limbs for various albony and other aliens. As impressive as it was, my eyes settled on a different ship that landed nearby.

Hybrids gazed at me from its surface. Orange pustules pumped energy under their surface. Blighted ones swam nearby, making a mockery of their old, gialgathenic forms. They wrestled with older models of my golems, and a battle erupted in the sea again. Trying to settle the conflict, several Elysium soldiers landed nearby with Hybrid guards, carrying various documentation.

They psionically announced.

"We mean no harm to the locals. We are here for the imperials."

It was a repeating call. Several Hybrid carcasses piled up, the battle being waged for a while. Once close, my status disappeared, and I crashed through the imperial's protective barrier. Raising a hand, I sealed the hole shut with a saturated antigravity well while standing over everyone.

The albony and others gawked at me. Kessiah peered up, and she shouted.

"It's about damn time someone showed up. Get these guys the hell out of here. I'm trying to make some money for Schema's sake."

I glared at the ship.

"Get them out?"

I waved my hand.

"They're not leaving."

As my hand passed, I disintegrated the ship in five singularities' wake. They evaporated, the nearby albony trembling in fear. The vessel converted into a kinetic shockwave rippling through the water. Reaching up my other arm, I pulled down. Saphigia's new barrier molded under my command, covering this isolated bubble.

Weathering the incoming shockwave, we watched schools of fish and Hybrids get thrown aside by the tsunami and tidal movements. I turned to Kessiah.

"We're getting out of here."

She gestured at a dying imperial soldier.

"I'm kind of busy at the moment."

I walked up, swiping the gooey mess of a person into my pocket dimension. Kessiah blinked.

"Oh yeah, you can do that."

I swiped the other injured soldiers into my pocket dimension, already having practice. After getting the last one, Kessiah stepped away from me.

"You're Daniel, right?"

I pulled my helmet down.

"Of course. Who else?"

Kessiah shrugged.

"A giant, metal monster?"

I made a finger pistol with my hand, pointing at different Hybrids in the distance. I pulled them into a cluster.

"What makes you say that?"

I evaporated them with a singularity. Kessiah frowned.

"Don't know. Maybe it's the weather?"

Off in the distance, a vast warp erupted. Along its edges, golden claws punched through the ether. I sighed.

"Well, it's about to get stormy."

Kessiah peered off, covering her face.

"Ok, yeah, it's still you under all that steel."

I smiled.

"Give me a minute. We'll talk after I handle this."

I broke through the Imperial's barrier again, letting them handle the aftermath as I stared down the largest gialgathen to ever live. Its mammoth eye gazed through the tear in space-time. From the warp, a haughty voice erupted over the landscape.

"Another oceanic world? Ugh. I tire of desolating the seas of far-off planets."

Lehesion pulled himself from the void, and his eyes met mine. A grin grew over his face.

"Ah. It is you yet again. I thought we'd called a truce of sorts? Perhaps you wished for another thrashing?"

Energy plumed from me, ascendant mana billowing out like blood. The ocean ran red.

"I'm not the same Daniel you fought before."

Golden lightning erupted from Lehesion as he shouted across the horizon.

"And neither am I, child."

Chapter 375: A Might Unseen and Undeniable

Lehesion pulled himself from the void, and his eyes met mine. A grin grew over his face.

"Ah. It is you yet again. I thought we'd called a truce of sorts? Perhaps you wished for another thrashing."

Energy plumed from me, ascendant mana billowing out like blood. The ocean ran red.

"I'm not the same Daniel you fought before."

Golden lightning erupted from Lehesion as he shouted across the horizon.

"And neither am I, child."

Lehesion breathed deep. Energy piled into his maw, and he unleashed a giant ray of energy toward the city. It bounced off of the city's barriers while I bolted towards him. I split the sea with my gravity wells, tidal forces spreading everywhere. When I reached Lehesion, he swung his tail towards me.

I flowed around it, and Lehesions tail smashed the sand below. Grit melted to glass from the impact, and water billowed away, vaporizing. Air touched us both, each of us staring. Lehesion boomed.

"You've become even better at avoiding my blows. The weak always run."

My armor grinned.

"You're wrong. I don't need to anymore."

Lehesion smirked.

"Then why have you, little one?"

I raised a hand.

"Come on. Let me have it then."

Lehesion grinned, energy building in his tail.

"You have gained many levels since we last fought."

I burst into laughter. Lehesion grimaced.

"What do you laugh at? Is your position so pitiful that it's driven you insane?"

I pointed at him.

"First off, you might be projecting a little there. Secondly, levels don't tell you much."

Lehesion's eyes narrowed.

"We shall see."

Lehesion smashed his tail downward, and I reached up a hand. It crashed against my palm with enough force to crush a skyscraper. It could've leveled a large hill or created a small canyon, but I didn't budge. Like a child hitting a steel wall, Lehesion's tail broke from hitting me, bones cracking within.

Lehesion gawked.

"W-what trickery is this?"

I gripped my hand, crushing the golden flesh of his tail.

"Oh, you'll need to do better than this, shiny lizard."

My armor shot through his body, a blazing infestation that soaked in his energy. Lehesion sliced away his tail as he grunted.

"You are as grotesque as always."

I stared at him.

"All you see is the physical. Soon, you will fear what my mind has become."

Lehesion froze in place before shaking himself. He breathed deep before roaring across the horizon once more. It crashed against my wake, and the sound shattered. Silence passed over me as I kept my gaze steady.

Lehesion snarled, "Cease staring at me."

I walked his way. Lehesion boomed.

"Cease."

He waved his giant wings, golden energy beams spreading across the entire area. The ground quaked and rippled apart where the light touched, breaking down at an atomical level. Instead of facing the attack, I switched to The Rise of Eden and generated a colossal stone shelf. It materialized in front of Lehesion.

His beams blasted against several hundred meters of rock. The stone swallowed the rays, and his attack blew him backward. As he flopped, I bolted through the rock and reached him. The shattered god molded his golden aura, creating a shield. With Event Horizon, I pierced it.

Cracks rippled across the gold as I disintegrated his insides. Reaching up a hand, I smashed it down, augmenting my strike with a dozen techniques. Gravity wells. Telekinesis. Heat. Accelerated time. A smaller surface area. My dimensional wake. A reinforced body. A reinforced mind. My strike was a culmination of all my years of effort and struggle. It embodied what I'd done to myself, abandoning my humanity to save myself.

And it ushered forth cataclysm.

Lehesion's body splattered like a yellow watermelon. Blood, guts, Hybrid mush, and water dispersed as heat vaporized the nearby ocean. Glass sprawled like charred tree roots from around the crater. The shockwave passed over me before I stared at my hand and a dead Lehesion. I'd evolved into a whole different being since we last met.

Gazing at the lizard's reconstitution, Lehesion's body returned where his aura lingered. He oggled at his surroundings before jumping away from me.

"Where are your allies? Is this an orbital bombardment? A nuclear assault?"

I cracked my knuckles, waves rippling through the water above from the force I put on my bones.

"No. It's my fist."

Lehesion scrambled away.

"Lies."

I bolted back to him.

"See, I like to punch things. The problem is, it doesn't often work these days."

With a single strike, I destroyed him once more. As he came back, I smiled.

"My enemies are tricky, but sometimes, once in a blue moon-"

I smashed him. He arrived once more. I laughed.

"Once in a blue moon, this actually works, and it is oh so satisfying."

He flew away, sliding through the water with elegance despite his size. I followed. The surrounding ocean disintegrated into steam from friction and heat as I approached. I threw another haymaker at the shiny lizard. His body splintered, becoming a mushy soup at the bottom of a dry sea. The waves around us plumed out before billowing up thousands of feet high.

I blinked in disbelief myself.

Lehesion reformed, staring around once more.

"What is even happening?"

I smiled.

"Let me show you again."

I popped the golden balloon. Seeing his regenerating face, I opened my current status and compared it with a timestamp from when I fought Lehesion before. I turned a hand.

"First off, I'm a hundred times heavier."

I burst the bright blimp. He came to, and I gawked at the numbers.

"I'm two thousand times stronger, somehow. That's wild, I'll tell ya."

I detonated the glowing zeppelin. Regenerating again, he stared at me in horror, and I leaned toward my status.

"Only twelve times more mana regen? Oof, that's starting to slow down. I have to find a way to fix that."

Lehesion's eyes bulged.

"Cease this. What in Eonoth's name have you done?"

I stared at him. Lehesion peered around.

"We...We are still alone. Is Schema helping you? Did you find a hidden artifact?"

I lifted a hand.

"It's my flesh and bones. Tough to emulate."

I pointed at him, trying out singularities within his aura, and the golden energy swallowed all my magic. Unlike Valgus's chains, this wasn't some absolute, antimagic. My sorcery went through but siphoned to a different place. It carried a similar effect to Valgus's shackles, so Lehesion smiled at me. It was a crooked expression, incomplete as his confidence.

"Hah. You've yet to pierce my defenses."

I narrowed my eyes while spreading my hand. Singularities burst an inch outside of his barrier's extent, the shockwaves cascading around him. The lizard disintegrated again. As he pulled himself from the void, fear spread over him. He trembled.

"What has been done? What contracts have you signed? Whose souls did you sell?"

I darted towards him, and he turned around, flying away. Splat. He returned, trying to warp out. I kept the rip in spacetime open and destroyed whatever lay beyond its veil. Lehesion scrambled to pass me, but I extended my armor over the warp before slamming it shut.

Getting desperate, Lehesion flew up, and I followed. Energy coalesced, and an eclipse formed overhead. The day devolved to darkness, and Lehesion howled out.

"You...If I can't kill you, I'll destroy this entire region."

I raised my brow.

"Region? You gotta up the ante. That's not going to cut it anymore."

In my city, the two constructor golems kept the barrier firm. Lehesion channeled energy through his body, stars forming overhead as they had before. I hovered before him, charging mana into my frame and dimensional wake. Once Lehesion finished, his stars shot down from above.

Falling like an apocalypse, the bolts came closer, tiny lights becoming massive beacons. In the shattered god's wake, heaven rained. I faced that eclipse, my form looming in shadow. Energy siphoned through me, channeling into my palms. Ludicrous quantities of mana built up, and I glowed like a sun.

I spread my arms, and singularities cast out over the sky. The dark, inken blots devoured the incoming stars, swallowing hundreds of them. A cacophony of sound erupted, so loud it killed all near it. It disintegrated anything alive, and clouds coursed in from afar. Whirlpools lifted from the ocean to the gravitational anomalies. The sea shifted in the horizon, waves casting up from afar.

Lehesion marveled for a moment before peering down.

"Are...Are you a god as well?"

I rolled my eyes.

"No. I'm Daniel."

Lehesion's eyes closed, and when they opened, I winced. Those controlling him unleashed a devastating psionic attack. Hundreds of mages rushed into my mind, ripping and gnawing it apart. They scorched the air and salted the earth. I bled from my eyes, nose, and ears as vessels ruptured in my head. The liquid pooled in my mouth. It dripped through my teeth like mercury coursing.

And I smiled, my grin wide. I tapped my temple.

"You'll need more. Much, much more."

I pulled in most of the minds from my wake, and they rushed at the attacking forces. They kamikazed into the enemies, my psyches killing several enemies with each of their deaths. Unleashed in a formless goop, they flooded the enemies with mana, memories, and haphazard thought.

There was no reason to use strategy. There was no need for finesse. I assaulted them with every ounce of my ability, and Lehesion's frail mind collapsed under the flow and pressure. His eyes rolled back in his head, and he twitched like an insect pressed with fire. I killed hundreds of mind mages before they tried escaping.

I held them within the palace of my mind, and I barred the exits. They chose this path, one against me. They would feel the entire burden of that mistake. As I slaughtered, a voice rang out in my head.

Tohtella.

"You. What are you doing?"

I continued killing.

Tohtella shouted, "This. This means war."

I reached into Lehesion's mind, finding telepathic strands. I pulled them into the fray. Into the killing field. Into an abyss. My abyss.

Tohtella hissed, "This is about the lottery, isn't it?"

Once close, I inundated the minds. They burst at the seams, driven mad by mana and incoherency. They drowned. They ruptured. They split apart like melons filled with liquid metal.

Tohtella roared, "We will retreat. We will give you anything. Stop. Stop, now."

I spread madness, flooding the weak. The telepathic control of Lehesion weakened. I darted towards him, smashing his body apart once more. Taking out a few runic plates, I detonated them, deforming the fabric of reality where Lehesion's aura lingered.

Lehesion's body regenerated into a devolved collection of talking organs and speaking skin.

The remnants controlling him scattered, unable to tolerate the horror of inhabiting such a body. I remained within, tearing it apart. As I gored the mind into pieces, a familiar presence coursed in. I peered around, and I grimaced. Time stopped, and a voice echoed out like far-off thunder. It built in my ears until I felt it in my bones.

"We meet again, living metal."

Chapter 376: A Chat After Time's End

I flooded them, and they burst, the telepathic control of Lehesion weakening. I darted towards him, smashing his body apart once more. Taking out a few runic plates, I detonated them, deforming the area. Lehesion's body devolved into a collection of talking organs and speaking skin. The remnants controlling him scattered, unable to tolerate the horror of inhabiting such a body.

I remained within, tearing it apart. As I gored the mind into pieces, a familiar presence coursed in. I peered around, and I sneered. Time stopped, and a voice echoed out like far-off thunder.

"We meet again, living metal."

Around me, Eonoth's presence coursed in. It reduced the fabric of space into its plaything and warped all it touched into an eternal void. As the dark reached the edges of my wake, I pushed back against it. The overbearing presence crushed me down, and I buckled. I collapsed as my skin peeled off. My bones disintegrated to a liquid, and my teeth shattered.

I stood, my body reforming several times a second. This wouldn't work. Instead of trying to keep such a large area untainted, I pulled my wake to the surface of my skin. The pressure reduced, and I only bled from many ruptures across my body. The pressure mounted like diving deeper under the sea.

Like a leaking ship, I groaned and bled under the weight of the dimensional shifts around me. They hadn't overcome me yet. The pressure increased, and my body crushed into a small puddle as a laugh echoed. I held on, pulling my wake closer. I condensed it into a minute point, the size of an apple. I abandoned my body, letting it disappear, but I held onto this tiny bastion of sanity I maintained.

I closed it and my mind off, becoming a bulwark. I existed within the sea of burden, holding on. Eonoth tapped the tiny sphere like a child tapping a glass tank full of fish. Cracks in the wake rippled through me, several of my minds dying. I rallied, pulling my wake further down. I still existed, the size of a coin. It tapped against me once more. I died, or at least it felt like it.

I'd have to pull myself further down, deeper into these waters. I strained every mind to tighten myself to a tiny point. Another tap arrived, and many of my psyches died. I compressed to the size of a penny. Death rained from Eonoth's tampering. My mind squealed as I bit down hard, turning myself to the size of a pupil. The thumping continued, and chunks of my psyche perished.

I reached my limit, becoming the size of a pinhead. Every part of me struggled to maintain this, and I could not squeeze more blood from this stone. The tapping ceased, so I waited. With another thud, a chunk of my animas died. However, I held my ground, keeping my dimensional sanctity from the Old One.

Taps arrived in waves. One. Two. Sets of threes. They whittled me apart like a stone being shot. Cackling coursed around me, an endless discord of madness. I ignored it and regenerated my mind, parts of myself dying with each tap. I kept reconstituting my sanity across each storm while holding myself in this minuscule form.

The retaliation grew in volume, size, and scale. I tempered an unending set of thumps. Likely subtle to this strange presence, it eviscerated all of me. I held onto memories of what my sane mind was, remembering its form but unable to recreate it under perpetual pressure. My thoughts shook, becoming disjointed and chaotic.

It reminded me of Valgus infiltrating my mind. No. Far worse. This was a raw, psionic death, not a deft, technical usage of mental might. Holding together, I crushed under Eonoth's probing. It reminded me of dying in the psionic fluid but from a physical, tactile impact. I laughed at the irony of the situation.

Earlier, I easily dismantled a pressing enemy of Schema who threatened galactic peace. Against an Old One, I was a dimensional pinhead who couldn't even hold a physical form. There were levels to this game, and I was at the bottom. There was no lower that I could sink, yet I held onto that thought.

It sparked joy in my chest. It arrived like a thundering chorus and a resounding cheer. Here I was, nothing more than a pawn on an endless chessboard, a piece waiting for my

inevitable slaughter. I was pulled and tugged by the masters who carried control of everything around me.

But I was in the game. That much was undeniable. One day, I could win.

Sensing my joy, Eonoth's voice echoed like music did while walking into a club.

"You resist me? And with palpable elation. Interesting. You are so easily broken, yet you return all the same. Where is your limit?"

I crushed.

Eonoth said, "Resist."

I crushed ten times.

"Resist."

I crushed a hundred times.

"Resist."

I crushed a thousand times, my mind struggling to maintain sanity.

"Hah hah, resist me. Resist. Resist. Resist.

I wondered if resist was even a word. Could I even spell it?

"Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist."

I quaked, my core aspects struggling to maintain a definite form.

[illegible]

Instead of holding onto my entire mind, I kept a smaller piece. This eased the process. It made it easier to let go of what Eonoth carved away.

"Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist.
Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist."

I pieced away at what defined me and my mind. I continued whittling away until I decided to remain. Yes, I would remain. That was all I needed. It was all I was.

[illegible]

This, too, would pass. I would persevere.

"Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist.
Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist.
Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist."

I would withstand.

[illegible]

I would weather this storm.

"Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist.
Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist.
Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist.
Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist. Resist."

I would remain.

[illegible]

I would endure.

"Enough."

I smashed into nothing, falling into the Old One's abyss. I reconstituted, my wake pulled into some other plane. I peered around, remembering this place from long ago. I grabbed the side of my face before squeezing in frustration. I thought I'd pushed through some barrier or made a difference.

No. I was nothing still. More nothing, maybe, but still a muted presence to these interdimensional beings. While I considered how to even practice whatever that was, an ever-shifting form encroached. I gazed at an indefinite being of cosmic origin and an unknown scale.

Eonoth laughed.

"You...You try to resist my pull. Why?"

I waved a hand.

"I'll answer, but don't say resist anymore."

Eonoth wrapped around me, not touching but pressing from all angles.

"In my domain, I will do as I wish. You may resist. Resist. Resist...Now speak."

I floated in the ether. Eonoth scoffed.

"You've become defiant. Baldowah did not lie."

I narrowed my eyes. Eonoth shivered.

"You hold to what you've said...I shall not speak the word resist, as you've asked."

Whenever Eonoth said the word, it repeated in my head, an unending symphony that built like some cognitive virus. I trembled as it expanded, taking more of my mind each passing second. Before it overwhelmed me, I pulled several psyches around the phrase and threw them into my dimensional wake. In the ether, I scrambled them into nothing, killing their cognition.

The virus died with them.

Eonoth retracted his undefinable form.

"Your mind is durable as your body. Perhaps more so."

I sneered.

"Why did you bring me here?"

Eonoth rippled the ethereal plane around us.

"You've destroyed my champion. Do you wish to take his place?"

"No."

"Then where am I to search for another? Tell where others may reside and who could take his place? Perhaps your friends? Althea? Torix? Hod?"

Rage swelled in my chest, and I channeled mana, ready for anything. Eonoth sighed.

"You're less talkative than before. It is irritating."

"I'm not your entertainment."

"You have been, are, and will be. Until you die. Until all die."

"Or you die. It depends on who goes first."

"You believe your resistance was a sign that you may stop me?"

Eonoth didn't listen when I told him to stop saying that word. I was done. I crossed my legs and closed my eyes. Eonoth's voice rose in volume.

"Your mind believes it can build on an infinite basis. However, you are restrained by laws and cannot outdo what you've spawned from."

I channeled mana into my runes.

"I am greater than your dimension."

I achieved a sense of peace.

"Your silence shows your will. Hm. Then listen. I will fold time to undo what has been done. If you continue dismantling my champion, I shall utterly shatter your mind. You will not be able to resist what I've done the next time. I will infest your mind with enough madness that even a thousand species would be driven insane."

Eonoth quaked.

"A taste of what will come."

A dozen cognitive viruses erupted in my head. I writhed, my mind falling apart while Eonoth laughed. Resist encompassed vast swaths of my mind before I kamikazed into

my dimensional wake. I cleaved pieces of myself apart like a man amputating fire off his body. Where I cut, I regenerated without the virus.

Pieces of it remained, and it overwhelmed the sane parts of myself yet again. I died, reformed, and died again. I kept the cycle of self-sacrifice continuing, destroying my mind until it was unrecognizable. It took several hours and thousands of psionic deaths before I became whole again. I was me.

Finally able to, I opened my eyes. The Old One's plane had disintegrated, and I was on Mt. Verner in the warp drive. I stared at steel walls and ionizing clouds that encroached over me. The doors opened, and I stumbled out onto Blegara. I caught my heft with a gravity well just before I landed.

I would've caused a massive explosion from tripping. Staring at the sandy ground, I took several breaths, calming myself down. I pulled myself upright while sitting down and grabbing the sides of my head. I heaved for a while. Nothing came up.

A soldier walked up to me.

"Uhm, Sir, is everything ok? Did something happen at Mt. Verner?"

I shook off my unease.

"No. I just need a moment."

She waved.

"O-of course. Send a message if you need anything."

She left me, and I held down my nausea. I stared up. In the distance, a weak and feeble barrier protected some of the city. No constructor golems passed over the skyline. No one fixed the poorly made structures. No one had handled the Elysium forces landing on the planet.

I was in the past.

I stared at my hands, wondering if I was even still alive. Was my imprisonment an implanted memory? Was anything real? I shivered, not knowing how long Eonoth trapped me in that place. It could've been years or decades, and I couldn't make it out. My time there blurred together, memories of that time like crushed glass. A corrupted mosaic. A smashed plate.

Was I broken?

In the corner of my vision, a notification rang out.

[Unique skill gained! A Mind's Defiance | Level 10 - Few are willing to die for what they believe in. None are willing to die forever. None but you. Know that your deaths are with meaning. They are a statement to those that would doubt you. They are a testament to your will and vision. They are a mark against those that would destroy all you love.

You have chosen to defy forces beyond us, and we will stand with you.

+10% to Mental Reconstitution Speed.

+10% to Mental Resilience.

+10% to Mental Regeneration.

+100 points for creating a unique skill!

Skill level up! +90 points in A Mind's Defiance.

Skill level up! +234 points in Temporal Compression.

Skill level up! +102 points in A Manifold Mind

Trees unlocked!]

Gazing at the notification, a wave of calm passed over me. Enormous amounts of mana radiated in. My psyches crystallized, becoming rigid and dense. I swallowed back down a wave of nausea, and my trembling lessened to shaking. Clarity coursed, and motivation surged.

That's right. I wasn't alone. After taking a breath, I said the word.

"Resist."

I winced, but it left no mark on me. I remained whole and sane. I repeated the word, testing myself, and I retained coherency. I stood on unsteady feet and squeezed my shaking hands. The tremors stopped. The fear faded. Before heading out, I gave myself a moment to remember my resolve. This would be a long road, and I'd only taken a single step.

It was time to take another.

Chapter 377: Relived

Gazing at the notification, a wave of calm passed over me. Enormous amounts of mana radiated in. My psyches crystallized, becoming rigid and dense. I swallowed back down a wave of nausea, and my trembling lessened to shaking. Clarity coursed, and motivation surged.

That's right. I wasn't alone. After taking a breath, I said the word.

"Resist."

I winced, but it left no mark on me. I remained whole and sane. I repeated the word, testing myself, and I retained coherency. I stood on unsteady feet and squeezed my shaking hands. The tremors stopped. The fear faded. Before heading out, I gave myself a moment to remember my resolve. This would be a long road, and I'd only taken a single step.

It was time to take another.

I took a second to think my options through. Knowing the future, I considered rushing to crush Elysium immediately. After some thought, I came up with a different plan. First, I opened my status and invested my tree points into Owner of Worlds.

You hold in your hands the power of decision. Your words usher forth change on a global scale across regions, cultures, and species. You may guide those under you to oblivion or nirvana. You may squeeze to powder or carry to eminence. You may crush to nothing or build to bastion.

It is a history you make.

+75% to City Barrier Strength

+75% to City Barrier Efficiency

+30% to City Barrier Size

+30% to Credit Income Multiplier from owned territories

+30% to Experience Multiplier from owned territories

+75% to Bounty Payout in owned territories

+75% to Bounty Experience Reward in owned territories

-30% to Warping Costs in owned territories

Sovereign Exclusive: +18% to World Perk Efficacy

The bonuses clicked into effect as I shot towards Saphigia's center to compensate for lost time. I landed on the city's monolith, crushing it under my heel. Powdered stone billowed in a massive cloud, but I contained it with an ice shield. After pulling the rock and water out of the confined area, I pulled out the active blue core.

It hummed in my hands, still keeping this part of Saphigia safe, but I shook my head at the weak, tamed thing. It paled in comparison to the blue cores I gained on L-7. After

pulling out twenty blue cores, I generated a new pillar and embedded cipheric markings. Once completed, I moved on to creating constructor golems.

With two made after several minutes, I took my time to create eight more guardians. Before I finished all of them, I sent the already-made golems to help against Elysium's vessel. However, instead of having them destroy it, I told them to only defend the imperial troops and Kessiah. My arrival would still be necessary for my plan.

An hour passed before I finished all of the golems. While crafting, I charged the twenty blue cores I put in Saphigia's central monolith. I doubled the core commitment from my last go-through, which paid off. A dynamic, dense, and resilient barrier covered the city, and I marveled at it.

The hexagonal shapes composing the sphere resembled crystal panels of ice, holding well over three hundred billion mana stored to protect this place. It could send out those panels and slice apart anything nearby, the cipheric augments taking on a life of their own. Even the buffs from the monolith improved, making everything stronger within.

They'd need more than Lehesion to take this place.

After the city's makeover, I shot across the skyline, making my body thin like a needle. The more aerodynamic form reduced friction, preventing any unintended ignitions nearby. After a minute, I reached the Elysium vessel. The imperials fought the Elysium troops with my golems as a backup, but the cored golems dwarfed the power of the Hybrids.

The pulsing machines piled up by the dozen, my guardians disintegrating the masses as they stacked up. The imperials stabilized the situation, and my barrier's buffs helped keep critically wounded soldiers alive. Wanting Lehesion to arrive again, I copied my previous landing. I crashed through the protective wall that Kessiah healed in.

The albony and others gawked at me. Kessiah peered up, and she shouted.

"It's about damn time someone showed up. Get these guys the hell out of here. I'm trying to make some money for Schema's sake."

I glared in their direction.

"They're not leaving."

Getting Deja Vu, I encompassed the entire area in a gravity well. From afar, any stray Hybrids or Elysium soldiers siphoned to Elysium's ship. I commanded my golems to get the imperials out of there, and I preemptively pulled the city's barrier over us. Once I piled everything together, I localized the gravity well into a shrunken point.

The vessel caved in, air bubbles bursting out of its smashed hull. I gave it one more squeeze, liquid squealing out of cracks. Three singularities later, the vessel was no more.

I turned to Kessiah.

"Yo. We have to go."

She pointed at the wounded albony.

"I'm kind of busy-"

I had already swiped several people into my pocket dimension, collecting them all in a few seconds. Kessiah gawked.

"Oh yeah. You can do that."

I swept up the last soldier.

"I'm isolating them within a dimensional stasis. They can't die without time's passage."

Kessiah stepped away from me.

"You...You're Daniel, right?"

I pulled my helmet down.

"Of course. Who else?"

Kessiah shrugged.

"A giant, metal monster?"

"Eh, maybe a little. One sec."

I turned towards Lehesion's warp in the distance.

"Try to finish up here. I'll be back in a few minutes. I can explain what's going on then."

I flew up the way I came in, leaving them with only one hole to fix in their insulating cover this time. As I crossed the blue core's barrier, I found Lehesion's spatial tear far further out than before. While I waited for him to get through, I charged mana for the coming fight. I needed him and Elysium to remember what I was capable of.

Lehesion smiled.

"Ah. It is you yet again. I thought we'd called a truce of sorts? Perhaps you wished for another thrashing."

"More like I want to give someone a wake-up call."

Lehesion smiled.

"You shall be the one to awaken, child."

He darted through the portal before breathing deeply. Jerking myself sideways, I let his beam billow out to my city. It crashed into the barrier in a massive explosion. I waved my hand over the resulting cloud of steam, pulling it away with gravity. After the ocean filling in the missing water, the shield showed no marks, holding up with utter ease. Perfect.

Lehesion grimaced at me.

"What is this? Face your destroyer."

He rushed at me, flipping in the water while dragging his tail behind himself. It built energy before colliding with my raised arm. His limb ruptured, unable to tolerate the forces he put on it. Rearing back my hand, I smiled.

"Yup. It's still just as satisfying the second time."

I splat him in an instant. He regenerated, and by the time he could move, I had already stretched my pocket dimension to its utmost extent. I swiped up a large portion of him but couldn't get his entire body into the pocket dimension. The entrance wasn't large enough, so a slither of him always remained.

From that slither, he reconstituted in his entirety. Either way, I wasn't getting his aura into the dimensional space, and that's what really mattered. Still, I held several of his bodies within my pocket dimension for later use. After a few more clashes where the golden balloon popped, he flew into the sky for his eclipse shenanigans.

I destroyed the stars once more, my body a flood of destruction and my mind its maker. Once thwarted, Lehesion's eyes rolled back in his head, his controllers taking him over again. Instead of assaulting my mind, enormous amounts of energy coursed in from afar. His body expanded. He engorged himself on power as he had against the Spatial Fortress long ago.

Gazing at me, Tohtella spoke through him.

"It's you again."

I glared at her. Lehesion turned a paw to me. The gesture didn't fit his body.

"This is a misunderstanding, I'm sure. You wouldn't want us to destroy this place and earth next?"

I coursed with an absurd amount of energy.

"Try it."

Lehesion's eyes narrowed.

"Do you think we lack the resolve to destroy your planet?"

I spread my hands.

"No. You lack the ability."

Lehesion bolted towards me, many times faster than before. He slammed his tail into my arm at a blistering pace. A shockwave erupted from the collision, liquefying nearby fish and corals. The ground glassed, and the ocean vaporized. I felt the impact this time, but I held with a slight effort.

Lehesion's bones crushed like wet stones, and Tohtella screamed. I grabbed the flesh of the tail.

"I'm not the same, and I will carve that understanding into your mind."

I pulled Lehesion down and psionically invaded him, but I left the lizard's psyche alone. He was Eonoth's champion, after all. However, the Old One hadn't said anything about Elysium. Once we made contact, they rushed into my head and killed my mind again.

They harvested pieces of me. They chopped, ripped, and tore me apart. I blinked out tears of blood and tasted copper on my tongue. Or mercury. Honestly, I didn't know what my blood tasted like. They didn't either, as I shook my head in disappointment. Their attempts at slaughter, they were shallow. I faced a puddle.

And compared to the endless sea of Eonoth, this was nothing.

While studying Elysium's tactics, strategies, and techniques, I died my shallow deaths. They employed many of them, most familiar but a few new. As they crashed against me, I offered a subtle resistance to exercise their own psionic approach. After a while, my face wrinkled, and I frowned.

It was time.

I enclosed them, many deep within my psyche. I flooded their minds with my own, psionically drowning them. They tried escaping, but I held them here in purgatory as I had before. After splitting most of Elysium's psionics into pieces, Tohtella's voice radiated out.

"You. What are you doing?"

I continued killing.

"Well, I'm decimating all of your current psionics. If I could, I'd pull you down here and kill you too."

Tohtella's voice hardened.

"This means war."

I slaughtered their forces for a while. Tohtella's voice rasped.

"This is about the lottery, isn't it?"

I furrowed my brow.

"Oh really? You think so?"

I pulled dozens more psionics down here, and I ended them.

"You think I don't understand your intentions after the lottery?"

Tohtella's tone changed as I killed swaths of her people.

"E-Elysium is a large organization, and we don't have absolute control of every branch-"

"No. War began on Leviathan-7. I'm showing you what war means to me."

I killed thousands.

"It's one-way slaughter. You line up. I knock you down."

The bodies piled up.

"You want more enemies? I am more than enough."

Their control waned until it no longer pressed on Lehesion. I ripped at what was left.

"You want to have goals? Safety? A place to sleep? To feel warmth without fear? If I am your enemy, then you will have nothing. I'll scorch your worlds. I'll kill every person you want alive. I'll destroy your heritage and history. I'll tear your memory from every mind that has ever heard of Elysium."

Tohtella shouted.

"We'll stop. We'll leave."

I released some mental pressure.

"Then go. If Elysium ever shows a sign of aggression to me or my planets, you will be met with total and complete annihilation. Never touch my worlds again."

Tohtella's presence dispersed, but I continued emptying Lehesion's mind aside from the lizard himself. Once I finished, I pulled myself out. I gazed down at him.

"You know, you're free if you want to be. That could still be possible."

Lehesion stared at me with wide eyes, his wings close to his body. He huddled close to the ground, his head low.

"What are you?"

Tired of hearing that damn question, I shouted.

"I'm Daniel. Don't ask again."

He cowered, and I walked over. I put my hand over his forehead, Lehesion sweating under the vast sea. I leaned close.

"Elysium will never touch my worlds again. And you? If you see one of my planets, I'll gore your mind to splinters."

I squeezed his head.

"Do you understand me?"

"Y-yes."

"I'm not accepting excuses if you land on a planet I just claimed."

"Of course."

I roared.

"Now get out."

I let him go, and Lehesion turned, splitting apart space-time and leaving. I stayed there for a while, hoping my plan worked. After decimating their psionics, Elysium wouldn't want another incursion with me for at least a bit. It also gave Schema some breathing room heading into the future.

I did all that without incurring Eonoth's wrath, which wasn't difficult. The Old One's definition of stopping a champion was absolute and pure. That meant I had plenty of wiggle room before the entity stepped in. Peering around, I winced at what lay around me. Glass patches, dead wildlife, and muddied water stretched for miles.

I had an absolute mess to clean up. I raised a hand and shouted.

"Yo Schema, I bought you some time. Make sure you use it."

Nothing was said, but all was heard. I bent down and jumped. The sand exploded underneath me, the water sinking from above before pluming upward in a wave. I bolted towards Kessiah's camp, finding them repairing the hole in the roof and getting people back into their vessel. I found the entrance, about ten feet too small for me.

After lying on the ground, I pulled my wake out of my body with my furnaces. I floated the ancient artifacts into the bubble and rematerialized my body from the ether. As I walked into existence, I raised a hand to Kessiah.

"You finished?"

Everyone gawked at me, my fight with Lehesion having just finished. The aftermath still lingered, and many of these soldiers had heard of Lehesion's wrath. I crushed him, making me something above their greatest enemy. Breaking the ice, I spread my hands while looking around.

"Hah, we taught that lizard a lesson, eh?"

Because of the tension, I got a few laughs from my joke. A few imperials walked up, thanking me for the show, saving them, and getting them out of this situation. I pulled different injured albony out of my pocket dimension, having Kessiah heal them one at a time without so much pressure.

I watched her work, impressed by her finesse. She learned the anatomy of the albony inside and out, allowing her to save fatal wounds of all kinds. Unlike most healing, she remade anything missing, so it wasn't a bandaid fix. Her recovery fixed everything but the mind itself.

However, she wasn't perfect. Hybridized soldiers couldn't be saved with her alone, and surgeons carved up any infected soldiers, trying to get enough living tissue to rebuild the main body. Any infections near someone's head spelled a rapid end, and too much missing tissue led to blood loss.

I couldn't handle anything technical but walked up to the surgeon's tables. With my strength, I could pinch off any Hybridized areas near the end of the infection sites. My armor could eat the leftovers, though stopping my armor from eating untainted tissues was difficult. I drained so quickly that I ended up using single wires and tapping them onto infected sites. My armor soaked it up like dabbing a napkin on water.

Despite my lack of proficiency, I eased the surgeon's jobs by orders of magnitudes. We finished within two hours, and I met up with Kessiah. She got her credits, counting them. I offered a high five.

"Hey, teamwork makes the dream work. Eh?"

She frowned at me. I lowered my hand.

"What's up."

She shook her head.

"It's nothing. I just wanted to do this on my own for once."

I furrowed my brow.

"You did. I can't heal at all."

She pointed at the cleanup.

"You know, there's a lot of steps that go into healing. It's not just helping regenerate. There's sanitation, decontamination, debridement, and other stuff. You're helping with all that."

I grabbed my arm and wrenched it off. As I did, I liquefied the connective parts so I didn't bust the glass nearby from how loud it would've been. Raising the injured arm, my tissues flooded like a cup filling with water.

"You can do this for other people. I can't do that, and trust me, I've tried. Hell, I'm worried I won't be able to continue with removing the infected-"

"Debridement. Technically, it's Hybrid debridement, but we don't call it that."

I leaned back.

"Well, my armor keeps soaking energy up faster and faster. It's becoming more difficult to keep it in check."

I peered around at my golems.

"Hm, but maybe I could specialize some of the golems for that. They're not quite as powerful as I am, but they'd still smash someone apart with a slight mistake."

Kessiah scoffed.

"Sounds hard."

I furrowed my brow.

"But not impossible...You ready to head back?"

Kessiah put her hands on her hips.

"Sure. I just got another job, but that can wait if you need me."

I leaned in.

"What's the job?"

Kessiah peered off.

"Hmm. It's for some alby royals. Apparently, that lottery thing didn't end up going too well for them. They're paying big bucks to make this happen fast, but you're the boss-"

I raised my hand.

"Actually, what I want can wait. Where is this?"

Kessiah peered at her nails.

"It's at their capital, Ostaltia."

My eyes widened.

"Let's go. Now."

I lifted her with a gravity well.

"No time to explain."

She pointed at me.

"Hey, you can't just grab me like this."

I set her down.

"Do you mind?"

She smirked.

"Nope."

I rolled my eyes and picked her up with a gravity well. I pointed at the vessel.

"Can they warp us there?"

"We need a main drive. There's one at Saphigia's center."

I pulled us out of the area before one of the soldiers pointed at the body I had left behind. They shouted.

"What are we going to do with this?"

I waved a hand, pulling it with me. Kessiah crossed her arms.

"What the hell happened at the lottery?"

I winced.

"It's a long story."

Chapter 378: A Hopeful Death

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"What the hell happened at the lottery?"

I winced.

"It's a long story."

I gave Kessiah the cliff notes before we landed near the monolith of Saphigia. Kessiah rubbed her temples.

"So, you're telling me that you've been scrambling your mind to squeeze time, you have a bunch of minds, and lots of them die all the time?"

I shrugged.

"Yeah. Pretty much."

Kessiah's arms flopped on her sides.

"What the hell are you doing to yourself?"

"Isn't that obvious? What has to be done."

Kessiah furrowed her brows.

"None of this is your responsibility. You're just a kid from some backwater world at Schema's edge. Even if you've forgotten that, I still remember it. This isn't your fight."

"It is now."

"Why, though? And besides that, nowadays, I can't even relate to half the bs you're telling me anymore."

I frowned.

"No one can."

Kessiah's expression softened.

"Hey, I didn't mean it like that."

I peered off.

"I know."

She raised a hand.

"Look, my point is that you don't have to be the person to do all of this. You can just look after yourself. Sheesh, even I know you've done enough to deserve that much. Just, I don't know, let people handle themselves. That includes Schema."

I peered at her, my eyes piercing.

"From the ashes of every fallout, I rise. The aftermath is more silent each time. What makes you think that will change?"

Kessiah leaned back. She reached out before opening her mouth. No words came out. She winced.

"Ah. That's a lot, isn't it?"

I pointed at the warping receptionist.

"It is. We have to go."

We walked toward the clerk, and I had no idea where we were going. I pursed my lips before Kessiah leaned to the receptionist.

"Yo, we're going to Ostaltia. It's the capital of the Empire."

The clerk smiled at me, and a screen popped up. I gazed at hundreds of warp locations. I pushed away at the screen.

"What the hell is this? Agh, my eyes, they burn."

Kessiah swam out of the gravity well before pushing me aside. Well, I allowed her to move me, but you get the point. Kessiah clicked a few of the status screens, heading toward the specific subsector of Ostaltia we needed. She hopped back into the gravity well, and I walked us to the warp drive's queue.

As we waited in line, Kessiah tapped her sides.

"You remind me of myself."

I raised a brow. Floating in the gravity well, she crossed her legs.

"I don't mean our personalities or anything. I'm talking about how we handle stuff."

Thinking back, I disagreed.

"Really? How so?"

Kessiah pointed at me.

"It's our mess-ups. You already know, but I killed my parents whenever my blood arts went out of control."

I nodded.

"Sorry for your loss."

She waved her hand.

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. Anyways, I felt awful for decades about that. I couldn't get this...This overwhelming kind of guilt out of me. It ate away at my insides, and I rotted to my core."

Remembering her general cynicism when we first met, I concurred with a nod. Kessiah frowned.

"You didn't have to agree that quickly."

I shrugged.

"If the shoe fits."

She shoved me, moving her away.

"Whatever. The point is, I couldn't use my skills for combat, and I still struggle to. Now I'm healing, and it's really helped to do something about that guilt. I'm not a waste of space anymore."

"Your point?"

"I hate to say it, but I think you might be doing the same thing I did."

Finally being our turn, we walked into the warp drive. The doors closed, and a while passed. I tapped my foot.

"When are these things going to open?"

Kessiah laughed before giving my shoulder a pat.

"Hey, I'll drop it, but think about what I said. You might be holding onto responsibilities that aren't yours....Just saying."

We shifted positions, and the slabs of steel slid open. I ran out onto a giant colosseum. Pillars of marbled stone stood over a hundred feet into the air while holding up a spinning series of copper and bronze wheels overhead. They flashed light, their entire expanses smothered with patriotic symbols of the Empire. All around, albony and other alien races oriented themselves like people in an airport.

I flew us over the masses, not wanting to crush them. We bolted between the marble pillars, racing over the city. Individuals zoomed by me, some of them giving me dirty looks. Kessiah nudged me.

"You're not following flying conventions."

Staring at an endless city, I spread my hands.

"Where do we go? There are buildings everywhere."

Kessiah pointed at a tall cathedral in the distance.

"It's that-"

We bolted over, and I shielded us from the wind. After landing near the enchanted entrance, I nudged at the doorway. Schema-based runes and locks protected it, so the door bounced back. Several albony guards walked up.

"Halt, show us your credential-"

I suppressed them in gravity wells before elongating a finger. I heated it, slicing through the orichalcum locks. I jerked the massive doors open, and the machinery that opened the doors broke. I sighed, getting frustrated with how fragile everything was. Not letting it get to me, I looked around.

Underneath the light of the enormous cathedral, dozens of injured albony lay on different stone beds. Unlike the outside, cipheric inscriptions smothered the place, and the entire area shined with crystallized manas, rare minerals, and beautiful works of art.

Below, the stench of entrails, blood, and decay dispersed in the area.

Many clergymen cast holy spells for healing, their appearances mirroring a priest fused with a surgeon. They operated on dead albony, trying to revive them despite their grievous injuries. Most of them carried Hybridized tissues, and even a psionic glance told me their minds were brutalized beyond repair.

Elysium ensured their deaths.

However, a few albony royals held onto life. They spoke with garbled words and a chaotic cadence. I sent a message to Shalahora detailing my coordinates. Seconds later, a rip in spacetime appeared from a Sentinel's spear, and Plazia peered through the expanse.

"The data was accurate. Ahhhh. So this is the matter."

Shalahora molded through before Plazia cackled.

"A gruesome sight. Good luck."

The rip closed, and several guards peered at us. Inspecting Shalahora's level, they gave up any pretense of defenses. I gestured at a wounded albony.

"Can you save their minds, or are they done?"

Shalahora placed a hand on one of their heads.

"This one is broken in darkness. Drowned into oblivion, he will live in purgatory forever."

Kessiah gawked.

"Well damn, you're giving up that quickly?"

Shalahora tilted his head at her.

"Imagine a finely blended person who died weeks ago. Under the sun, their insides festered and rotted into a bloated pulp. You are tasked to revive that."

Kessiah winced. Shalahora pointed at the albony.

"That is what her mind is."

One of the albony surgeons peered up from the subject.

"A-are you sure? It doesn't seem that bad to me."

I pointed at Shalahora's titles.

"Look at his level, and you decide."

The surgeon gawked before we walked up to another albony. We passed several, all of them being operated on. After assessing them, we headed into the catacombs of the cathedral. Even more ornate than the top level, multicolored fires cast golden hues over the polished stone here. The stench of corpses built in the space, and we found Obolis carrying a gilded bag.

He pulled artifacts out of it, different ones for different situations. I raised a hand.

"Hey, can we help?"

Obolis turned to us, and he tilted his head.

"How did you-" He tapped his forehead. "Ah, Kessiah. You've intercepted her call here. I'm trying to access this situation and save the highest-tiered royals here. Few will make it from what I've gathered."

I looked around, recognizing Alastair and Victoria. The big guy had his chest shelled out, and his entire corpse Hybridized into a blot of machinery and wires. Victoria wore ethereal chains, and she spoke as if nothing was wrong. A cursory glance exposed her mind had been converted into something unrecognizable.

Shalahora shook his head.

"She's gone."

Midway through taking out an artifact, Obolis froze in place. He turned to Shalahora.

"You...You mean to say there is no possible means of regaining her?"

Shalahora flashed over, placing a hand on Victoria's head.

"Hm...No. To her core, she is the chattel of Elysium. Her inner thoughts revolve around them. Her beliefs stem from them. Even her dreams are inspired by them."

Victoria smiled at Shalahora.

"What? I'm no one's slave...And take these chains off of me. I am more than fine."

I rubbed my brow, "How the hell is it even possible to do something like that?"

Obolis's hands shook.

"We don't know."

Obolis's eyes rested on Victoria for a moment. Obolis growled.

"All I see are the talking corpses of my family."

Obolis turned and threw an artifact at a wall. Shalahora flashed over, intercepted the artifact, and flashed back to Obolis. Shalahora placed the relic in his hands, holding it there. The shadow murmured.

"Be calm."

Obolis squeezed his hands around the artifact and nodded. We walked through the room before I peered around.

"Where's Helios?"

Obolis closed his eyes.

"He is dead and alive."

Kessiah put her hands on her hips.

"Huh. That's a first."

Obolis pulled us aside. We paced to the next floor, another layer deep in the catacombs. Mirroring the floor above, flames flared out with golden light. A giant bloom of void ice wafted out at the center of the room with chilling mist. Within the violet cluster, Helios gazed out with a pale, blinded eye. His mask shattered, and the other eye was missing.

I flinched as Helios's actual state soaked in. A Hybrid exploded out of the back of his neck. His body was missing an arm and a leg, his blood frozen within the void ice. After calming myself down, I scratched my head.

"So yeah...He looks, uh, pretty dead."

Kessiah winced.

"Oh yeah. He's dead."

Obolis walked up to his nephew and interlocked his arms behind himself.

"He is most certainly passed, but dead? Not quite. You see, Helios is the only member in a state of suicide."

I raised a brow.

"Helios? Committing suicide?"

Obolis moved his hand.

"Yes. He likely found the situation so dire that he decided to reset himself."

Kessiah snapped her fingers.

"Ah, the feisty cat never used his luck revival, huh?"

Obolis sighed.

"It's a last resort for a reason, and even now, Helios still hasn't used it."

I walked up.

"And we're figuring out why?"

Obolis nodded. I got closer before pulling my wake over the area. It molded away from the void ice and Helios. My eyes widened.

"Oh man, that's some intense time dilation he's in. What is this, a stasis or something? It's got to be artificial."

Obolis leaned toward me.

"It's true stasis, not the tricks you'll see the Force of Iron or Schema play. I found that artifact two centuries ago in Argos. I gave it to Helios as a gift a decade ago. He used it as he died."

Kessiah shrugged.

"Maybe he wanted to be reincarnated here instead of at the lottery?"

Obolis turned to her.

"I thought the same. We've placed him down here while we operated on the more pressing individuals above. However, I wished to have an experienced psionic inspect Helios before we wiped him. It's due to the other royals showing signs of mental tampering that we can't seem to undo."

Shalahora stepped up.

"I shall see what may be done."

A minute passed. Shalahora shrugged.

"I cannot pierce the stasis."

Obolis winced.

"This is what I feared."

The Emperor created a stone and tossed it toward the void ice. It froze in the radius of the stasis. Obolis shook his head.

"This is an absolute death as time has stopped its passage entirely within this sphere. We can't kill him and reset his ruined body."

I turned to Obolis.

"What do you mean?"

Obolis turned a palm to the void ice.

"Death requires time. There is none there."

I raised a hand.

"One moment."

I walked up to the stasis before putting my hand on the aura. My hand stopped, unable to enter the stasis whatsoever. I gawked at it.

"This is insane."

Obolis nodded.

"True stasis, as I've said."

I condensed my wake before pulling my hand out.

"Wow. I gotta say, that is one powerful artifact. Crazy stuff, for sure."

Obolis tilted his head, his eyes wide. I cracked my knuckles before rolling my shoulders.

"Wish me luck."

I pulled my wake over me before rearing my hand back. I jammed my arm into the aura, pushing through the stasis like someone wrestling through a pile of glue and sand. Obolis's jaw slackened before I turned to him. I frowned.

"Yeah, this reminds me of Chrona's time magic, but many times stronger. Tough stuff, I gotta say."

After pushing through the aura, I dove my arm deeper until I made contact with the void ice. It took a few minutes because of the stasis, but I cracked through the stuff before reaching Helios. I turned to Shalahora.

"Hey, you can reach him now, right?"

The shadow nodded, and Shalahora paced up. He touched my shoulder, using me to link to Helios. After a minute, Shalahora stepped back.

"Aside from intense duress, there are no signs of tampering with his mind."

Obolis smiled. The expression was irrepressible.

"What? You're certain?"

Shalahora oozed.

"I don't tell lies."

Obolis walked over.

"Ah, my apologies. I meant no unspoken accusations. Can he be healed?"

I shook my head.

"He's dead. There's no lifeline whatsoever, and most of his organs are Hybridized. He needs a full reset for sure."

Obolis let out a sharp sigh. He held his hands together.

"Gah, one. A survivor. Thank you...Thank you."

I shook my head.

"Don't thank us yet."

Obolis's brow furrowed.

"We just need to pull him out of there and evaporate his physical form. He'll return unharmed."

I tapped my teeth together.

"Now, if there's one thing I've learned from fighting Elysium, they are always three steps ahead."

I dug several wires of Dimensional fabric through Helios.

"And I also know they use tricks to get what they want. Like-"

I split open one of Helios's shins, tearing his armor apart like a tin can. Obolis winced as I drained the blood over Helios's bones. The Emperor leaned back.

"Ugh, must you consume his corpse?"

I pointed at the shin.

"I'm not. I'm getting it out of the way."

Obolis inspected close, and horror spread over his face. I pursed my lips.

"See what I mean?"

Cipheric inscriptions laced the entire surface of Helios's bones. Obolis spread his hands.

"What is this?"

I sighed.

"It's a way of corrupting someone's physical form. I remember Yawm tried using it with insidious effects on his Followers. Elysium's taken up the mantle, and they're doing, er, something with it, I guess?"

Obolis leaned closer.

"This...An implanted restructuring enchantment?"

I shrugged.

"Honestly, I have no clue, but it's there."

Obolis turned a hand.

"We'll have it canceled before having him reset."

I dug through the corpse before I shook my head.

"This is what I mean by three steps ahead."

I cracked open the shin bone, and underneath the marrow and blood was another layer of dual-sided runes. I nodded.

"They thought they had us this time, but not on my watch."

After memorizing them, I smashed the cipheric inscriptions, blending Helios's bones to nothing. Somehow, this helped him. At the same time, I pulled out my grimoire and handed it to Obolis.

"Use this to make the counter enchantment. At the very least, we'll need any cipheric effects voided in this space."

Above us, several screams echoed out. I turned to Shalahora.

"What's happening?"

Shalahora raised a hand.

"The Hybrids are consolidating."

The cathedral's roof ruptured, and several albony royals approached us as Hybridized monstrosities. A freed Victoria glared at us with a wicked smile, and she swung a spear of light behind herself.

"It's time to make our mark."

Chapter 379: A Friend Found

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"It's time to make our mark."

I raised my brow.

"No, it's not."

I peered up, creating a multilayered gravity well over the place. The first layer was a large panel that pulled downward. It was enough to restrain an average person. Anything that kept causing gravitational ripples received multiple plates of gravitation until they quit squirming around. In ten seconds, everything in the building stopped moving.

Aside from Victoria, that is. She stood in crushing gravitation, the rock floor cracking beneath her. She collapsed onto her knees before pulling a metal cylinder from her dimensional storage. Obolis snapped his fingers, the chains reforming over her.

"That's quite enough."

Victoria collapsed before one of the Hybridized royals crawled across the ground. It reached the cylinder before pressing a button. Stopping the worst, I walked up, pocketed the cylinder, and turned to Obolis.

"What was that?"

Obolis walked past the tether of dimensional fabric I left behind like a rope.

"It was a thermonuclear bomb she stole long ago."

I raised my brow.

"It's been set off?"

"Yes. There are many methods of disposal without casualties."

Shalahora tilted his head, tethering to everyone in the building and nearby. He turned to me.

"Their minds are silenced. What should be done?"

I shrugged before turning to Obolis.

"What do you want? This is your city."

Obolis walked up to Victoria. The Emperor narrowed his eyes at her.

"You've been reconstructed by Elysium. You understand that, don't you?"

Victoria growled.

"You don't know anything of what was done to me. They didn't change anything. They made me understand what you've taken from us. What you sold us out for."

Obolis sighed.

"I gave you the greatest upbringing imaginable. Endless texts of value, every weapon and armor piece you requested, and a prestigious university full of like-minded individuals to challenge and encourage you. I gave you many options others dream of. I even granted rare requests for exotic animals and meetings with band members you wished to see."

Even in her recreated state, Victoria's hair rose on end at the last statement. She peered away, flushing red under her fur. Obolis walked up and lunged beside her.

"Are the core characteristics there or-"

Shalahora lowered his head.

"No. She is lying to you to lower your guard and kill you. She remembers who you are and how to weaken you. That is all this is; she presents a shallow facade to have you killed. She plans to shatter Helios's prison to recreate him as she has been. She will do the same to many after that, converting more albony royals to erode your empire from within."

Shalahora's form rippled.

"And that is only the beginning."

Obolis peered away before squeezing his hand.

"Ah...As expected."

Obolis placed a hand on her cheek.

"I loved you deeply. You were the heat to Helios's cold. You both fought like wildfires, each surging the other to greater heights. In that perpetual combat, you found reason and purpose. You were a light to all that saw you, an inspiration of the albony ideal."

Enjoying this book? Seek out the original to ensure the author gets credit.

Victoria heaved for breath before trying to bite Obolis's hand. The Emperor grabbed her jaw. He could easily break her neck, and the grizzled Emperor considered it. Instead, he set her down and turned to me.

"Can you lessen the gravitation over her?"

I did, and Obolis opened his dimensional storage and pulled out an artifact. The sword of light glistened as Obolis smiled at Victoria.

"This is the sister of your spear. They were found together."

He grabbed Victoria's spear, ripping it from her grasp. A quick push later, and the weapons clicked in place. A halberd spawned from the glow, radiating with intense quintessence mana. Victoria stood up, facing him in her chains. They disintegrated before Obolis placed the weapon in her hands. As she snatched it away, she snarled.

"You finally give it to me after all this?"

Obolis interlocked his hands behind himself.

"It's my final lesson."

She grabbed the halberd, swinging at Obolis. It blurred with excessive speed, but Obolis dodged with ease. The Emperor gazed at the streaks of light.

"What I told you then holds true, even now."

She kept swinging the weapon, and crescents of light lingered from her attacks. They resonated with her halberd, strengthening it with a subtle melody. Obolis turned away.

"You aren't ready for the Shaelance Glaive."

The resonations built as cracks of light spread over Victoria. The resonance destroyed the Hybrids nearby as she screamed out. The gleaming glow encompassed her entire body, and she dispersed as soft petals. They floated away like a torn flower carried by a gentle breeze.

The Shaelance Glaive fell to the ground, and Obolis picked it up while resting on his knees. Shalahora walked up, reaching out a hand. Obolis handed the psionic Sovereign the weapon, and Shalahora marveled at it. Shalahora raised it high.

"A fascinating weapon. Two flows of quintessence must mirror the other, and they build to a blinding crescendo. From their chorus, a resonance of destruction is born."

Cracks spread into Shalahora's arm. He tossed it to me, and I snatched it out of the air. It hummed in my hand. I matched its quintessent rush before giving it a few swings. The light expanded in the Rise of Eden.

It built a strange series of notes. The slicing bolts of light resonated and sang like a throng of warriors. They coalesced into the weapon at its peak, a fierce potential radiating through me.

It faded before I lifted the weapon high.

"Why did you want Victoria to pass with this?"

Obolis let his hands rest at his sides.

"I saved her from that weapon many times, and she never listened to my warnings. She would've rather died this way than be a tool of Elysium."

Obolis nodded before standing. He squeezed a hand where Victoria had been.

"This was the one time I couldn't save her."

Kessiah put her hands on her hips.

"Guys, there's people that need treatment. Let's get this show on the road."

Obolis kept his shoulders low.

"Indeed. We shall treat the treatable."

I handed the spear back, and we headed upstairs, finding everyone restrained by variable levels of gravitation. I released a few guards, and all of them lunged onto a knee facing Obolis. A few scrambled to get their masks back on, apologizing profusely. Obolis dismissed all transgressions, and he turned to the patients here.

They shouldered the lottery's mark, from Hybridization to psionic splintering and fatal wounds. Obolis rubbed a temple.

"How many may be saved?"

Shlahora pointed at three different albony. Obolis nodded before pulling out another artifact from his storage. He pulled out a band of fire, and it slotted around his outstretched hand. Mana siphoned through a few elemental furnaces before Obolis tightened his grip. As he did, fire spawned over the wounded albony, and they faded into nothing.

Obolis pointed downstairs.

"Let's hope that Helios can be saved."

Kessiah stayed upstairs, treating individuals while we headed down. Obolis and I drafted a few ciphery canceling inscriptions while Shalahora guaranteed Helios's mental security. After a couple hours, I called in Plazia to help, the three of us racking our brains for any solution. Plazia and Obolis did most of the technical work, but I wrote out the cipher. My thaumaturgical abilities gave me more nuance than them.

After achieving a practical effect, we established an area that muted a specific ciphery interaction. It duplicated the results of Plazia's Schema removal but not entirely. That variant focused on isolating system-based effects. This enchantment stopped anything that changed what a person was.

That was where I came in. Plazia and Obolis couldn't make that engraving because it lacked the stability to use on a living person. Their attempts resulted in weird, wonky incantations that were wild and unpredictable. I stepped in at that point, knowing how to fix it. After I finished etching into the pages, Obolis peered at my runes.

"It's so strange. You make the cipher look less like a language and more an art form."

Plazia leaned on a throne he had crafted hours ago.

"It is all he may do with the cipher, but it is a unique trait...It happens to suit this circumstance well."

I frowned.

"Let's hope so."

I charged mana into a monolith we marked the inscription on. It was my preferred method, after all. After several minutes, it took hold. As the odd sensation crossed over me, Obolis crossed his arms.

"Did it succeed? There's no change."

I left my body before remaking myself from my dimensional wake. As I did, I tried reforming in a different shape than my usual. I couldn't. Once made new, I turned to Obolis.

"I feel its effects. It works."

Obolis tapped his crossed arms while looking at Shalahora.

"And the mind is secured?"

Shalahora dispersed.

"It is, and there are no other enchantments elsewhere. This place is pure."

Obolis took a breath.

"Then we need to stop the stasis. If you would?"

I trotted up.

"Gladly."

I pushed through the temporal field before reaching Helios.

"So it's the gauntlet, right?"

Obolis nodded. I pushed through, finding Helios's plated arm. Beneath the gauntlet, two gemstones were embedded in the inner palm. One channeled energy from the gauntlet, while the other remained lustrous but unused. I glanced at the Emperor.

"It's the gemstones, right?"

Obolis stepped closer.

"It's one of them."

I raised a brow. Obolis turned a hand.

"They were supposed to assist him with his sight. He turned them into incredible weapons through his own ingenuity. The one siphoning mana is responsible for the stasis."

I gripped it.

"Are we ready?"

Obolis stepped back.

"As ready as we can be."

I dislodged the gemstone. The temporal field dissipated, unleashing all frozen within, even Helios's death throes. His voice filled the cavern, erupting like a pained cry. Obolis peered away as Helios's body funneled down to the bottom of the void ice, most of him blended from yours truly. The blood and chunks froze seconds after, and I shook my head.

This situation was insane.

After the echoes faded, We looked around, waiting for Helios's respawn. Seconds passed like eons. As dread sank in, a flash of mana crossed over us. A muscled albony appeared, black stripes lining his furred body. He glanced around, his eyes pale and blind from birth. He stared at his hands.

"And here I imagined you'd all be too stupid to figure it out."

He squeezed them into fists.

"Looks like I was wrong."

He smiled at us.

"Excellent work, uncle...And Harbinger."

Chapter 380: A Changed Albony

I shook my head at how insane the situation was, and seconds passed like eons. We all looked around before a flash of mana crossed over us. A muscled albony appeared, black stripes lining his furred body. He glanced around, his eyes pale and blind from birth. He stared at his hands.

"And here I imagined you'd all be too stupid to figure it out."

He squeezed them into fists.

"Looks like I was wrong."

He smiled at us.

"Excellent work, uncle...And Harbinger."

Obolis walked up, his hands shaking. Helios put a hand on the Emperor's shoulder.

"You survived. As the Carnage of Ostaltia should."

Helios lowered his arm before narrowing his eyes.

"Victoria wasn't savable then?"

Obolis winced. Helios tilted his head.

"Hm. You're emotional, aren't you? Perhaps the worst has happened?"

Obolis's arms fell to his sides. Helios nodded.

"Then the Empire is no more."

Those words sunk into the place like a knife between the ribs. Obolis reached out his hands.

"Helios."

His nephew put a palm on Obolis's chest, stopping the hug. Helios raised his brow.

"This weakness isn't fitting for a king. The Empire needs you more than ever, so make yourself whole from these pieces."

Obolis trembled. Helios made a fist and gave his uncle a light punch in his chest. Leaving his hand there, Helios stared at Obolis.

"The albony need you, not this shell you feel you've become."

Obolis tried speaking, but his words bled into nothing. Helios leaned close.

"Be what you must be, not what you are. Isn't that what you told me? Hm?"

Helios walked away from Obolis, leaving the Emperor there in a state of shock. Near us, Helios peered at his own corpse before sneering.

"I appear to have been blended into a fine paste before being reborn. Blegh."

Shalahora and I peered at each other before I turned a hand to Helios.

"Uh, shouldn't you give him a hug or something?"

Helios leaned close to me, his eyes like slits.

"What do you think we were given in our time of need? No words of encouragement, I assure you."

Helios leaned back and snapped a finger, the void ice shattering around his corpse. The freshly melted blood pooled down before he picked up his clothes, armor, and possessions. They dripped with fluids and chunky bone, but Helios left his mask fragments behind. He simmered.

"Agh. Why must everything be so disgusting?"

Helios turned to us.

"Surely you all must be busy? Let's move."

I frowned.

"What's going on here?"

Helios shook his head.

"I'm joining your guild...If you would allow it."

Obolis stared at Helios. Obolis's jaw slackened when he heard the words, his eyes watering. Caught between a rock and a hard place, I raised my palms to them both.

"I'm not a part of this."

Helios raised a hand to me.

"Oh, but you are. Know that I wished to end this without theatrics, but it wasn't meant to be so."

Helios's face wore an empty smile.

"You should stay and learn much of what Obolis understood before entering the lottery. Of what he hid from even us, his loyal subjects."

Helios's ire transformed from angst to deserving rage in an instant. Obolis shook his hands.

"No, Helios, there's a misunderstanding. I didn't know-"

Obolis turned to me. His expression changed as the Emperor peered back at Helios.

"I can explain. If I told you all about the lottery beforehand, then Schema-"

Helios shouted, "You wanted to rebuild the Empire, so you risked our ignorance. We walked into a deadly game without prior knowledge, something you had on hand. You could've taken away our positions, but no. You knew some of us would die and measured that risk."

If you encounter this tale on Amazon, note that it's taken without the author's consent. Report it.

Helios put his hand on his chest.

"We, who gave you everything. Our loyalty. Our dreams. Even our lives. You converted us from your kin to a measurement. We are no longer people to you. We are a calculation for your gain, your legacy, and your history."

Helios took a step. Void ice spawned from his feet.

"I am a calculation no more. I will no longer walk in your shadow to a valley of death."

He took another step, and my hair stood on end. Helios's voice hardened to iron.

"I will walk my own path. I will forge my own way."

Obolis grimaced.

"Everything I've done is for the albony."

Helios walked off, opening a warp to Mt. Verner.

"All you do is for yourself."

The warp closed behind him, and we sat in tense silence. Plazia coughed on his hand before melting into the ground. Wishing I could just leave like that, a while passed before I let out a long sigh.

"We should go."

Obolis simmered.

"You should."

I turned, walking out of the room and floating upstairs. In the medical bay, Shalahora sighed.

"To this day, I still lack any knowledge of familial affairs. To press onto that nerve is beyond me."

I put my hands on my hips.

"Me too, buddy. Me too."

Plazia's eyes melted onto a wall, and a mouth of jagged rock hissed.

"Perhaps Florence may help you?"

I snapped a finger to the wall.

"Good idea."

One of the albony surgeons looked at us. She dropped her scalpel and turned to the doorway.

"I'm not paid enough for this."

True to her word, she left the building for a different path in life. I couldn't blame her as Plazia molded out of the wall, walking out of magma. The twisted Sentinel sliced through dimensions before sighing.

"I bore of drama. You individualized species reak of it."

He stepped through, reaching Mt. Verner. Shalahora followed, and Kessiah had already evacuated earlier. That left me for last. I put a hand through the portal before it clamped onto my arm. I pursed my lips before Obolis stepped up. He wrinkled his brow.

"Will you accept him into your guild?"

I shrugged.

"I don't see why not."

Obolis's face gnarled up like old roots.

"Doing so is an insult I'm unwilling to bear."

I sighed.

"Unwilling to bear? Holy shit. Ok, I didn't want to have to do this, but-"

I walked to him, the portal trying to grind through my arm.

"If I have to choose between you two, I'm picking Helios every time. He hasn't lied to me. He sticks to what he says and doesn't take advantage of people. Sure, he's gruff around the edges, and the guy can have an attitude. That's all surface-level. Underneath, he's a good guy."

I tapped Obolis's chest plate.

"We both know you're not. From our talk on L-7, you agreed with Schema aiming to cull the weak rulers. Separate the spoiled from the spoilers, right? Hell, from what Helios is saying, you looked forward to having your empire cleansed."

Obolis leaned back.

"I-I never considered the implications-"

I raised my brow.

"Helios mentioned everything that needed to be said. You could've gotten rid of the albony's titles. They didn't have to be rulers, but now you're trying to say you never considered that? You're trying to lie to me like you tried lying to Helios."

Obolis took a sharp breath. I frowned.

"Yeah, I saw it. He did too. You're off your game right now, which makes sense. You've lost everything, and this must be a shock. However-."

Obolis closed his eyes before squeezing his hands into fists. I lowered my arm.

"You need to take this loss on the chin and quit ducking it. It's not befitting of a king."

I turned to leave. Obolis snapped.

"The artifacts? The income? If you accept Helios, then you lose them. It's in your hands now. This relationship continues or ends because of you."

I glared back and leaned over him.

"That's where you're wrong. I'm not ending anything. You're letting your ego get ahead of what's best for your people. You did that in the lottery."

I gestured to the empty room.

"Look at how that worked out for you."

Obolis glared while heaving for breath. I grabbed the tightened portal over my arm and pulled it back open.

"I'll be here whenever you calm down. Till then-"

I gave him a two-finger salute, and Obolis bristled. I walked through the portal, stepping into Plazia's lair. Insects cleaned Helios's possessions, and the icy albony stood tall. I walked up.

"It's good to see you again."

He gave me a curt nod before I pulled the lug into a hug. He leaned his face away at first before sighing. He squeezed back, and I let go. Helios sneered.

"You weren't going to let go until I returned the gesture?"

"Hell no."

Helios grinned.

"You're as obnoxious as Florence."

I pointed at him.

"Speaking of, he needs to see you."

Helios raised a palm.

"I wish to clothe myself first beforehand. I want my dignity."

That made sense. Before anything else, Shalahora manifested from the shadows.

"Do not blame Obolis for his words. He has lost everything, and he is falling apart."

Helios frowned.

"Why do you care?"

Shalahora peered down.

"I...I feel for his pain."

I nodded.

"I'm not taking it personally. If anything, I feel bad for the guy. He's obviously bitten off more than he can chew, and now he's starting to choke."

Shalahora dispersed.

"It is a burden he chose to bear, but it is one he can no longer undo. Now, he wears the mantle of his species. It will crush him as it crushed me."

Shalahora's words lingered.

"Do not let it crush you, Harbinger."

After he faded, Helios sneered.

"He's cheerful, isn't he?"

I shrugged.

"What can I say. The guy has a...Darkside."

Helios facepalmed.

"To think I missed this idiocy."

We exchanged banter, but in the back of my mind, Shalahora's warning rang out. Despite my jokes, I took the Sovereign's words to heart. He had a reason for everything he said, and I would heed the wisdom in them.

While we talked, Plazia finished sanitizing Helios's clothes. Helios put them on, taking his time and being meticulous with every article. I watched as he did, fascinated that an upright, fully furred tiger wore clothing and armor.

Helios scoffed.

"Enjoying the show?"

I raised my brow a couple times.

"Always."

Helios laughed before shaking his head.

"When was the last time you've even worn anything?"

I looked up.

"I think during that dinner party that Ophelia and Florence organized. Was it a suit or something?"

Plazia read a dusty book.

"No. At that time, you molded your armor into a suit. My children told me it looked awful."

I spread my hands.

"You were spying, even then?"

Eyes of magma opened in the walls.

"I am always watching."

I put my primordial wake over him, knowing how insidious it felt.

"Me too, buddy."

Helios narrowed his eyes.

"You've mastered your primordial energy. That is incredible fluency."

My eyes grew distant.

"My lottery was...Challenging."

Helios grimaced.

"Mine as well. I need to discuss the details of it with you and now."

"Same. I'll get the others."

When I opened my status, Helios put a hand on my arm.

"There are details of my experience that the others shouldn't hear. It will be a burden for them to bear."

Remembering the psionic liquid and my other secrets, I nodded.

"Ah...Alright. Who needs to know?"

Helios pointed at Plazia.

"Aside from that informational kleptomaniac? Torix and you. That is all."

Plazia cackled.

"I am of many faces. To wear them, I must know them."

Helios grabbed his gauntleted wrist.

"Seeing and knowing are distinct concepts. You should learn the difference."

A wall smiled.

"You speak of sight? Would the blind preach to the able?"

Helios inspected his hand.

"There is more than one way to see."

Plazia cackled.

"And there is more than one way to be blind."

I raised my brow.

"Remind me not to try and one-up Plazia."

Helios stared at me and clasped his armored hand into a fist.

"Enough chatter. There's much to discuss and little time to do so."

I frowned.

"About the lottery?"

Helios's face gnarled.

"No. Of Elysium. Of Schema...And of my uncle."