

New World 171

Chapter 171: Pieces of a Puzzle

Inside the walls of the gialgathen's base, the metal was cleared out. Espens walked barefoot around to several sectors of the camp, their feet bleeding shards of metal. In the center of the field, a pit of sludge bubbled. Espens congregated around this muck.

The beginning of a metal matrice appeared beside the pit. Saysha beetles swarmed its surface, expanding it. They feasted on fresh bodies, turning sinews and meat to metal and wires. An enormous pile of eggs squirmed beneath a cove of steel.

The espens cultivated the insects. They collected the sludge, pouring it over the expanding egg sacks. The children and pregnant espen women sat near the eggs. Beside them, a pile of rotting corpses reeked. These espens cut open the bellies of the bodies and shoved eggs into them.

They used make-shift knives made out of leftover metal splinters. The strongest, tallest espens then carried the corpses to a landing zone. This is where the Skyburners laid resting.

I analyzed them. There were seven of them, six Skyburners hovering around level 9,000. One of them was level 11,000, some ancient general or the sort. They roasted the corpses of silvers, bite marks spread over the bodies. With their huge eyes, they stared down the slaves, making sure they kept working.

As I looked closer, horrid details surfaced. Yana worms crawled through the skin and flesh of the espens. I glanced back at the pregnant espens. Their bellies shivered, holding something alive. I winced as several espens scooped up the disgusting slop at the center of camp with their bare hands.

They drank it, feeding the worms inside them. They winced, holding their noses. Their own filth covered them, a stream of caked on mush running down their chests. Some of them were children. They'd never known a life outside of this hellish, dystopian place.

It disturbed me of course, but I kept myself like stone. Acting on emotion wouldn't help these people. Acting on logic would. I posed questions to myself, trying to make sense of this mess.

The slop was toxic. It should kill the espens, yet they lived and worked all day. Most silver's bodies were poisonous as well. The gialgathens here couldn't survive off just the carcasses. They were eating something else. What that was, I didn't want to even imagine.

The more I thought about it, the more I wanted to run in and destroy them. I silenced those thoughts and crushed that urge. There were six Skyburners and a large, ancient gialgathen as well. It grew massive horns over its skin with armor chock-full of gemstones. That gialgathen would be a tough fight all on its own.

Fighting them all at once ensured all the espens would die, and that's if I lived of course. I was strong, but there wasn't much point in risking death. I couldn't offer the espens medical support. I didn't have a safe means of transport either. I lacked too many resources.

I bit my lip, a sense of helplessness running up my chest. I shook it off. A rescue operation wasn't my specialty. For Tohtella and Torix, however, they'd handle it like a walk in the park. They'd maneuver around all the intricacies, making sure each person was treated appropriately.

With Althea's combat prowess on top of that, we had a good chance of success. Like the hammer of an Old One, we'd come crashing down on these frog-dragon fucks. If we executed well, we'd kill the gialgathens without the espens getting caught in the crossfire.

More than the slaves, a gialgathen hostage was a must. Someone was organizing these camps across the continent. Figuring out who that piece of shit was took precedent.

With that in mind, I recorded the camp using my obelisk. I marked the base's location on my mini-map as it got footage. After a few minutes, I jumped off the barrier's sheer face, flying away. Well, it was closer to falling away. That's how it felt to pull myself with the gravity wells.

With that potent magic, I dashed across the wasteland, evading the thick clouds of silvers. After an hour passed, Yildrazian skyscraper's popped up on the horizon. Before going into the city, I cleaned my gray armor with my skin.

That's how I thought of the black plates over me. I'd lived in the umbral shell for years now. It was a part of me like the scars on my face and hands. Unlike scars, the dark metal was more useful though. With its unending hunger, I cleared the dried blood of silvers all over me.

As I removed the debris, I peered off in the distance. The morning sun was rising up. I hardly noticed the dusk before. My new perception let me see in the dark. It didn't mask my surroundings like it once had. I smiled, appreciating the greenery after being surrounded by the silvers all day and night.

Once my armor was shining, I dashed into Yildraza. In minutes, I reached our hotel. I jogged through the entrance. As I did, the receptionist smiled at me, "Did you just get your power armor polished for today's big fight."

I shook my head, "No. Killing silvers."

She raised her eyebrows, "You're one busy guy."

I walked into the elevator, the doors closing, "I try to be."

After the elevator reached our floor, I jogged into our room. No one was awake yet outside of Torix. Without anyone else to discuss my findings with, I lifted myself up onto the next floor. After skipping the stairs, I knocked on his door.

"Ah, yes, you may come in."

I stepped into his room, more charts and diagrams covering the walls now. Torix fiddled with a gemstone, carving runes into the crystal surface. He set it down, walking up to me. I raised my hands, "I have some shit to show you."

His fire eyes narrowed, "Before you begin your spill, allow me to have a word."

I waved my hand, "Alright, but hurry."

Torix raised a hand, locking his hands behind him, “I understand that disciples are meant to care for their masters. It’s simply the nature of the relationship. In instances, an apostle can look towards their teacher as a father.”

He sighed, “And in these cases, it can only be expected that the disciple takes an interest in the personal lives of their teachers. Perhaps they may wish to nudge their masters in a different direction. Though as admirable as these attempts are, I assure you, Daniel-“

I raised my hands, “What are you talking about?”

He raised a hand, coughing into it, “Well, you’ve set me up with a woman of prestige. It appears to be a date of some sort. I’m letting you know that I appreciate the effort, but it’s not necessary.”

I leaned back, “Wait...I think there’s been a misunderstanding.”

He waved a hand, “Oh don’t be coy. It’s as I explained earlier.”

I shook my hands, “There’s definitely been a misunderstanding.”

Torix went on, staring into the distance, “It has been quite some time since my last romantic relationship. Though I lack sensual pleasures, I do crave the company of the fairer sex.”

I cringed, “Look Torix. This isn’t about that.”

Torix looked me in the eye, “It isn’t?”

I shook my head, “No. I mean, by all means, go for it. Seize the day and all that. I called her over here for something else altogether.”

Torix’s hand lowered, his fiery eyes flaring a deep red, “Oh....”

An awkward silence passed. I raised a hand, pushing through, "There's something I need to explain. I also need your help."

Torix stood up straight, "Ah yes, I'm more than glad to assist you."

Over the next fifteen minutes, I explained my findings. I told him the story from finding espen bodies on the way to Yildraza to the Gialgathen's base. Torix listened intently, his eyes returning to their usual navy blue. As I finished by showing him the footage, he murmured,

"This is quite the conundrum."

I nodded, "You're damn right about that. I called in Tohtella to help you with organizing a plan against these guys."

Torix cupped his chin with a bony hand, "It seems as though you already formulated one that's acceptable. I'll iron out a few of the wrinkles, but it should fair rather well."

I sighed, "Ah man, thank god. I was worried I did something stupid."

Torix leaned back, "What? Why would you ever think that?"

I looked at my hands, "I don't know. It just...I've fallen into traps before. Look at Baldag-Ruhl. Look at Yawm. I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed all the time."

Torix stepped up, putting a hand on my shoulder, "Did you see my misunderstanding about the meeting with Tohtella?"

I winced. Torix did too.

"Yeah. It was awkward."

He sighed, "It was. It was also my mistake. It just so happens I make more than my fair share of them. Everyone does, whether you can crush a mountain or create a singularity doesn't absolve you of that. You're doing your best, Daniel. Besides--"

Torix waved a hand at the footage, “Following that, er, flesh whale as you call it. That was clever. Marking down footage, taking questions, even having the discipline to not rush in. In my eyes, that shows maturity and intelligence.”

He grabbed my shoulders, “When we first met, you’d have run in like a hot-headed fool. Now you weighed your options and chose one after deliberation. There’s nothing to be ashamed of. You’re doing well.”

I’m not gonna lie, I choked up a little. I kept it together, patting him on the shoulder, “Thanks, man. That...that helps.”

Torix lowered his hands, pushing up an imaginary set of glasses, “If anything, I’m the one that should feel useless here.”

I spread out my hands, “What? No.”

He raised a palm to me, “When we faced off against Yawm, I excelled. I controlled reconnaissance. I managed thousands of troops. I even helped enhance your strengths using conduits en masse.”

He clenched his hands to fists, “Now I manage my students, exploring Giess as if it were a vacation.”

I shrugged, “What’s wrong with that?”

Torix turned towards me, “Isn’t it obvious?”

I shook my head, “You like to teach. I don’t get why it’s considered bad to do what you like.”

“W-well there isn’t any stakes behind my actions. I’m just...lulling my days away in comfort and content.”

I scoffed, “Yeah, that’s kind of what everyone’s trying to do.”

Torix sighed, “Regardless of how you put it, it doesn’t change my reality. I’m piddling while you save worlds.”

I waved my hands back and forth, “No. That’s not what’s happening. I’m not saving worlds. I’m getting them out of shitty situations.”

I pointed at him,

“You’re the guy keeping those worlds from spiraling back out of control. The mages, warriors, and runic inscribers you’re training, they’re the ones clearing out dungeons now. Without them, Earth would just fall right back into chaos.”

I shook my hands, “So don’t sell yourself short man. This isn’t a one-man party. This is a team effort, alright? It kind of pisses me off hearing you talk like that honestly. If that’s how you felt earlier, then I’m not selling myself short again either.”

Torix nodded, his eyes glowing green and sentimental,

“I won’t degrade myself again if you decide not to either. Deal?”

I raised a fist, “Hell yeah it’s a deal.”

A moment of comradery passed. Torix scoffed, “Look at us chatter away. There’s work to do, and there’s little time to do it.”

I snapped my fingers, “Ah, that reminds me. I need you to teach me some mental magic.”

Torix’s eyes lit up, “Really now? You’re quite tenacious as is. What makes you believe you need even more reinforcement?”

I shook my head, “I went deep into silver territory. It was ugly. If fringe worlds are like that, I’m going to need a mind of steel. I figured mental magic would help with that.”

Torix nodded, “Indeed it would. I’m curious, however. Why are thinking of becoming a Fringe Walker all of a sudden? Did Schema finally convince you with a few choice rewards?”

I shook my head, “No, it has nothing to do with him. It’s more like...I realized that I’m pretty damn strong.”

Torix rolled his eyes, “Oh yes, of course you are.”

I looked him in the eye, “No, I mean it. My mana regen passed 20 million a minute the other day.”

Torix’s knees wobbled. He took a step back, “What? How?”

I shrugged, “It’s a bunch of conversions from trees I’ve gained along with my armor bonuses. Either way, the situation is what it is.”

I raised a hand, “What matters is what I do with it. I mean think about it. A lot of people’s lives rest in my hands. It terrifies me, to be honest. I never thought I’d be the kind of person with these kinds of options, with this kind of reach.”

Torix crossed his arms, “I suppose It is quite the burden to bear.”

I nodded, “Yeah, and I’m trying to think about how I’ll handle it. Schema’s rewards or not, a Fringe Walker helps a lot of people. With my build, I could clear out a dozen worlds a year. Think of that. That’s helping trillions of people. It’s fucking crazy.”

Torix scoffed, “You sound pretty confident of that. You certain you could handle that kind of trial?”

I shook my head, “Not like I am right now, but that’s why I’m asking for the help. With time, I’ll forge myself into something that’ll strike fear in the eldritch. When I’m finished, they’ll tell their children stories about the monster of monsters.”

I grinned, “After all, I’m the Harbinger of Cataclysm, right?”

Torix rubbed his hands together, “Who just so happens to be my disciple. Come, let’s get you started with a few practical exercises to develop a few skills. You’ve got this old man’s metaphorical blood boiling with excitement.”

With our pep talks finished, we got to work. He gave me three exercises for controlling my thoughts. The first involved meditation. I already owned the skill, and it fused into Hunter of Many. I figured developing it further wasn’t necessary anymore. It would improve by using the mythical ability.

The other two skills were different. The first one involved acceptance. The tactic worked like this. Eliminating all suffering was impossible. Shitty situations were going to happen. By preemptively preparing myself for difficulty, I strengthened my resolve to handle said difficulty.

It was just like going into a fight expecting to take a few hits. When I did that, I didn’t break down after taking a wallop. I’d know the strikes were coming so I would be ready. This skill applied the same concept but to life instead of fights. I summed it up with a saying; it wasn’t about weathering the storm.

It was about learning to laugh in the rain.

This took a bit trying to get into the right state of mind. After an hour of doing so, I gained the skill I needed.

New Skill Gained! Mental Preparation(lvl 1) – By readying yourself for harsh circumstances, you enhance your ability to withstand them. Increases mental resilience, tolerance, and improves judgment in stressful situations.

It was one of those skills that I never thought about but knew existed. After I discovered the skill, I trained the next exercise. It involved the willingness to hurt others. The best way I could put is in terms of fighting.

When I first started boxing, I didn’t want to hurt my opponent. I wanted to win the fight, but I didn’t want to break their face. After a few months, I learned that mentality was holding me back. Big surprise there.

I won't say going into a fight with murder on my mind is exactly helpful. It's more about knowing when to go all out. Having the ability to shift gears like that without hesitation was invaluable in conflict. By gaining an awareness of it and honing the talent, I gave myself an edge in any battle.

Once more, it took about an hour of practice, but I got a hold on the skill.

New Skill! Mental Adaptability(lvl 1) – Others react slowly, unable to adjust to sudden changes. You hone your thoughts, giving your mind flexibility. Enhances the shifting of thoughts, especially in stressful situations

As I reread my other skills, it gave me an idea of what Torix was going for. Meditation was about slowing my thoughts down. Mental Adaptability was about speeding my thoughts up. This let me adjust my mind for a given situation. Mental Adaptability allowed me to implement those skills faster.

It was a solid trifecta for building off of. With those skills gained, I walked downstairs for something to eat. I was starving. I train Thermomancy with a piece of orichalcum in my hand as I did.

Althea and Kessia were already up, both of them snacking on junk food. I waved a hand, "What's up guys, er, gals?"

Althea stood up, a grin growing on her face. With her veil on, she ran over to me. I hugged her, picking her up off the ground and spinning her around. Kessiah rolled her eyes, "I just ate breakfast. Can you both at least try not to make me vomit?"

I set Althea down, "Had a long night out?"

Althea nodded, "Yeah, Torix let me know you were busy with something. We went out and enjoyed ourselves."

I looked around, "Where's Caprika?"

Kessiah shrugged, "She's off doing official imperial duties."

I nodded, "Alright, cool. I'm also going to need a favor from you guys."

Althea drank some kind of juice. She set the glass down, "Sure. What is it?"

I explained the silvers and the Skyburners. Kessiah raised her hands as I finished, "Uh, yeah. You can count me out."

I shrugged, "yeah, it's a bit much to ask. You still in Althea?"

She smirked, "Of course."

We chatted like that, enjoying our breakfast. Not long after, we heard knocking on the door to our hotel room. I pointed at Kessiah and Althea, "So, we're having this Speaker named Tohtella over. She's helping out with the mission."

Kessiah stood up, "I'll go get my veil and shit on."

She walked out while I opened the door. Tohtella walked in, wearing the exact business wear as before. With a clipboard in hand and an obelisk floating beside her, she raised her free hand to me,

"It's good to see you again."

I pointed into our room, "Come on in."

As Tohtella looked around, she raised her eyebrows, "Hmm, it seems as though have quite a few resources at your disposal?"

I shrugged, "Eh, sort of. Anyways, this is Althea. She's a very effective fighter, about as effective as I am."

Tohtella walked up to Althea, looking her up and down, "You seem...less intimidating than Daniel. It's a welcome change."

Althea scratched the side of her head, “Yeah, he kinda looks like he’s ready to fight any second.” Althea leaned back into her chair, “I like to take a more subtle approach.”

Tohtella nodded, “Noted. Where is the wizard you mentioned?”

I flicked Torix’s door with telekinesis. Torix shouted, “Who is it?”

I shouted back, “The guest is here, the one I told you about.”

Torix walked out of his office. He stepped down the stairs. Tohtella walked up, “Are you the information specialist Daniel mentioned?”

Torix reached the bottom of the stairs, his hood pitch black from magic,

“Hmm, I suppose so. I’d rather think of myself as a wizard or warlock.”

Tohtella adjusted her glasses, “Mages deal in information, don’t they?”

Torix nodded, “They do, but they work within a precise niche of it.”

Tohtella nodded, “Then it’s good to meet you...”

Torix opened a hand to her, “You may call me Malthazar.”

Tohtella jotted notes on her clipboard, “Malthazar. Now, do you all know the manner of business we’re working with?”

Torix and I nodded. Althea weighed her hand back and forth, “Er, sort of.”

Tohtella nodded, “Then I’ll ensure that each of you is informed. Let me begin.”

Tohtella turned towards me, “May I use your obelisk?”

I turned to our resident mage, “Should I let her?”

Torix nodded, “Give her access to the files regarding the Skyburners and whatnot. Simple.”

I fiddled with my status menu. After a few minutes, I restricted Tohtella’s access to the necessary info. I handed it off to Tohtella. She gave me a curt nod, “Thank you. Now-“

She opened an image of a Skyburner,

“I researched local legends and gathered first-hand accounts of gialgathens about these beasts. Their greatest strengths are threefold. Their jaw strength, their tipped tails, and their fiery breath. Avoid these three parts of them, and you avoid most of their toolset.”

I scoffed, “Yeah. I figured that all out the hard way.”

Tohtella pointed at me, “And you came out no worse for wear. We three, however, aren’t allowed to learn the hard way, are we?”

They shook their head. Tohtella adjusted her clipboard, “So then we avoid all contact with them. The plan of action against these monsters should involve a decoy. We will then pelt them from a range, preferably isolating them one by one.”

Tohtella raised a finger, “If we wait until they Skyburners leave their base, we may ambush them. After doing so twice, we may assault the rest before their guard is up. If this info is correct, then we could kill four of the seven gialgathens. This makes the fight far more likely in our favor.”

Torix cupped his chin, “They have access to magic, don’t they?”

Tohtella glanced through the footage, “Yes, they will.”

She pointed at the old gialgathen, “This is one of the general of Emagrotha’s old army, Gaikhag Monothos. He’s adept in many ancient magics.”

Torix sighed, “Then they’ll no doubt have some measure of protective incantations, correct? If we assume so, ambushing the first two will alert the others. If they escape, they may warn other camps like this. This will make further operations much more difficult.”

Torix stepped up to the image, “If we instead launch an ambush under the veil of night, I believe we can assist the espens with escape while finishing them all off.”

Tohtella’s eyes narrowed, “The gialgathen’s deaths take precedence.”

Torix raised a finger,

“Of course. The issue is that the espens may have information as well. Destroying them in the crossfire won’t do us any good. I suggest we allow Daniel and Althea to handle the battle. We can focus on getting the espens out of the situation.”

Tohtella leaned back, “Ahem, I understand that you’re more than able to look after yourselves. Defeating seven gialgathens, Skyburners for that matter isn’t feasible at your levels.”

Althea smirked, “Levels can be deceiving.”

Tohtella shook her head, “I can call in a strike force.”

They debated tactics as I cupped my chin, deep in thought. I killed the last Skyburner by smashing into it from above. That worked pretty damn well. If I escalated that tactic further, I could fall from higher up. If I accelerated myself enough, I’d land like a meteorite on the camp.

My health regeneration and damage resistance would stop me from disintegrating during re-entry. Using my Invincible tree, I’d take at most 70% of my health from the landing. I could use the overkill damage to blow up another Skyburner. Hell, I might even be able to charge a singularity too.

I raised my hands, interrupting the conversation, “Wait, I just got a great idea.”

I pointed at Althea, “You can slice off the head of the general by sneaking in with your camouflouge. We’ll time it so that right after you do that, I’ll slam into the camp from above.”

Tohtella shook her head, “That’s a rudimentary, simplistic plan, don’t you think? We can do better than that.”

Torix shook his head, “If there’s one thing I learned from working with Daniel, it’s that simple is often times best.”

I raised my hands,

“Here’s what will happen. I’ll fly way up over the camp. I’ll time my descent in conjunction with you guys. When I land in the camp, I’ll be like a bomb. Hell, I might kill two or three Skyburners with the impact alone.”

Tohtella scoffed, “Would you mind informing me how you would survive atmospheric re-entry, the impact, or the horde of angry Skyburners right after?”

I raised a fist, “I’m tough. Real tough.”

Chapter 172: Leaving an Impression

Torix nodded his head, “He is quite resilient.”

Tohtella sighed, “Then if you all agree with his plan, I will trust in your competence as a whole.”

Torix turned to me, “I will blanket the landing position with darkness. This will prevent us from luring in a horde of angry silvers.”

A message popped up in front of me,

Torix Worm, of Darkhill(Giess: 3/04/26) – It will hide your identity. I will give another spare suit of armor. Put it on before you leave the magic field.

I grinned, holding down a laugh, “Alright, sounds like a good idea to me.”

Tohtella gave us a curt nod, “I’ll organize the necessary medical supplies for treating the yana infestations. The slaves will need immediate detox and surgical treatments.”

I frowned, “That was something I’ve meant to ask. How are the slaves able to live there? I saw them eating that sludge. There’s no way they should be alive.”

Tohtella bit her lip. She adjusted her glasses, “Part of my work involves researching the silvers. One of the most reliable sources of information involves old legends from gialgathens.”

She waved a hand, “Particularly in regards to the yana worms. Gialgathens view yana as mythical, terrifying creatures. They are one of the only silvers that can threaten gialgathens. Though it isn’t widely known, the highest punishment in gialgathen culture involves the yana.”

Tohtella jotted something on her notes, “They would infest a traitor with the worms and throw them deep into silver territory with clipped wings. This is a slow death sentence, one where the beast loses its mind as the yana take over.”

I grimaced. The first zombie gialgathen I fought on Giess was a result of that punishment. Well, probably.

Tohtella continued, “They learned several characteristics about the yana during those punishments. The host feeds the yana sludge. The yana then excretes nutrients in turn. My own findings verified this.”

Althea shook her head, “That’s disgusting.”

Torix nodded, “Indeed it is, but it’s useful information. Are the gialgathens doing this as well?”

Tohtella shook her head, “Their metabolisms can tolerate silver flesh despite it being loaded with toxins.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Wow. Alright then, well that’s even more reason to kill the Skyburners then.”

One of the bottom floor doors opened. Kessiah walked out, her veil covering her. Tohtella turned to her. After a few seconds, her gaze turned sharp,

“You didn’t tell me that you had another remnant with you?”

Kessiah raised a hand, “Yo, who are you?”

Tohtella crossed her arms, “I’m Tohtella Adair. You may call me Miss Adair.”

Kessiah rolled her eyes, “Ok Miss Adair. I’m Kessiah Crow. Looks like you saw through my disguise right away. Sucks I had to put it on.”

Tohtella adjusted her glasses, “It’s due to your low level.”

Kessiah tilted her head, “Low is a little harsh, don’t you think?”

Tohtella raised a hand to her, “No. It’s not. The Crow clan is famous for their physical augmentations and Blood Arts. Not even level 3,000 is a travesty considering your birth.”

Kessiah crossed her arms, walking in front of Tohtella, “Oh, so you know a thing or two?”

Tohtella raised her head, her chin high, “Yes. I do know quite a bit, like how you’re a rather bitter disappointment.”

I turned to Tohtella and snapped,

“Kessiah’s a friend. You shit on her, then you’re shitting on me. Understand?”

Tohtella glared up at me. She sighed, composing herself, "It's...I'm sorry. Please excuse me."

Tohtella waved her hands, "This discussion is over either way. We've formulated a plan. I will go about handling the details. Will tonight work for you all?"

We nodded. I kept my gaze on Tohtella as she walked out. As the door closed, I turned to Kessiah, "Any idea where that came from?"

Kessiah shrugged, "I don't know. She's got problems though, that's for sure."

Torix sighed, "It's best we do not assume much. Now, I'll go prepare the necessary scrolls, gems, and supplies. You all do as you will."

Althea stood up, weaving between furniture to me. She wrapped her hands around me, "Hey big guy. That was sexy standing up to her like that."

I smiled at her, "Eh, I try."

Althea raised her eyebrows, "Oh, wait a minute. Did you forget what today is?"

I creased my brows, "Er, maybe."

Althea smirked, "I'll give you a hint...tournament."

I smacked my facemask, "Oh fuck. I completely forgot."

I hugged Althea, "Sorry, got to go."

She giggled, "Try not to crash through a wall getting there."

I opened my dimensional storage. I tore open three packs of rations, pouring them down my throat. I tossed the bags into the garbage, running outside. I dashed into the

elevator, tapping my foot with impatience. After reaching the bottom, I leaped over a crowd of people in the lobby.

After swishing through the doors, I pulled myself up over the crowds with magic. I floated over the hordes of espens and aliens, reaching the stadium in seconds. I ran inside, running out the bleachers. I looked around, finding the seating for combatants.

I jumped over the crowd, keeping myself light with a touch of gravity magic. I landed in my previous chair. I leaned back into my seat, opening my status. I checked the tournament rankings online with my obelisk. I tilted my head back, sinking into my chair with relief. There was still a fight left before I was up.

As I relaxed, Eradin shouted at me from afar, “Here I believed you might miss our fated duel?”

I shook my head, “Almost. I had some business to take care of earlier today.”

Eradin chuckled, “Good. I hope you’re ready for a friendly thrashing.”

I laughed back, “Only if you are too.”

I watched the next fight while keeping my eyes closed. This trained Hunter of Many. At the same time, I heated and cooled my favorite chunk of orichalcum. Putting myself under some stress, I trained my mental skills at the same time as well.

With all that going on, the fight in front of me dragged on forever. Two fighters like Jilian fought one another. They both unloaded hundreds of shells at each other. I tuned it out after half an hour, focusing on my own skills.

My mind wandered as I adapted to the mental stress. The entire tournament progressed oddly. It wasn’t straightforward with one person versus another. It involved an intricate set of branches, each designed for an outcome.

For example, every gialgathen began the tournament by fighting another gialgathen. This halved the pool of gialgathens that other combatants had to face. Whoever organized the competition did everything they could to make the gialgathens lose.

I stopped my exercises, ready for my next fight. I scrolled through the previous tournament's rosters. For the last decade, every one of them involved gialgathens facing each other exclusively. This meant only one gialgathen fought on into the upper ranks of the tourney.

I frowned at it. It was a biased schedule that tried eliminating the gialgathens. The gialgathens were so strong, however, that it didn't work. A Breaker would need to join the tournament to win. I doubted many of them found the time between completing bounties.

I closed my status, irritated at whoever ran this thing. I sighed, calming myself and readying myself for the next fight. Mental Preparation leveled up as one of the gunmen collapsed from exhaustion. Kiki Mosk raised a hand,

“And that is Kelevar's defeat. Give a hand to Moisc!”

Next to no one cheered. For once, I sympathized with the crowd's reaction. Neither fighter stood a chance against a gialgathen. They wasted the crowd's time with an hour-long bout of boredom. It let me level a few skills at least.

With the snooze fest over, Kiki Mosk raised a hand, “And now for the final four fights for the Yildraza sector. After this, the winner will go on to compete against the best of the best in Giess's oldest city, Choria! There, the tournament's victor will be decided.”

He gestured towards me, “We have an exhibition of talent on display today. We have the unstoppable Daniel Hillside, a newcomer with a brutal reputation of dominance.”

A light flashed over me. I sighed, going through the motions of raising my hand and riling up everybody. Kiki continued,

“He'll be fighting four combatants in a row today to test if he's as invincible as they say! After all, the true test of a fighter is overcoming adversity.”

I rolled my shoulders. If I were struggling, I'd call bullshit on this kind of thing. As if though, I counted my blessings. This meant I didn't need to spend forever waiting for my fights anymore. I could finish this in one hour if I hurried.

I jumped into the arena, clasping my fists. Kiki roared out, “And he looks like he’s itching for a fight! The first combatant will be the winner of the last bout, Moisc!”

He didn’t even announce his last name. Covered in gray power armor. He got back onto the arena’s stage, still out of breath from his last fight. It sucked he had to fight me while exhausted. I’d win either way, but he couldn’t give his best. As a guy who’s competed before, I sympathized.

As we faced each other, I gave him a short bow. He did the same. I raised a hand and shouted, “Sorry you have to fight like this.”

He shrugged, “Eh, I knew I wasn’t winning the tournament anyway. I’m just here for the experience. I got further than I ever expected anyway.”

I liked his positive attitude. Kiki Mosk raised a hand, “Are both combatants ready?”

We nodded. Kiki swung his hand down. I stomped the ground, lifting a panel of stone between Moisc and I. With Hunter of Many, I tracked his location from behind cover. I raised a foot, kicking forward. I extended my reach with telekinesis, busting his shielding.

Moisc already fired at me, unlatching a grenade. I thumped the projectile with telekinesis. The bomb smacked the forcefield around the arena, letting out a vibrant, blue fire. With crowd letting out a cheer, I kicked again, shattering Moisc’s secondary mana shield.

Moisc opened his dimensional storage, his desperation building. Before he pulled something out, I launched a short uppercut. A telekinetic pulse smashed into his gut, knocking him upwards. Spit flopped out of his mouth as he couldn’t breathe.

He tumbled from above, stunned and gasping for air. I caught him with a gravity well. At the same time, I kicked the block of stone between us back onto the arena. Kiki raised his eyebrows,

“Yeesh, that must of hurt. On to Daniel’s next opponent!”

Moisc's breath returned to him as the medics came up. He let them carry him out on a hovering stretcher. My next opponent flew up from the stands, a large gialgathen. He wore armor over his neck and chest. With red skin and black spots, he glared at me. He growled,

"Filthy dirtwalker. You will not play with me as you did Alzoroath."

I nodded, "You're right. I won't. I don't have time too."

He narrowed his eyes. He breathed in as Kiki raised a hand, "Are both combatants prepared!"

We gave the nod, the gialgathen still breathing deep. Kiki raised a fist, "Then go!"

I snapped a kick upwards, hitting a telekinetic panel. A portion of the force converted, hitting the gialgathen's chin as he breathed fire at me. The green flame dispersed on the arena's invisible barrier, creating a light show. The crowd boomed out, in awe at the display of light and power.

I wasted no time. As the gialgathen's breath sputtered out, I reached out a hand. I jerked the gialgathen's head towards me, accentuating my pull with gravity. His head whipped down while I launched myself upwards. I lifted my knee, landing the blow flush on his jaw.

My armor creaked as the bones in his face cracked. Several of his teeth shattered, tumbling against the arena. Knocked out cold, his head flopped to his side. I caught it, preventing him from suffering more damage. As I set him down, the crowd went quiet.

Even Kiki looked affected. He pulled at his collar, "Well...that was something." A drop of cold sweat fell down his face, "Ahem, the winner!"

The throngs of supporters burst into applause, giving me a standing ovation. I gave them a wave while lifting the gialgathen out of the arena with magic. Medics tended to his injuries while I cracked my neck. I growled, "Come on. Who's next?"

Kiki raised his eyebrows, "The next victim is a veteran of the tournament. We have Eradin Forest-Torch!"

Eradin flew up into the arena. As he landed, the old beast sighed, “And here I believed I might win Yildraza’s selection this year.”

I shrugged, “You can still win.”

He shook his head, a toothy grin on his face, “I do have two eyes, young one. What they just saw gave me a clear message.”

His tail whipped behind him, picking up speed as he continued, “Eradin, you should’ve retired before this last fight.”

I raised my hands, “Eh, we’ll see.”

Kiki Mosk raised a hand, “Are both combatants ready?”

We nodded. Kiki swung his arm down, “Then begin!”

I gave Eradin a bow, and he returned the favor. The crowd booed, wanting more drama. I rolled my eyes as I charged mana. Eradin stepped forward, whipping his tail towards me. I slammed my arm into his attack, knocking it down onto the arena.

The arena crumbled, a plume of white powder rising. Eradin flicked his tail slamming it towards me again. I detonated my runes, dashing forward as he did. Eradin pierced deep into the arena as I bolted towards his face. With momentum behind me, I slammed my fist into his face

The old gialgathen’s head whipped back. He stumbled, still conscious. Eradin’s eyes glazed over as he fell. He crashed off the arena, a clash of sound rippling out. He tried getting back up, but he was too disoriented. I looked up, waiting for Kiki to end the fight.

He didn’t.

The crowd chanted, "Finish him. Finish him. Finish him." The old gialgathen shook his head, getting a sense of where he was. He looked around, his eyebrows creased. I waved my hand, shouting at Kiki,

"Just end the fight already. Eradin doesn't even know where he is."

Kiki shook his head, "He can still battle. Just listen to the crowd."

Kiki grinned, a sinister edge in his voice. I frowned as Eradin locked eyes with me. He stared a for a moment before his huge eyes widened. He glanced down,

"I...I lost, didn't I?"

I nodded. Eradin raised a wing, letting out a mental shout, "I surrender. He has beaten me. Honor to him and his clan."

The crowd booed, their hatred for the gialgathens coming out. A few people shouted,

"Where's the blood?"

"I wanted to see some more missing teeth."

"He's crushed dozens of espens with his bullshit tail. He has it coming!"

The crowd's reaction disgusted me. A few people tried throwing food and drinks at Eradin while he was down. I shot out a wave of gravity, slamming the food back into the arena.

This shit was getting old fast.

Kiki sighed, "Well, it's well within tournament regulations to surrender."

He raised a hand to me, "To the victor!"

The crowd changed on a dime, giving me an enormous hoopla. The mob repulsed me at this point. I just wanted to win the mythical compendium then get out of here. All this easy fame and status came from their hatred of gialgathens. My integrity wouldn't let me accept it.

With those thoughts swirling in my head, the crowd calmed back down. Kiki raised another hand, "And now we have the final fight for the Yildraza sector. The last gialgathen and last year's winner, give a hand for Derlilath, Lady Of The Yellow!"

A chorus of boos echoed out as a yellow gialgathen flapped her wings. Old and muscled, she landed in front of me. She almost glowed with energy, her armor encrusted with gemstones. She grinned at me, her voice commanding,

"It's good to see they've brought a worthy warrior this year."

I grinned back, "Likewise."

Unlike the others, she looked like a serious challenge, so I analyzed her,

Delilath, Lady of Yellow(lvl 10,031 | Unknown Status) – Once a general of Lehesion's army, Delilath worked as one of the gialgathen's most powerful mages. She's placed in the top five of the tournament for the last seven years since she's decided to compete.

Though she once fought to help the espens, public opinion turned against her. Numerous campaigns by prominent figures such as Thisbey Thorn or Azakus Riola ruined the reputation of Lehesion's followers. With rumormongering and propaganda, they've turned Delilath from a celebrated hero to a scorned symbol.

Regardless of her affiliation with politics, Delilath's competence in battle is undeniable. She wields ancient magics only known by the gialgathens. By drawing mana from her surroundings, she opens up her own mana pool to enhance her tail swipes. This combination of control-oriented sorcery and physical ferocity makes her threatening to almost anyone.

Be careful and tread with caution.

I smiled, my blood boiling at her status. This would be an actual fight, and that prospect excited me to no end. I pounded my fists together, denting my gray armor and letting out an echo. Delilath channeled her energy, soft, yellow spheres forming around her.

Dozens of yellow stars formed beside her, a sweet-smelling wind rushing over me. I followed suit, charging up my own mana. The air around us saturated with energy, our auras intermingling. Sparks of red lightning shot from me, my blood permeated with volatile energy.

Kiki backed away, raising his eyebrows, “Well, both combatants look as though they want to tear each other apart.”

A happy grin grew over his face, “Excellent! Are both combatants ready?”

With her chin held high, Delilath nodded. I shook my fists, mana saturating my frame. Kiki laughed, “I’ll take that as a yes.”

He swung his hand down, “Let the battle to decide who represents Yildraza begin!”

Chapter 173: Riptide

I gave Delilath a bow. She bowed back. As we raised our heads, she snapped her tail towards me. I stomped a foot while condensing my weight. I burrowed downwards, her attack smashing a crater into the arena above my head.

I detonated my charged runes, bursting out from the ground. A cloud of white powder surged out with me. Delilath shifted her head, dodging my assault. She snapped her tail at me again, catching me in flight. I crossed my arms, blocking the blow.

My camouflage caved in, the gray armor crumpling at Delilath’s might. As our attacks followed through, her tail bounced back, but I kept going forward. With me behind her, Delilath stepped back. With agility defying her enormous frame, she turned around.

She took a short breath. As her chest swelled, a few of the yellow orbs she formed earlier compacted over me. The dense mana sunk into my skin, rattling my brain. I expected pain. Confusion washed over me along with a sense of bliss.

At that moment, all was right with the world. My mouth tasted sweet. The stuffy air in my helmet smelled of light perfume and delicious food. A calming sensation pervaded me from head to toe. I had no problems. If anything, I was glad to have something to do with all my time.

Delilath's deep roar interrupted my sudden intoxication. Her yellow, piercing fire plumed out toward me. I pulled myself out of my drunkenness, snapping an antigravity well between me and the flames. The well pushed me back, the fire billowing outward and away from me.

Delilath lunged back before she burned herself. I landed on my back, crushing the arena beneath me. Before I sunk down, I pulled myself up, looking at my hands. My armor was red hot. I shook my head. My train of thought was muddled.

I didn't understand why I was so interested in my hands in the middle of a fight. Before I figured it out, Delilath snapped her tail at me again. I tried deflecting, but my body moved like I was in a pit of molten lead. I blocked at the last moment, her tail snapping me sideways.

I gasped, actual damage being done to me. If this continued, Delilath would tear my armor off and expose my identity. I didn't even feel like that was a bad thing though. As I argued with myself about the merits of disguising myself, Delilath took another deep breath.

I frowned at the attack, irritated by it. I stood up and dived into the ground. Delilath's flames melted the rock above me. I dug forward, picking up the pace. She kept her blaze over me, creating a moat of magma. I shot out of the ground, sending a telekinetic kick towards her chin.

One of her yellow spheres concentrated into a point. It dashed towards her chin, nullifying my kinetic wave. As it did, my eyes widened. She could counter my magic, influence my mind, and was a behemoth to boot. If she kept this up, I didn't just have to worry about exposing my identity.

I might lose.

She snapped another attack with her diamond hard tail. I blocked it again, the momentum of her attack slinging me straight into the ground. She stepped up towards

me, breathing in. Another tail whip smashed into me from above, cracking my facemask.

I closed my eyes. Delilath's magic didn't work like most mages. People generally incapacitated you with pain or injury. Delilath used euphoria against her enemies, making them dull and dumb. Without any experience facing the magic, I wasn't armed with tools against it. Well, not conventional tools at least.

So, I improvised.

I clenched my fists and ground my teeth. I used Mental Adaptability to its maximum, reminding myself why I was fighting. I wanted the mythical compendium. I needed to get good relations with Giess's leaders. Hell, I just wanted to be the best.

With Delilath's magic muddling my brain, they felt like shitty reasons. Using the logical side of my mind, I envisioned the worst case scenario from here. I could expose my identity. I might end up breaking ties with Giess, remaining unknown and hunted. I would lose, which would suck all around.

Bolstered by both line of logic, I stood up. A tail swipe slammed onto me from above, but I smashed it to the side with a swipe of my forearm. With my armor resembling aluminum foil at this point, I narrowed my eyes and sharpened up.

I was back.

Delilath unleashed her yellow fire, singeing stone. I grasped gravity, bending the trajectory of her fire upward. It clashed against the invisible forcefield, parts of Kiki's suit igniting. I shot a palm out, sending a telekinetic bullet at Delilath's chest.

Another yellow sphere darted to save her. She whipped her long limb at me again while I pushed through the mugginess. With a burst of will, I deflected her strike. Using the opening, I shot a blistering combination of kinetic bullets her way.

Four spheres disintegrated, voiding my magic. This cycle continued, each of us picking up our pace. We battled back and forth, each side vying for dominance. Our tactics evolved.

I kept pads of gravity over my arms, preventing my armor from crumpling anymore. Delilath generated mana orbs, drawing from the mana around her. I pulled from my own reserves, dipping into the sea of mana at my disposal. Tension grew. The arena evaporated around us, our conflict disintegrating it.

The invisible shield around us rippled as dynamic forces dispersed out in massive shockwaves. We matched each other, firing off efficient, savage strikes. We gained a flow of each other's patterns, making adjustments throughout the fight.

I burst through my mana, deflecting her with gravitational waves alone. She discovered that I was protecting my armor. She aimed her strikes to cleave it off should I miscalculate. This extended my mana reserves, hundreds of thousands of mana burning each second.

Kiki kept his hands up, sweat pouring down his forehead. He struggled to contain the fight, the monumental forces we generated challenging to deal with. The crowd roared out, amazed at the exhibition of both our strengths.

The struggle stretched on, each of us finding our own rhythm. It was a game of endurance now, each of us fatiguing the other. Beads of cold sweat poured down Delilath's face, a toothy grin spread over her maw. I grinned back, enjoying the intensity of the bout. I hadn't fought like this in months. For her, it might've been years.

After two hours of raging intensity, she ran out of yellow spheres. Without her protection, she blasted through her reserves. She sliced her tail, echoing out a sonic boom as it shot at me from above. The heat from the attack caused my ears to pop from the pressure change of the air.

Before it landed, I dipped into my health pool, sending out a dense, powerful wave of magic. As magic and might clashed, a shockwave ebbed outward. The invisible forcefield wobbled before collapsing, the arena quaking under Delilath's onslaught.

With sweat pouring down my own face, I retaliated with fury. She lunged towards me, snapping her jaw at me from above. I met her charge, firing off a punch with my heels planted. My fist connected just shy of her chest. My hand bounced back, Force of Nature activating in all its fury.

I'd thrown the same punch tens of thousands of times. My body just went through the motions, muscle memory guiding me through the act. Telekinetic augments generated

around my fists and feet. The ground around me sinking from my telekinetic extensions. My augments converted the surface area of my punch.

Instead of being spread out over my large fist, it pierced Delilath's chest like needle. This gave my attack tremendous piercing power. The impact punched a hole through her torso, my shoulders creaking under the stress. The energy dispersed from her back, her plate mail ripping out.

Delilath stood there, her eyes and mouth wide open. She glanced down, blood spurting from the wound. She gurgled, blood leaking out of her jaws. She fell sideways, but I caught her before her head clunked on stone. Two gialgathens swung in from the crowd.

A waterfall of blood gushed from Delilath's chest. My heart raced in my chest. I overdid it, big time. At this rate, she'd die. I ran up to her, one of her friend gialgathens hissing at me. Ignoring her, I looked at the tunnel through Delilath.

Blood spurted out each time her heart beat, several arteries ruptured. The medics weren't in a hurry to aid her either. Using several small gravity wells, I pinched the ends of a dozen of her arteries. As I did, the bleeding dropped by over half. It was still more than enough to kill her in minutes.

I turned, shouting at Kiki, "Know any healing?"

Kiki shivered, gasping for breath. He shook his head, "I'd love to help, but...I'm...I'm experiencing mana deprivation...Give me a second to recover."

I dragged my hand down my helmet, "Fuck. Medics?"

The two medics stumbled up. The doctors pulled out two health potions apiece. I growled, "What the fuck are you doing with two potions? Use all the potions you have."

They jittered through their bags, dropping a few vials and patches. With shaking hands, each medic poured healing solution onto the wound. It wasn't anywhere near enough. I opened my dimensional storage, pulling out green health potions from Torix.

These were the kind you dumped directly onto an open wound. Delilath was choking on her own blood. She couldn't exactly swallow. With that in mind, I pulled the elixirs out, handing them to the medics. They poured several of the potions onto the wound, which healed it at a surface level. The wounds inside her chest were still raw, internal bleeding running rampant.

Getting desperate, I set several dozen of the green bottles onto the ground without their caps on. The healing mixture gushed from each of them. I lifted the collecting pool of liquid with gravity. There was a bit of dirt in it, but I didn't have time to filter the tonic.

With a blob of green potion, I whipped it around to the other side of Delilath. I forced the healing tonic deep into Delilath's chest, saturating her wounds with the healing liquid. Delilath stuttered, unable to breathe. While maintaining the other wells, I created another one over her mouth.

Blood siphoned out of her mouth, stopping her from drowning. She gasped, coughing in agony. I looked at Delilath and shouted, "Stay with me, ok? Stay with me. Don't go to sleep, alright?"

She looked me in the eye. Seconds later, her irises relaxed. All tension left her body. The sputtering stopped. The gialgathen that hissed at me earlier was crying, large tears pouring down her face. I stood up, grabbing the sides of my helmet.

I heaved several breaths. I looked at my hands, blood all over them. I peered back down at Delilath. I raised my hands, not knowing what to do with myself. My eyes widened with horror as both gialgathens now wept over her. Like a lost child, I stood there not knowing what to do.

My mind raced. I killed so many things before. Hell, I've killed innocent people without meaning too. Seeing the impact of death was different. The two gialgathens looked like her family. Their chests quivered. Their racking cries loudened. Delilath was a great fighter. She helped Lehesion free millions of slaves. She didn't deserve to die like this.

As that dawned on me, I reached out a hand to the gialgathens. I tried saying something, but they growled at me before I could think of something to say. One of them looked at me, the gialgathen's face crinkled up. With snot and tears pouring down its face, her glare pierced right through me.

I took a step back and shook my head. Something about the way she looked at me was terrifying. Before it sunk in, Kiki chugged several mana potions from his dimensional storage. He wiped off his forehead with a handkerchief,

“And here is the victor everybody! He’s the first person to ever defeat Delilath, the Lady of Yellow...At least in Yildraza. He’s definitely the first to end her reign for good. Come on everybody, let’s hear it for Daniel Hillside!”

The crowd had been silenced by the carnage from earlier. The horde revitalized, cheering for me. I looked around, astonished that anyone could clap for what felt like murder.

I caught glimpses of concerned espens. Some of them teared up and cried even. The vast majority cheered with elation, however. It caught me off guard. Kiki clapped his hands, “And that concludes Yildraza’s tournament in dramatic fashion. Do have a good day everybody, and enjoy yourselves!”

I found myself staring at the weeping gialgathens. Kiki floated right beside me, his hoverboard humming,

“As part of tournament policy, you’re not guilty of anything! Plenty of people have died in the tournament despite a Speaker’s protection. It’s inevitable. Delilath’s death is my responsibility.”

He grinned at me, “So I’ll be the one to take the fall for your mistake! Isn’t that just great!”

I glanced up at him. “But...she’s so frail? Her level is high? How did she die? I don’t understand.”

Kiki scoffed, “Gialgathens aren’t integrated into Schema’s system. You may not know this, but creatures without access to the system have stunted healing capabilities. When they bleed, they die!”

I blinked. Kiki’s explanation was so obvious but I didn’t even remember it. Gialgathens weren’t like eldritch or like system goers. They were more like bears or sharks. If something crushed a hole through their chests, the animal died.

That's why I was able to make it out of my first dungeon, BloodHollow, in the first place. Schema's system helped me heal through the grievous wounds that hit me. Otherwise, I'd have died a few minutes after being integrated into Schema's system. The gialgathens didn't have that. This kind of blow was death.

Kiki patted my shoulder, "Surprising, isn't it? You probably have never experienced the world without Schema's system, but this is the reality of it. Don't take it to heart."

I centered myself, getting myself out of my mental fog,

"I'm fine. I didn't want to kill her. That's all."

Kiki nodded, "It won't hurt your fame or how the people are behind you."

I frowned, "I couldn't care less."

Kiki grinned, "Now that's a rugged hero! I hope you're ready for the final portion of the tournament! Good luck there. Considering Delilath took hours for you to take down, you're going to need it!"

I ripped my gaze away from Delilath's corpse, walking away from the scene. I gripped my hands, letting out some nervous energy. Kiki was right in a way. Each combatant put their lives on the line every time they fought. Referees protected competitors, but they weren't perfect.

That was an excuse though. No matter how I rationalized the situation, I killed someone without meaning too. Delilath might not be the last one I murdered either. If I made another mistake, I'd end Kessiah, Torix, maybe even Althea.

That's what scared me. In that sober state of mind, I found myself walking out to the stadium's lobby. People swarmed me, asking for autographs, photos, and answers. I raised a hand and shouted,

"I'm tired. Fuck off."

I used several of my skills to enhance my voice's impact. A wave of silence rippled over the amassing crowd, my words commanding them. The mob let me walk out in peace. Right before I walked out of the stadium, a hand gripped my arm.

I glanced over, my voice hard as stone, "Who is it?"

Thisbey grinned at me, patting my arm, "Why, I'm just here to congratulate the victor. I wanted to invite you to lunch with me if you wouldn't mind."

It was this slimy fucker again. I shook my head,

"Yeah, not hungry. Just saw someone bleed out."

He raised his palms, "If you aren't hungry, perhaps we could meet in a place where you could clear your mind? I know a spot two blocks away that should serve as a quiet place to rest and unwind after such a brutal bout."

He waved his arms, "After all, I'm certain you'd like to collect yourself after an experience like that. As always, you're more than welcome to walk away. I don't hold hostages when I'm conversating."

I weighed my options. On the one hand, I wanted to talk to my friends back in the hotel room. On the other, Thisbey was giving me an opportunity. Even if he was piece of garbage, he was a knowledgeable piece of garbage. If I played my cards right, I could learn a lot from him, like maybe who to make ties with on Giess.

I sighed, "Alright, fine." I pointed at him, "Understand this. I don't like you, and I sure as hell don't like how you do things."

He gave me a warm grin, walking ahead of me, "Well perhaps you can think it over. I know just the place for you to ponder."

We walked past the group of silent onlookers. I stared down, finding myself wearing armor that looked like a crushed aluminum can. I glanced back up, "Yeah, I need another suit of armor."

Thisbey waved a hand, “I’m not one to judge a man on his appearance. I stick strictly to their character. That be’in said, where I’m taking you has somewhere for you to change at if you feel so obliged.”

We paced out of the stadium and onto Giess’s streets. Aliens and espens alike gawked at me, blood covering my crushed armor. I couldn’t blame them. Some aliens even called the police, giving them my description.

Thisbey raised his eyebrows, “I’ll handle the law enforcement, don’t you worry. I’m sure you have plenty to worry about already.”

Thisbey picked up the pace, weaving between crowds of people. He turned into an alleyway, pacing through the dark, dirty street. In the middle of the alley was a reinforced, steel doorway. Thisbey walked up to it, leaning towards the side of the door.

A sensor scanned his eyes. He talked as it happened,

“This is one of my many warehouses spread throughout the city. I figured you’d take kindly to the peace and quiet here.”

The door swung open, air hissing out of the building. We walked inside, finding a cozy room with several bookshelves lining it. A warm fire burned from a pit of orange opals at the center of the room. Several leather lounging chairs spread out beside it. I took a deep breath.

Yup, gialgathen leather as usual. The guy was psychotic.

The door closed behind us as I followed Thisbey inside. I glanced around, finding several desks covered in notebooks. Thisbey pointed at them,

“Those contain some of my business dealings. I enjoy spending quite a bit of time here whenever I need somewhere to focus. You’re welcome here anytime you please.”

I breathed in, the smell of stone and fire letting me relax. As I walked further in, books and leather mixed with those scents. Crisp, fresh air flowed past me. As slimy as Thisbey was, he had a good taste. I couldn’t deny it. His choice in fabrics was fucked though.

With a hearty laugh, Thisbey grabbed the collar of his gialgathen skin suit,

“I’m glad to see you’re taken by it.”

I nodded, “Yeah, it is a nice place to just sit and think.”

He gave me a signature Thisbey grin, walking over to his desk. He pulled out two glasses and a bottle. I rolled my eyes,

“Trying to worm information out of me?”

He nodded, “If I may be so frank, yes. Of course I am. You’re the talk of the town, and everyone is curious as to who you are. I aim to keep them guessing.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Why?”

He poured me a glass, “You’re no espen. I know that. You’re far too tall and broad. Your armor lacks a humidifier as well, meaning dry air doesn’t bother you. However, if they don’t see your face, the masses assume you’re espen. I’m quite all right with that, as you may imagine.”

He brought over the glasses to a set of chairs overlooking the fire. He set the glasses on a table between the chairs. Thisbey sat down onto the chair, sighing with relief. He pointed at the other chair. I frowned at him,

“It’s not exactly smart to tell me that kind of thing. I can expose my identity any second.”

He tapped the chair, “It’s quite comfortable if you’d to take a seat.”

I walked over, sitting down. He smirked at me, “You won’t expose who you are. Your identity means a lot to you. I could tell in the fight you were protecting your gray disguise. It’s obviously not as tough as you are, so why else would you wear it?”

I glared down at him. I towered over Thisbey, a head taller than him even sitting down. It didn't phase him one bit as he leaned back in his chair. He glanced back at the fire, crossing his fingers. He waited, giving me time to think.

I took a deep breath, remembering the fight with the Skyburners. I needed to flush my mind of all the bullshit going through it and perform. I fucked up in the tournament. I couldn't afford to do the same against the Skyburners.

Thisbey took a sip of the herbal tonic, interrupting my thoughts,

“Would it bother you if I asked a tentative question?”

I shrugged, “I thought you were here to give me some peace and quiet?”

He shrugged, “Well, I aim to give you food for thought. That should help ease your transition.”

I scoffed, “Sure, why not.”

He raised a hand, “As I understand it, you've been rather busy as of late with the tournament and all. I sympathize if you've been preoccupied with other matters, but have you given my proposition any thought?”

I shook my head, “Eh, not really. Don't know if it's worth giving thought.”

He laughed, “Good. When a man thinks too hard, it muddles his mind. Best to keep it clear and follow your gut. It's worked for me. It'll likely work for you as well.”

He turned to me, “Excuse me if this feels like an interrogation, but there are reports of someone clearing out the silvers nearby. Would that happen to be you perchance?”

I nodded. Thisbey picked up his glass again,

“You saved several of my boys when you did that. I'll let the media know about your deeds. It should help smooth over today's...incident.”

I shrugged, “I don’t care too much about fame to be honest with you. If anything, it just gets in the way.”

Thisbey raised an eyebrow, “Now Daniel, fame is simply a tool, and like any other tool, it can be misused.” He raised a hand, accentuating his next point,

“It’s much like a hammer. It can be used to both build and destroy depending on where you swing it. Your fame is much the same way.”

He swung his hand one way, “On the one hand, you built the confidence of the espen people.” He swung his hand in the other direction, “On the other, you’ve destroyed some of the gialgathen’s arrogance.”

He accentuated his next point, grasping his fingers together, “I consider both tremendous feats in their own right.” He gestured a palm to me, “All I ask is you swing that hammer of yours one last time.”

I rolled my eyes, “Really now? Sounds like you want me to swing a hammer through a gialgathen’s skull. If you ask me, you’re a damn lunatic.”

He shook his head, turning back to the fire, “You’ve seen and felt what they can do. They’re more than merely powerful. They feed on the natural mana that saturates Giess. Think of it. Trillions of creatures thrive on mana. Predators eat those creatures, and mana collects in their flesh and blood.”

He raised a fist, “The gialgathens are the densest collections of mana on this planet. That’s why they defy a normal planet’s biological limits. I’ve never seen a non-eldritch match their might. Their overwhelming capacities come at a cost, however.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Alright. Sureeee. Let’s hear your pitch.”

He kept on going, ignoring my sarcasm, “Mana pollution.” Thisbey shook his head,

“Scientists still don’t quite understand the mechanism behind it. Signs of it lie everywhere around us, however, even beneath our very feet.”

He took a sip of his drink, “You may not be aware, but there’s a vast ocean of pollution beneath the surface of Giess. The silver’s feed on that mana pollution. That’s why they came here. That’s why they’ve spread out.”

I knew this part of his bullshit was true. I dove miles beneath the surface of Giess early on after coming here. He turned to me,

“The animals here, they evolved around the mana. They use it like water or air. The difference is that mana is a resource with consequences. You can use internal mana all you want. It’s the will of your own mind. It regenerates if you give your mind some time to rest.”

He shook his head, “Drawing from nature is different. It’s like sapping the will of the world, and it leaves a toxic, inhospitable mush behind.”

I frowned, “Wait, you’re telling me all that muck is from animals?”

He nodded, “And the espens, our technology, even our entertainment. It all draws from a well that’s about to dry up. Very few people understand this. A few select individuals are even combating it.”

I remembered Thisbey’s silver mining business. He looked at my facemask, a smirk growing on his,

“You guessed right. I’m leading the charge, funding the farming of the silvers. We can’t eliminate them. We need them even more than they need us.”

He looked back at the fire, his brow creasing, “But the mana pollution has run its course already. We’ve walled in vast seas of the sludge, but our time is running out. If it weren’t for the silvers, we’d already be done for.”

I cupped my chin, diving deep into thought. Thisbey calculated his every word. Taking it at face value was foolish. At the same time, not all of it was lies. When I first arrived on Giess, I carried my friends and I over one of those seas of walled in sludge. I even explored one of the oceans, finding a follower of Eonoth. That scientist was trying to create espens that lived off the muck.

This was why.

Thisbey frowned, “Now that you understand a few of the intricacies of Giess’s climate let’s present a question. If you guessed who contributed the most to mana pollution, who would it be?”

I sighed, “The creatures that used the most mana.”

Thisbey’s gaze turned hard like iron, “Let me divulge another deduction from you. What species do you believe does this the most?”

I frowned,

“The gialgathens.”

Chapter 174: Coming Together

Thisbey nodded, “Let’s be precise here. My boys have run the data and done the research. A single gialgathen can destroy a hundred square miles of land over its lifetime.”

He leaned back into his chair, letting a hand flop onto his armrest,

“Now while I might be a biased source, something has to be done about this mess. Otherwise, every man, woman, and child on Giess will drown in this here filth.”

Thisbey’s voice turned sharp as a razor,

“And why? For what cause? So that these beasts can look down on us? So that they can whittle away our planet’s resources just to fuel their own arrogance? I say that’s some poor reasoning. I say we put a stop to it.”

I narrowed my eyes, “Well then, how would you get rid of the problem exactly?”

Thisbey waved his hands, “If it were up to me in totality, my solution would be simple in practice. We eliminate the cause of pollution. Seeing as that isn’t an option you’d consider, how about we find a compromise so to speak?”

I thumped my fingers against my armrest, my impatience growing. I’d heard more than enough of Thisbey’s bullshit at this point. Thisbey spread out his arms as if he had nothing to hide,

“I just need you to tell the espens that drawing mana from nature is foolish. There’s a large portion of espen society that still does so. You’d be the one to put a stop to it.”

He leaned back in his chair, a smile growing on his face, “It has nothing to do with the gialgathens. I’m self-aware enough to know that I’m biased. Despite that, I’m willing to work with my compatriots. That means I’m willing to work with you.”

I leaned back into my chair, “Where are you getting the data and research from?”

Thisbey shrugged, “A reliable and neutral source, I assure you. Most of what I know isn’t public knowledge. Find someone who researches the silvers. Anyone worth their salt can tell you this much.”

I looked down, diving into thought. Thisbey was full of shit for sure, but he raised a few points I should research on my own. His growing desperation to convince me also taught me something. If I shifted something the wrong way on Giess, I could wreck the whole planet.

My decisions mattered. I affected people, a lot of people. Up till now, it was like I was running away from all that. It’s a lot to take on, and it’s not something I’m good at either. If I kept fumbling in the dark though, I might end up slaughtering people, my friends included.

Killing Delilath drove that point home.

With that in mind, I took a deep breath, centering myself. I was scared of all this new responsibility and influence. The more I avoided it though, the larger a problem it would become. It was time I stopped running away. I put that fear behind me, using it to spur me forward. It was time to man up and get this shit done.

I first needed to get a solid understanding of the situation on Giess. Once I got an idea of what I was working with, I'd come up with a plan. The quicker I did so, the better. At this rate, people might even think I was siding with Thisbey. The guy was a genocidal maniac. Not my cup of tea, personally.

I stood up from my chair, "I'll talk to someone else about it. I have a lot to do. Goodbye."

Thisbey leaned his head back, "Could you at least consider the idea of my proposition? What is it about me that throws you off to such a degree?" He frowned, "Am I too lowly for you? Is that it?"

I raised an eyebrow. Thisbey snapped at me. I was done playing nice with him, so I gripped the edge of my chair's armrest,

"Tell me, what animal did you get this leather from?"

Thisbey blinked, "Well, it's a trade secret."

I crushed the armrest in my hand, smearing the wood and nails like playdough, "See, that's why I won't consider what you're saying. You're lying to me."

Thisbey's brow creased, "Now there's no reason to get uncivil here. These are ungrounded accusations. Any proof behind them?"

I was done with his politician talk. It was time to be blunt. I leaned over Thisbey,

"I'm done playing these little games of yours. Let's just be honest, alright? I hate your guts. You get other people to do the dirty work for you. Why? Because you can't stand a little dirt under your fingernails."

A blood vessel throbbed on the side of Thisbey's head. He stood up, pressing a finger against my chest,

“Now I’ve been as kind to you as my own son. I’ve paid for hotel rooms. I’ve done charitable work in your name. I’ve done nothing to deserve this kind of judgment, let alone condemnation...Especially from you.”

I scoffed, “Ever since we met, you’ve been trying to use me to orchestrate genocide.”

He frowned, “It’s not genocide. It’s saving Giess from an environmental crisis. I’ll have you know my intentions are pure at heart.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Really now? No hidden agenda there?”

He gripped the collar of his leather suit, “Of course not. I’m a man of my word.”

I grabbed his skin jacket,

“You’re still trying to play games with me, Thisbey. You’re wearing gialgathen skin. I can smell it. I can feel the mana in it. How the hell am I supposed to trust you when you can’t even own up to that much?”

He knocked my hand aside, “You don’t know me. You don’t know my history.”

I scoffed, “You’re wearing another sentient species’ skin. What else do I need to know about you before I can tell you’re a bad person? That you eat children?”

Thisbey’s face went dark. He glared up at me and seethed,

“I will ruin you for this. Do you hear me? I built you up and I’ll tear you down. That reputation of yours, I’ll flip it in seconds. I’ll turn you into a demon instead of a hero.”

I rolled my shoulders, “Just like you did with Delilath? I already told you. I couldn’t give two fucks about fame.”

He spread out his arms, “At the very least I didn’t kill her like some savage. Your big, brutish hands can’t do much else but smash, can they? I wonder what you’ve done to

that woman of yours with those big old hands? Probably beaten more than once or twice.”

I wrapped my hand around his shoulder. My palm rested over his chest, and my fingers wrapped around to his back. I compressed his torso, his bones creaking,

“You mean these big, brutish hands?”

Thisbey paled, anger draining out of his face.

I tilted my head, “Answer me this, smooth talker. Do you wear gialgathen skin because you’re afraid? Does it give you control over them? Do you think it gives you control of me?”

I cracked my neck, the bones in my neck sounding like steel. Thisbey’s knees shook as I glared back down at him,

“Tell me...do you feel in control?”

I held him there, giving his chest the slightest squeeze. My fingers were steamrollers, squeezing the life from him. A bead of cold sweat dripped down the side of his face. He shook his head and mumbled,

“I don’t.”

I nodded, “Didn’t think so.”

I let him go, patting his shoulder,

“Hey, just a heads up. If I see you wearing gialgathen skin again, I’m feeding you to an organ caterpillar. They’re deep in silver territory.”

His heart pounded in his chest, his pupils dilating with fear. I turned around, walking out. As I opened the door outside, I turned to him,

“They’re a nasty bunch, so you shouldn’t have any problems fitting right in.”

I closed the door behind me, done with that guy. I lifted my arms over my head, stretching out my back. As I did, the muscles in my back popped like iron cords. I ran forward, jumping up. I pulled myself along with a gravity well, reaching our hotel.

As I entered our room, I found Tohtella and Torix discussing details of the plan. They both stared at a series of holographic projection of the Skyburner base. They organized portal locations, supply chains, and portal locations.

They looked at me as I walked up. Tohtella crossed her arms, “Good to see you’re well. Did you win? It doesn’t look like it.”

I frowned, “Yeah, I won. It wasn’t easy though.”

Torix scoffed, “I assure you, that’s quite apparent. Here-” He opened a portal, pulling out another gray square of armor.

“I only own seven more. Do try to keep them safer would you?”

I took the gray square, “Yeah, yeah. I’ll give it my best.” They looked back at their projection. I put hand on Torix’s shoulder, “Hey, I need both of your help before I let you guys do your thing.”

Tohtella pursed her lips, “What is it?”

I raised my hands, “I need resources on Giess. Culture, environment, etcetera. I’m trying to get a grasp of what’s going on.”

Torix’s fire eyes flared, the fires growing brighter, “That’s rather sensible of you. Would you mind discussing what spurred you into action?”

I frowned, “I killed someone at the tournament.”

Torix leaned back, “Oh...Well then...”

Tohtella pursed her lips, “Who was it?”

“Delilath, Lady of Yellow. I didn’t mean to. Our fight dragged on for hours. When I finally got the upper hand, she snapped her jaws at me. After that, well.”

Torix shrugged, “You punched her to death. Alas, such is the circle of life and combat.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Her family flew over. They wept.”

Torix nodded, “It’s difficult, I know. It’s a series of fights, however. You’re not able to guarantee that every combatant will be safe, let alone over many tournaments.”

Tohtella glanced at her clipboard, jotting a note down, “She was a general for Lehesion’s army. It’s a shame she passed. Will you be able to fight at full power tonight, or should we delay the operation?”

She glared up at me, her eyes keen. I shrugged, “Eh, I’ve been through a lot worse. I just want to know more about Giess so I don’t end up fucking something else up. Simple as that.”

Tohtella raised her eyebrows, “Well then. I may assist you.”

She typed in her status. Seconds later, a dozen messages appeared in my inbox. She gave me an amused grin, “Those documents should give you a general overview of several factors of Giess.”

I scrolled through them on my status and grimaced, “Oh man. This is just hundreds of research papers. Fuck.”

Tohtella scoffed, “It’s basic reading. I included many of my own notes for you to use at your discretion.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Thanks. This is ridiculously helpful.”

Tohtella gave me a curt nod, “You’re offering your services to me. The least I can do is offer the same courtesy.”

Torix turned back to the holographic projections, “Now in order to keep the espens safe, I propose cryogenic storage.”

Tohtella rolled her eyes, “The water in the espens will expand, rupturing the cellular lining throughout their bodies. We’ll be taking back a bunch of preserved corpses.”

Torix shrugged, “What’s wrong with that?”

I walked off, shaking my head at our necromancer, “I’ll leave you both to it then.”

I floated up to my room, walking in. Althea was gone, doing something with Kessiah no doubt. Their relationship improved since coming to Giess. Either way, I appreciated the alone time. I sat down on one of our fine, wooden desks. I laid open my status, flipping and folding the menu till it was shaped like a book.

As I flipped through the virtual pages, I figured out three important facts. First, Thisbey wasn’t lying about the mana pollution. Tohtella’s research and reports verified it. He exaggerated the gialgathen’s mana footprint, however. Gialgathens took up one fifth of the mana pollution. Espens took up two thirds of the mana footprint. The rest were ordinary animals.

Thisbey was stretching the facts quite a bit.

The second piece of info involved silvers consumption of mana pollution. The saysha beetles spread out the metallic grid. They were the only known kind of silver that actually reduced mana pollution. Little research had taken place on more advanced silvers, however. Scientists hoped to find better eaters of the sludge.

The third fact revolved around silver hunts. Giess’s leveling occurred faster than a normal planet. This wasn’t just due to the mana strengthening the local animals and fauna. After the first year on Giess, Schema changed the silver’s status to that of eldritch.

This meant that there was an enormous amount of monsters to kill in order to level up. I struggled to level for that reason. It was hard to find monsters above level 5,000. On Giess however, they were everywhere in silver wasteland. This made reaching the level cap simple, though it wasn't easy by any stretch.

All these factors gave me a better understanding of Giess. I came up with a three-step plan to save the planet. They needed to find an efficient sludge eater from the silvers. After that, they should invest in using Schema's system to learn and use internal mana. During all that, they should spread awareness of mana pollution.

It wasn't that complicated to be honest.

The social issues threw a wrench in any reform though. Gialgathens didn't see silvers or the eldritch as a threat. Most espens still looked to the gialgathens for guidance. Therefore, most espens followed that line of logic. Tohtella tried changing the gialgathens minds in a variety of ways.'

They never listened to her.

That's why Thisbey and Tohtella asked me to give a certain kind of speech. My raw physical strength forced the gialgathens and espens to listen. This gave the social breakthrough required for reform. The issue came in the kind of reform I would cause.

Thisbey wanted me to demonize the gialgathens and make them out as weak. I didn't know exactly how he planned on using that to kill of the gialgathens. I assumed that giving that kind of speech would elicit that kind of reaction.

Tohtella wanted me to bolster Schema's appeal by hyping up self mastery. It was a simple, effective way of reducing mana pollution. Now that I comprehended the situation, I stuck with her plan. It seemed pretty damn solid.

With all that bullshit handled, I closed my status and leaned back in my chair. I let out a long sigh, thankful that it was over with. It only took about eight hours of unrelenting, tedious research. As painful as it was, it was necessary.

It gave me a foundation to act on.

Armed with insight, I stood up and pulled out my chunk of orichalcum. With another few hours before the operation, I tested my next ability. Over the last few days, I leveled up thermomancy to 50. I let the orichalcum float over my hand, holding it with a gravity well.

During some of my free time, I theorycrafted ideas for Thermomancy. The first idea to come up was crafting with my armor. If I melted the metal, I could manipulate it far better than when it was solid. It gave me a level of precision I couldn't match in other way.

We were also heading out later tonight. If I could arm Althea and the others with something, it might even save their life. I had no clue honestly, but it was an idea worth exploring.

With those intentions, I channeled my mana, generating a concentration of heat. In seconds, the orichalcum melted. With a pool of molten metal hovering above my hand, I spun it around using a gravitational vortex. The glowing ball flattened out, the heat off it heating the air in the room.

I played with the metal, changing its shape. I got the hang of shifting it with gravity wells. With a clear picture of what I wanted to make, I molded it into the shape of a knife. Once I had the outline of a knife, I pressed and prodded the goop until clear, sharp lines came up.

Once I created the handle and guard, I cooled the metal until it was white hot yet solid. With the softened metal in front of me, I etched runic glyphs with telekinetic pulses from my fingertips. I sharpened the edge, using my unique skill, Hands of a Giant. I even incorporated dimensional cipher runes on the handle.

I wasn't finished though. I aimed to improve my creation process from last time. An issue with many of my weapons was wear and tear on the runic glyphs. In order to hide them and reinforce the blade, I decided to cover the base of the knife with my molten skin. It would become the first knife made of dimensional fabric.

With that in mind, I tore a piece of my real, charcoal colored armor off. With a burst of mana, I melted it. I molded it into a long, flattened strip. I wrapped it around the handle, creating

a helix of melted armor hovering around the grip. Using another burst of energy, I tightened the helix of my armor over the blade. At the same time, I cooled the metal.

The result was woven plate of blackened armor over the hilt. This served several purposes. It prevented the runic inscriptions from deforming. The sheath protected others from seeing the runes as well. It even reinforced the blade since my armor was much harder than orichalcum.

Taking another strip of my charcoal armor, I melted another strip of the metal. I folded it around the shape of the blade, creating an other loose helix around the edge. Using the same tightening and cooling method, I tightened the helix around the blade. With careful scraping, I sharpened the edge on the casing till it could swipe through steel.

I gave it a bit of decoration with a few simple markings. I pulled my creation back, hovering the dagger in front of me. I grinned, impressed at my progress.

Dimensional Slicer(lvl requirement: 5,000) – Hiding forbidden runic glyphs, this reinforced blade is a beautiful bringer of death. Dimension C-138 utilized a cocktail of different skills to craft this masterclass of weaponry. The bonuses are as follows:

+100 Strength, Constitution, Endurance, Willpower,

+50 Intelligence, Perception, and Luck

+125% Critical Strike Damage | +Extra damage against other metals

+10,000 health | +1,000 health regen per minute

-10% to Charisma | -10% to Mana Regeneration

Note: Bonuses doubled for a member of Harbinger's Legion. Bonuses don't stack with copies of the Dimensional Slicer. Excess mana is siphoned to Dimension C-138.

I put my hands on my hips, admiring my work. I planned on using thermomancy for heating myself up. After a bit of thought, crafting popped up as a creative way of using

the skill. If I refined the talent enough, I'd become a blacksmith of great renown. Well, probably.

With that in mind, I went to work on the next knife. Three hours into the night, I crafted three more knives giving me four knives total. I'd give two to Althea and one to Torix and Kessiah. I weakened the runic markings for Kessiah's so that she could actually use it.

I adjusted the cipher markings to each person. If the use channeled the weapons, it would draw out their individual strengths. Althea's enhanced her critical strike damage and her slicing through metals. Torix's augmented his summoning capabilities. Kessiah's improved her technical abilities while slugging it out.

It was satisfying seeing my work come to fruition. I was glad the knives enhanced the user's tankiness too. Since I was total ass at protecting people in a fight, these knives would have to do. As I finished the fourth blade, a notification popped up.

New Skill Gained! The unique skills Thaumaturge, Thermomancy, and Hands of a Giant have combined into the mythical skill, Thaumaturgical Blacksmith! Half of unearned skillpoints rewarded(63 treepoints)

Mythical Skill Interaction! The Mythical skill, Thaumaturgical Blacksmith integrated the normal skill, Living Forge, enhancing the skills abilities!

Legendary Skill Interaction! Force of Nature enhances the mythical skill Thaumaturgical Blacksmith, evolving the skill into Star Forger! This gives the skill increased ease of use when incorporating telekinesis or gravity!

Star Forger(lvl 1) – Many bend metal to their making. You choose to bend the stars, crafting masterpieces with ease. Enhances metal manipulation, self-forging, runic carving, blacksmithing, enchanting, temperature manipulation, and dexterous ability with gravity and telekinesis. Effect enhances with level.

I shook my head, amazed I gained a mythical skill without meaning too. I was using several of my unique skills at once when making the blades. Most of the unique skills were very high level as well. That eased the process, giving me a leg up when combining them.

Before I gave the daggers to the others, I checked out my trees. I grinned. I had enough points to reach the final tier in my tree, Legendary. I put all my points into it, a sense of excitement building. As I finished it, a notification popped up.

As I read it, I raised an eyebrow.

New skill level unlocked!

Sovereign tier skill now unlocked!

Chapter 175: Eye of The Storm

I scrolled down on my menu, finding the reward for the legendary tree.

Be the beginning and the end of your mastery. When others ask for guidance, your lineage is what they look for. They gaze at your shadow, for you are legend.
Legendary(Tier 5) unlocked!

+100% to effect of legendary skills!

+1 to unlockable legendary skills!(3 total)

Doubles legendary leveling speed! (Note: Does not apply to skillpoints gained from dungeon cores).

Legendary skills are easier to create, requiring less synergy and proficiency!

I nodded at the bonuses. The tree gave me about what I expected. The leveling speed meant I might not invest my dungeon cores into the skill anymore. If I trained Force of Nature all the time, then it would climb at a steady rate. The free skill points might be better allocated to my mythical skills instead.

Before I checked out my bonuses though, I went back to the other notification. I had no idea what a sovereign skill meant. It looked like the next level of skills, one above even legendary. It kind of mismatched the naming scheme though. I expected something like fabled skill. Sovereign sounded like ruling to me.

I shrugged, willing to ask the others about it when the time was right. With that handled, I opened up my skill menu. I slid through my many skills, finding Force of Nature.

Force of Nature(lvl 2,676) – You are nature given fury. Enhances all techniques and application of skills within this ability, including but not limited to: Close Range Combat, Runic skills, Telekinesis, Gravitation, Sensory Abilities, Bearing, Temperature Manipulation, Runic Inscriptions, Crafting, and Draining Abilities. Numerical bonuses are as followed:

+520 Strength, +520 Dexterity, +260 Constitution, +260 intelligence, +104 Perception

+52 to all attributes for having a 2,600+ total in a legendary skill.

Ability Bonus: +330% | Mana Cost Reduction: 66%

I shook my head at the bonuses. The spell cost reduction alone tripled the output of my mana. The raw stats added up at this point as well. All the bonuses together increased the output of the skill by over tenfold. Considering the might of my magic already, it was something to fear.

I raised a hand, forming tiny gravity wells over my fingers. I bent gravity, extending the wells in different directions. This warped their pull, creating strange angled that they siphoned at. As if a part of my own body, I generated a panel of antigravity over me.

I walked over to the desk, reaching for a book. The book slid away, along with the table. As it tipped over, I lifted a finger, raising it with just enough force to flip it back upright.

It was like walking or breathing, no effort required. Gravity was my elemental affinity now, something that was a part of me. As gravity bent under my will, I charged my mana. I condensed a gravity well, building its pulling power. I canceled it with an antigravity vortex. Instead of twenty minutes of charging, I'd need about two for a singularity now.

It was wholly and utterly terrifying.

I sighed, making sure to only use that shit when it was necessary. Otherwise, I'd suck myself into one, killing myself in the process. With that handled, I opened my tree menu.

Breaker(Finish an S tier bounty, only one class can be chosen)(0/5,000) | Originator(Be the first to learn a skill)(0/1,500) | Purger(Clear a quarantine)(0/250) | Sovereign(Lead an A tier guild or higher, Clear an A tier bounty or higher, Be able to unlock three or more legendary skills)(0/10,000)

I raised my eyebrows at the Sovereign tree. It was absurd, needing double what my next highest tree required. Considering the steep cost, I hesitated at choosing it. If my guess were right, it would dish out a reward every 2,500 skill points. That was a very, very long time by anyone's standards.

The other tree, Originator, looked like it might help me create skills. If I unlocked that tree first, I could build several dozen new abilities. With the skill points from them, filling out the Sovereign tree seemed more feasible.

With that in mind, I put my twenty-five remaining points into the Originator tree. With that handled, I lifted the four knives with gravity. I stepped out of my room. As I opened the door, Althea met me. With her hands on her hips, she glared at me,

"Hey."

I grinned, "Hey sweet stuff."

She frowned, "You look terrible."

I looked down, finding my armor crumpled still, "Oh, I do need to change."

I stepped back into the room. Althea closed the door behind me a bit harder than she needed too. I set the knives onto the desk while pulling the bent and broken armor off me. As I did, Althea snapped,

"I saw your fight with Delilath. Looked really hard."

I sighed, “Yeah. It was.” I finished tearing the trashy iron off me, “I didn’t want to kill her. It was like a punch to the gut, to be honest.”

Althea’s tone of voice softened, but it still carried a bit of heat,

“Well, I saw in the news that you went with Thisbey afterward. Why didn’t you come back here?”

I turned to her, “I wanted some information from him. He pissed me off though.”

She rolled her eyes, “Well what did it take to make you mad.”

“Talking bad about you.”

Althea blinked. She looked down, “Oh...well thank you...You didn’t hurt him, did you?”

I scoffed, “No, but he might have shit his pants a little.”

She giggled, “Really? What did you do?”

I walked up to her, putting a hand on her shoulder. I squeezed it, “Tell Thisbey, does that skin you wear make you feel powerful? Does it make you feel in control?”

Althea grabbed at an invisible suit, mocking Thisbey’s accent,

“Why I do declare, if you wouldn’t mind me saying, that’s if it’s something that might not offend you...It perhaps, maybe even might...In a manner of speaking.”

We busted out laughing. I laughed so hard my abs burned. I kept on chuckling till tiny tears poured out of my eyes. Althea puffed her chest out in pride, relishing my laughter. As I settled down, I wiped a tear off my face,

“Have you talked with Thisbey? that was perfect.”

She shrugged, “A few times. He’s called me, trying to get information about you. I’ve seen dozens of ads from him too. He always declares what he’s going to say before he says it. I picked up on it. Kessiah and I have been doing that act for a while, actually.”

I rolled my shoulders, “Alright, alright. I gotta get back in character.”

She grabbed at her imaginary suit again. I put my hand over her, squeezing her chest,

“Do you feel in control?”

Althea’s eyes widened, “You actually said that?”

I grinned, raising my hands, “I know right? Pretty cool line if I don’t say so myself.”

She waved her hands, “You’re giving me goosebumps over here. Good on you for sticking it to him. He’s a total jerk-ass.”

I nodded, “Agreed...Hey.”

She raised an eyebrow, “What is it?”

I frowned, “You looked pissed when you walked in here. Just wondering what was that about?”

She crossed her arms, “Well, remember how I told you that you didn’t have to do everything on your own?”

I gave her curt nod. She continued, looking off to the side, “I just...I was hoping you’d come to me after the situation with Delilath. You looked hurt. I wanted you to rely on me for once.”

I grinned, grabbing her and picking her up,

“I haven’t laughed that hard in years. You’ve already made me feel better without even trying.”

She giggled as I swung her around. I dropped her, setting her down with gravity. She raised her eyebrows, “Ooh, I’m impressed. Have you been practicing?”

I shrugged, “Eh, sort of.”

She smirked, “I’ve got something to show you when we fight the Skyburners.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Really now?”

She shrugged, “Eh, no big deal.”

I rolled my eyes, “Ok, I get it. I’ll wait. Before we go though, I have something to show you.”

I walked her over to the bed. Althea’s long, purple hair waved as she raised her palms, “You know I pass out after we do it. We have a mission later tonight.”

I scoffed, “Get your mind out of the gutter. Look.”

I picked up her new knives. I flipped them in my hands, holding the blades while offering the handles to her. She grabbed them, tilting the edges. A reflective sheen shined off them. Her jaw dropped as she read the bonuses,

“Jesus, did you sell your soul to Baldowah? How did you make these?”

I grinned, “Trade secret. What do you think?”

She flipped them in her fingers before slicing through the air. A violet stream of energy trailed behind them. Althea laughed, “I can’t believe how...wow these things are.”

I grabbed her back, “Not as ‘wow’ as you.”

She rolled her eyes, “Alright that one almost made even me gag.”

I let her go, raising an arm, “Wanna test them out.”

She pulled back from me, “On you? Of course not.”

I rolled my eyes, “I’ll be fine. My pain tolerance is maxed, and I’ll regenerate in seconds.”

She frowned, “Eh...”

I shook my head, “It’s better if you get a feel for the blades before you use them, right?”

Althea narrowed her eyes, “Hmmm...I guess so.”

She pursed her lips, “Ok...I’ll give it a shot.”

She lifted the dagger. Sparks of violet lightning traced off the blade as she swung it down. It pierced right through my forearm. Althea tried pulling it out, but the dagger was stuck. She shook her head, “Are you ok?”

I nodded, “Tis but a flesh wound.”

She tried pulling it out, but my armor stopped her. She shook her head, “I can’t budge it. I’d get two good stabs on you before you pulled my arms and legs off.”

I shrugged, “Doesn’t matter. Did it feel right?”

She grinned, “Well, I didn’t think it would even pierce your armor period, so I’d say it was a huge success.”

I moved my hand with the dagger still impaling my wrist. Two of my fingers wouldn't flex into a fist, but it would get the job done. I sighed, "It will have to do."

I grabbed the handle, jerking the blade out. Not one drop of blood leaked out, and no blood covered the dagger. Althea blinked,

"Uh, do you even bleed anymore?"

I raised my eyebrows, "Er, I don't know. Probably."

Cords of my armor shot into the hole in my forearm. Muscle and sinews shot out, reconnecting the limb. As skin molded over it, Althea's jaw dropped, "The fuck was that?"

I gripped the once injured hand, good as new, "Just a little health regeneration."

She scoffed, "Yeah, ok."

Torix shouted from below, "We need to review the plan before we leave. It's almost time to leave."

I turned to her, "You good to go?"

She pulled out her current daggers, dropping them on our desk. She flipped the Dimensional Slicers in her hand before sliding them into her empty sheaths, "Yup."

Althea smirked at me, "You need to put on your disguise. See you downstairs?"

"Definitely."

She trotted outside, swinging her hips. I placed yet another gray square onto my chest, the armor grafting onto me. I rolled my shoulders as the face mask slid over me. I paced outside, jumping down to the second floor. Using gravity to stunt my fall, I landed with a bit of grace even.

Torix and Tohtella stood beside the holographic projection. Tohtella gripped her clipboard to her chest while adjusting her glasses,

“Is everyone ready?”

I raised a hand, “Wait a minute.”

I pulled out Torix’s knife. I flipped it in my hand again, and the skeletal lich took the handle. Torix admired the craftsmanship, turning the blade in his hands,

“It’s exemplary. It’s as if you were working with water instead of metal.”

I shrugged, “Might as well have been.”

Torix scoffed, “Knowing how you are, you must have smashed it into shape with your face.”

I weighed my hands back and forth, “Didn’t have to go quite that far.”

Tohtella leaned over, inspecting the blade. She frowned, “This is unlike any dagger I’ve ever seen. When and how did you make it?”

I pointed upstairs, “In my room. It took like an hour.”

She leaned back, looking around the room, “Wait...what? You’d need a forge for this. There’s no other method of molding metal.”

I shrugged, “There is. We should focus on the plan though, not my crafting expertise.”

Tohtella shook her head, “Ah yes. Of course. Excuse my surprise.”

She pointed at the projection, “Using the system clock in your status, we’ll be attacking the camp at 2:00 A.M. in the middle of the night. Althea will strike Gaikhag Monothos,

lethally wounding him preferably. At the same time, Malthazar will spawn several dozen portals to a secured location.”

She pointed at a dot far away from the base, “This is along the strip of destroyed silvers you left behind, Daniel. Once they’re here, Malthazar and I will ensure the slave’s safety while you all devastate the Skyburner’s forces. Worst case scenario, we all die, and the slaves are left for dead.”

Torix raised a finger, “And the more likely scenario is that we save most of them, slay several Skyburners, and a few of them fly off. They warn the others, but at least we strike at them in a meaningful way.”

I raised a fist, “And here’s what I think’s going to happen. We save the slaves, destroy the Skyburners, and take a hostage. We worm the information out of him then destroy each camp one by one. They won’t know what hit them.”

Tohtella rolled her eyes, “Ah yes, a warrior’s confidence. Let’s hope you’re right with your prediction.”

Torix shrugged, “I’ve seen him perform far more daring deeds. Now, are we all ready?”

Everyone nodded.

Torix clapped his hands, his fire eyes glowing red,

“Then it’s time we show the Skyburners what it means to set a horizon on fire.”

Chapter 176: Destruction

We left our hotel, each of us geared up and ready for war. We traveled out of Yildraza, the city lights shooting up into the sky. Torix hovered, keeping himself and Tohtella afloat with magic. Althea and I ran, destroying portions of the scenery as we leaped and dashed.

We stopped, regrouping just shy of the silver’s territory. We stood in a circle, everyone looking at me. With cool wind at my back and soft ground under my feet, I stood up straight.

I raised a hand, “Look everybody. There’s some fucked up shit deep in silver territory. I mean it. Keep your head down and execute the plan. Don’t think about failure. Don’t think about your surroundings. Focus on the mission.”

I clasped my hand into a fist,

“Merjects will dive from above. If they get ahold of you, they’ll suck your brains out. Flesh Whales are vulnerable to fire but keep your distance. Their blood is hard to escape. Don’t fall asleep on the ground. There’s a thousand things that want to use your body as their egg sack.”

Althea winced. Tohtella gave a curt nod, jotting down notes. Torix grasped his hands behind him. I pointed towards the silvers,

“Outside of that, avoid the Skyburner’s jaws, tails, and fire breath. One hit from any of those three things, and you’re dead. Focus on their eyes and their mouths. Those are both vulnerable since they aren’t covered in armor or scales.”

I smacked my fists together, “Is everyone ready for some dragon jerky?”

Althea and Torix gave me a nod. Tohtella’s brow creased. I waved my hands, “Uh, gialgathen jerky then.”

Tohtella frowned, “What? They’re lean predators. Their meat would be stringy and lean. It would be like chewing a bundle of wires.”

I rolled my eyes, “Are you ready to eliminate the targets?”

She nodded, “Of course.”

“Alright then. Everyone check their status and finish any last updates.”

I opened my own status, checking out my levels. I leaned back from my status, finding myself with several thousand attribute points to allocate. I shouldn't have let it pile up like this, but there was so much going on as of late.

Over the two days, I fought in the tournament, cleared out silvers, found the Skyburner's base, and gained a mythical skill. It was a lot to juggle around. Either way, I poured all my points into endurance, then selected finalize. Even if everything else was complicated, working my status was surprisingly straightforward.

Sometimes, simplicity was king.

Dimension-C138(Level 6,521)

Strength – 7,036 | Constitution – 11,940 | Endurance – 49,306

Dexterity – 3,061 | Willpower – 27,375 | Intelligence – 10,173

Charisma – 1,777 | Luck – 3,437 | Perception – 4,009

Health: 9.60 Million/9.60 Million | Health Regen: 25.48 Million/min or 424,593/sec

Stamina: 6.01 Million/ 6.01 Million | Stamina Regen: 87,771/sec

Living Dimension: 1.15 Trillion/4.30 Trillion

Mass: 554,537 pounds(251,533 kilos~)

Height: Actual -12'8(3.87 meters) | Current – 9'10

Damage Res – 98.5% | Dimensional Res – 49.25%

Phys Dam Bonus – 679,893% | Damage Bonus – 40%

Event Horizon – 20,000 + (100% of your total health)/min

I raised my eyebrows, finding my perception over 4,000. I lifted a hand, staring at the metal. As I took a closer glance, I found thousands of layers. I squinted, finding the layers made of even more wires. I looked up, expanding my field of view.

I glanced around, spotting profound levels of detail. If I glanced close, I peered at tiny spots like a microscope almost. If I soaked it all in, a world of detail popped up. As it did, my head throbbed at the sheer complexity. Tiny insects in the grass, dust and pollen in the air, even the moisture in my breath, it all revealed itself to me.

I shook my head, dulling my senses. I shifted my attention back to my status. My stats marched forward, their inevitable climb never failing to impress. I neared 50k with my endurance, and my health nearly eclipsed the ten million mark. If summed it up in a word, ridiculous.

I closed the window, looking around. Althea still fiddled with her status, but everyone else was done. A minute later and she closed it. I pointed off in the distance once everyone was back in the game,

“Follow several hundred feet behind me. Let me lead the charge. I’ll be killing the silvers, clearing a pathway until we get within earshot of the Skyburners.”

Everyone nodded. I ran out, getting about a football field away from them. I activated Event Horizon, thousands of Saysha screaming as they died. They melted into black sludge that evaporated. I ran forward, killing anything that came up to me.

I gibbed merjects, engorgs, and the organ caterpillars. Within an hour, flesh whales and other creatures popped back up. They crushed under my fists, some splattering from gravity wells alone. As I decimated the abundance of silvers, a message popped up in my notifications.

Althea Tolstoy(Giess: 1:14 3/05/26) – Tohtella’s not doubting you as much. You look brutal out there.

I grinned, squishing a merjects skull in my hand. As its purple blood splattered over me, I protected my face mask with an antigravity panel. Ten minutes later, we reached

within a mile of the Skyburner's base. I shut down Event Horizon, waving my friends to me.

They all stepped up. As they did, Tohtella adjusted her glasses, "Ahem. Would you mind disclosing how you sterilized your surroundings? It smells like a hospital full of corpses after you pass by."

I shrugged, "It's an aura. Hard to teach. Anyways, I'm about to fly up. You guys save as many of the slaves as you can."

I turned to Tohtella, "Look, I'll be honest with you here. This gray armor isn't going to hold up." I pointed at Torix, "You're magic will get blown away when I land. She's going to discover who I am. Better now than during the chaos."

Torix sighed, "Perhaps. It is difficult to maintain a sight disruptive barrier around a meteorite after all."

I turned to Tohtella, "I'm trusting you here, alright? You tell other people, you'll be my enemy."

Tohtella frowned, "I understand your skepticism of me. I am a woman of my word, however. This is no different than a confidential meeting. In the same manner as those events, I won't disclose what you tell me or who you are."

I nodded, "Good." I pressed the gray square over my armor, unveiling who I was. I rolled my shoulders, releasing my Mass Manipulation skill. My armor and bones cracked as I gained height, towering over everyone. I charged my runes, saturating them with mana.

Tohtella gasped, her jaw slack, "You're...him...Wow..."

I raised a hand, "Yeah, we killed Yawm. We don't have a lot of time for that to soak in though."

She looked back at the ground, "It all makes sense now. The hidden identity, the combat ability, even your presence. You're not normal. You're the living dimension."

I shrugged, “Eh, I’m Daniel. My real name isn’t so famous though. Either way, we have some frog-dragons to kill.”

Tohtella still stared at me with starry eyes. She reached out a hand, dragging it down my chest, “I can’t believe you’re right here...It’s harder than steel like I thought...It’s smooth though...like glass.”

Althea popped her hand, glaring at Tohtella, “Come on business

lady. Stop trying to feel up Daniel. We’ve got work to do.”

Tohtella’s eyes widened. She stared down, marking onto her clipboard. As I gazed closer, she was jotting down a bunch of jibberish. All the while, she blushed until she looked like a tomato. I glanced at Torix, and he met my eye.

He and I shared a conversation with that glance, each of us holding down some snickering. A minute later and Tohtella was back to her professional self. She coughed into her hand, “Ahem, excuse my surprise. We may proceed as planned.”

I nodded, “Then let’s go. I’ll make impact at 2:00 A.M. as planned guys.”

I turned around, jumping up into the air. My dark armor blended in with the night sky, keeping me hidden from even the sharpest eyes. As I dived up, I relished my new freedom. I wasn’t squeezing myself with Mass Manipulation. I wasn’t covered in armor either. It felt good to be back to normal.

With that liberation, I shot into the night sky. The crisp cold of the upper atmosphere funneled around me. The air thinned, letting me speed up even further. Otherwise the friction off the air caused my armor to glow bright, making me hard to miss. The entire time, I charged my mana, saturating my blood.

As I reached an orbital altitude, my body radiated with energy. Vibrant streaks of crimson lightning shot out from me. I quaked with potential energy, my entire frame wanting unleash destruction.

I stared down, finding vast plots of land stretched out before me. The lights of Yildraza shined bright. The line of silver territory stretched far into the distance, winding like a

river. I glanced around me, the void of space encroaching from all angles besides below.

At the corners of my vision, the curve of Giess exposed itself. I glanced closer, finding gorgeous mountains and wide valleys. The purple sludge oceans lined up beside the vast seas. A path along the planet showed the line of the sunrise. It inched along, illuminating the planet.

All of that to say this – it was a view to last a lifetime.

All the perception paid off, letting me soak it all in. I promised to come back here at some point. The cold wasn't even bad. Before I lost any more time, however, I readied myself. I lined up with the Skyburner camp using my minimap. A message popped up.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill(Giess: 1:58 3/05/26) – Go

I reversed my gravity well. I shot toward the ground, accelerating like a bullet. My stomach rose up into my chest, my eyes sinking back into my head. The ground beneath me expanded, tiny plots turning into massive fields.

The friction from the air heated my skin. The water vapor near me sizzled, evaporating. The air pressure shifted over and over, my ears popping again and again. A layer of superheated air passed over me, a storm echoing in my eardrums.

The camp popped out of the forest of metal spires beneath me. My armor glowed red hot, a warmth passing over me. It shifted to white, both bright and blinding. I turned into a shooting star, my body holding together despite the situation.

My vision blurred. My bones rattled. My skin pulled on me. The warmth turned into a burning sensation. My mana rippled out, sparks of lightning radiating at full force. All went silent as I outpaced the speed of sound.

The heat around me dug into my health regeneration. I withstood the scorching air, my body staying stable. With the ground fast approaching, I ground my teeth and clenched my fists. It was time.

The Skyburners stared up at me as I came down. I aimed towards a cluster of three of them. One of them flapped his wings, flying away from me. The other two stared like headless chickens. I reached within feet of them, a violet flare of light.

I made impact.

70% of my health dropped instantly. The collision let out an earth-shattering wave of light and sound. The metal, ground, and Skyburners around me melted into a pool of magma. Beneath me, the ground dipped as I quaked the earth.

A seismic wave shot out in all directions, upturning entire metal spires. The wall around the base smashed outwards, decimated by the kinetic shockwave. Nothing remained of the camp as I gained my bearings, leaving a wasteland behind me.

I pulled up the surrounding magma with gravity. With a cyclone of light and fire enveloping me, I stood. With my hands grasped firm, I turned towards the three Skyburners left. Covered in burns and stabbed with shrapnel, they fumbled in utter disarray amidst the chaos.

Above them, their general's decapitated corpse leaked blood, impaled on bent spires. I glared at the gyalgathens, my armor white. Metal and stone liquefied under my feet as I stepped up out of the new crater. Scorching air plumed upwards around me as my flesh and bones reconstituted.

Violent arcs of crimson lightning shot off me, mana deluging out like a flood. Event Horizon left nothing in my wake as the Skyburners stared in awe. I stood before them as the sound I outpaced erupted around us, ripping out a sonic boom.

Frozen in fear, the closest one choked out,

“It’s...the Harbinger.”

I raised a hand,

“And I usher forth cataclysm.”

Chapter 177: To Face the Divine

The air around me burst outward as I unleashed a singularity in the center of a Skyburner's chest. Its ribs snapped. Its armor ruptured. Its smooth skin split. The gialgathen sunk into the abyss, the creature caving in on itself. Air siphoned into the singularity before it devoured all the sound around it.

All went silent, the battlefield quiet as a graveyard. In a flash of light and radiation, the singularity imploded. Another discharge of energy rippled outwards, sending spires of metal out like spears. The shockwave left another pit of raw ground in the steel. It left liquified metal and stone behind it.

The scenery itself deformed in the singularity's wake.

The two Skyburners tumbled through the silver infested scenery, both of them blown away. The orange and white Skyburner rolled through shards of metal. It stood up, its limbs shaking and one of its wings snapped.

The other Skyburner, purple and black, limped with a broken front leg. This beast spread its lilac shaded wings, trying to fly away in time. Before it escaped, I leaned over and jumped towards the creature. It took off, but I landed onto its back, smashing it back down.

The metal dented beneath us, my mass overwhelming the monster. I raised my right hand, a white aura leaking from my fist. Using the overkill damage from my initial impact, I clubbed my hand onto the Skyburner's head. It squished like an orange under a steamroller.

The blowback rattled through my bones, my entire frame ringing. I held together, standing up as another shockwave spilled out over the wasteland. Even silvers ran off, flocking for escape from the carnage. Beneath me, the gialgathen's body shivered, nerves firing off as a plume of blood shot out from it.

It sprayed over me, the liquid evaporating in an instant. A fine, red mist floated where the beast's head once was. I turned towards the last remaining gialgathen. The once noble Skyburner quivered, its will to fight broken beyond repair.

I rolled my shoulders, walking over to it. As I did, I tore off strips of my own metal skin. As it regenerated, I lifted the pieces and melted them, collecting a ball of molten

metal. As I neared the final beast, it turned and fled. I reached out with both my hands, jerking the creature back to me.

It clawed at the metal, tearing long slash marks as it scrambled to get away from me. I shot the liquid metal, splashing it over the creature. The Skyburner raised its head, pure agony consuming it. Before the beast died, I raised my hand, cooling the molten metal.

Encased in obsidian metal, the gialgathen writhed in its casted cage. With severe burns and a broken will, the beast ceased its struggle within seconds. I stepped up to it, the monster froze in place. Its head reared into the sky, only its jaws and upper mouth free.

It turned its eye to me, its eyes widening as I stepped up. It gasped out,

“You...you are a monster. You have broken me.”

I shrugged, “I can do a lot worse if you don’t tell me where the other camps are.”

The Skyburner’s pupils narrowed, true fear spreading over its face. It coughed, “No... No...I will never expose my brothers and sisters. We are one, and we are many. I will not let you find them, Harbinger.”

I raised a hand, heating the metal around him. It scorched his flesh in a few places, causing him to roar out in anguish. I snapped,

“Look, I’m not into this whole torture thing. You’ll find I’m a damn quick learner though if you don’t let me know what’s going on here.”

The Skyburner heaved, “No...It will not come to pass. What you will unleash onto me will never rival the wrath of the one I follow. “

I heated the metal again, and he squawked like a chicken having its feathers plucked, “Yeah, we’ll see about that.”

Before I committed to the interrogation, I looted the battlefield. After recording footage of the aftermath and the corpses, I harvested the carcasses.

Well, the carcasses that I could harvest.

The two Skyburner's I smashed on impact left little for my armor to eat. Each of them disintegrated into a fine mist. Same story with the one that died to a singularity. The other corpses were different, they even uncovered a few interesting details of the fight.

The ancient general, Ghaikhag Monothos, was decapitated. His neck was cut clean, so clean that it bisected, showing an anatomical graph of a gialgathen's neck. I found one more Skyburner just outside the crumbled walls of their base, its head lopped off in the same manner. Althea assassinated both of them, leaving me plenty to drink up.

After eating them, I ran past the final body. I punched its head off, leaving plenty left for my armor. I walked back to the encased Skyburner, finding Tohtella and Althea gawking at it. As I paced up, Tohtella turned to me and raised a pistol at my head. I rolled my eyes while she gasped in relief once she recognized me. Tohtella turned to the Skyburner, her hands on her hips,

"I underestimated both of you if I'm honest. To think you both held such destructive potential. It's terrifying."

Althea shook her head, "Here I thought my dual assassination was impressive."

I spread out my arms, "What? It was impressive. You insta-killed a level 10,000+ enemy. That's insane."

Althea scoffed, "Uh, it doesn't quite have the same wow factor as blowing the entire base up. You obliterated two of them right after that as well."

I shrugged, "We had time to plan and got the jump on them." I turned to Tohtella, "Did the slaves make it?"

She nodded, "We lost a third of them. The yana worms inside them frenzied once we teleported the slaves out. Torix improvised, freezing all of them. This put the espens and worms into cryogenic sleep. It's unfortunate, but some of them will die from that as well."

Althea bit her lip, shivering, “That’s better than watching those worms eat them alive.”

I nodded, “Well, we did our best. I killed five of the Skyburners. I’m killing this last one as well. Better than wasting the experience.”

Althea scoffed, pointing above her head. I glanced, and her title appeared.

Althea Tolstoy, the Shapeless Arbiter(lvl 6,201 | Class: Breaker)

I grinned, “What? You’re a Breaker now?”

She puffed out her chest, “I’ve been working on the tree for a while now, ever since we fought Yawm.”

I shook my head, “Wow. How did you get so many skill points so fast?”

She shrugged, “I’ve had a ton of extra points ever since I unlocked my legendary skill forever ago. I used them along with a few extra skills I’ve been training on Giess.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Looks like I won’t be outleveling you for long.”

She rolled her eyes, “Uh-huh. You’ll get a class here soon. Besides, your hustle will get you level capped pretty soon.”

Tohtella looked between us. She shook her head, “She’s a Breaker now?”

Althea put her hands on her hips, “Yup. I’m not as strong as Daniel yet, but I’m keeping up...mostly I guess.”

Behind us, the Skyburner roared out, “Such drivel. Silence yourselves or silence me. I will not waste away here as you all-“

I raised a hand, heating his armor up. He bellowed out, his voice echoing for miles. I snapped,

“Yeah, we’ll talk as much ‘drivel’ as we want too.”

Foam dripped from the edges of the Skyburner’s mouth as it glared at me. I turned towards Tohtella and Althea, “I’ll worm the information out of it. You two can go help Torix.”

Althea nodded, but Tohtella shook her head. She adjusted her glasses, “I’ll stay here and assist you.”

Althea leaned over her, a head taller than Tohtella,

“Just so you know, you touch my man like that again, and that General isn’t the only one I’ll break.”

Tohtella gave her nod even as she blushed, “I promise you that it was a momentary lapse in professionalism. I was only curious about the armor’s properties.”

Althea poked her chest, “You get curious about his ‘armor’ again, and I’ll get curious about what your insides look like. Ok?”

Tohtella sighed, “Understood.”

Althea pursed her lips and crossed her arms, “Good.” She looked up at me, “You better tell me if she does anything.”

I rolled my eyes, “I’ll bring you the hand she does it with, alright?”

Althea nodded. She looked between us one last time before disappearing like a ghost. I turned back to the Skyburner, and I frowned,

“Look, I don’t want to torture you.”

I heated up the armor. He howled out, but I growled over the beast,

“But I will do what it takes to stop this bullshit. Understand?”

The Skyburner glared at me,

“Kill me Harbinger. Tormenting me only belittles the standing of someone like you.”

I narrowed my eyes, “How do you even know I’m called the Harbinger?”

The beast let out a pained laugh,

“Hah, do you not recognize what you are? When I first laid my eyes upon you, fire cycloned around your frame. You paced from the burning crater you left behind, and I understood what you were. It required no introduction. It required no words.”

I frowned, “Hmm. Weird.”

A few minutes of torment later, and I gained a skill I never thought I would.

New Skill Gained! Torture(lvl 1) – Some bring their enemies to death in an instant. You bring your enemies to a line between life and death, bringing hell to life. +1% to physical pain caused to others.

I closed my eyes, grimacing at the skill. I sighed, turning away from the Skyburner. Tohtella adjusted her glasses, “What is it?”

I shook my head, “I’m not cut out for this. Let’s just put him out of his misery.”

An amused smile trailed onto her face, “Kind of you. Allow me to continue the interrogation.”

With cold eyes, Tohtella opened her dimensional storage. She pulled out a jar full of yana worms, the same pot from behind her desk. She channeled her mana, zapping the fluid in the jar. The worms writhed, eyes opening all along their writhing bodies.

Tohtella walked up to the Skyburner, "Hello there. It's good you can understand us."

The Skyburner snapped at her, "Begone, weakling. You are nothing but a leech on the underbelly of this world. You feast upon the scraps of great warriors."

She kept her amused grin on her face, "Oooh, really? Good. This weakling has something like a leech in this jar. Care to take a look?"

The Skyburner peered down at the vial. His pupils turned into slits as he howled, "Accursed Yana? You wouldn't dare...I've done nothing to deserve their desecration. I've done nothing that warrants such a trail."

"You and I disagree on the matter. Tell us the location of the other camps. Otherwise, I will dip just enough yana into your mouth that you'll barely be conscious. We'll dump you out into silver territory, and your kind will remember you by your zombied corpse."

He frothed out, "There are three other camps such as this. One lays by the mountain of red and fire and ash. Another rests by the ocean of green and blue and the River of Tears. The last camp resides on the remains of Lehesion and Emagrotha's great battle."

Tohtella nodded, snapping her fingers. The jar cooled, the yana's eyes closing. She glared up at the beast, "See? All you had to do was follow orders."

Tears poured out of the Skyburner's eyes. He wailed out, "I am a betrayer of many. Kill me as I deserve it."

Tohtella turned to me, "Do as you will."

She walked past me, looking away from the Skyburner. I kept my eyes on her, a different, icy side of her showing itself. She turned back to me, her eyes empty,

"What is it? Is there something on my face?"

I frowned, “No...Not really.”

I turned back to the Skyburner, “You resisted for a long time. There’s no shame in dying in battle.”

He gasped, “I died no such death.”

I melted and pulled the encased armor out from around him. After singeing him a bit, I jerked the metal back to me. My armor reconstituted it, the molten mass sinking into my skin. The Skyburner gasped,

“You...you give me a warrior’s death? For what reason?”

I raised my fists, “It’s all I can give you.”

The Skyburner lowered his head. After a moment of thought, he peered up,

“My name is Draygalga Fire-Swallow. Tell my brothers that I fought with bravery. Tell my sisters that I was noble in defeat. Would you do this for me?”

I nodded, “Yeah, you have my word.”

He nodded, “No matter the Yana nor the agony rendered unto me, I would expose nothing. This, I give to you as payment for my debt.”

I raised an eyebrow. Draygalga gasped out, “The one that leads us cleaved the sky with a swing of his claws. He is the oldest and strongest of our kind, the mightiest of us all.”

Tohtella jotted a note onto her clipboard, “Tell us. Now.”

The Skyburner’s eyes narrowed, “He is known as Lehesion, the Army of One.”

My eyes widened as Draygalga leaped towards me. He snapped his maw, but I shifted on my heels, sidestepping him. His jaws clanked, sending out a shockwave in front of him. It left a dent in the metal as I countered with a left hook.

His bottom jaw dislocated turning sideways. He whipped his tail at me, but I deflected it with my forearm. I hammer-fisted the back of his head, slamming his face into the ground. As I raised my foot, he gurgled with his broken face,

“I return to Giess, honor to thine name.”

I squashed his skull under my heel. I lifted my foot and squatted down, I placed my hands onto his neck. My armor devoured him, thousands of needles sapping his strength. After he died, I turned to Tohtella,

“Did you hear him?”

She looked at me, her expression frozen in place,

“We must warn the public. Lehesion has returned. We need to evacuate areas near the base and arm cities.”

I frowned, “Is he that big a deal?”

Her eyes hollowed,

“He is a living god.”

Chapter 178: A Steady March

I raised my eyebrows, “Uh, yeah, I’ve fought against a so-called god before. He bled, just like anyone...I will admit though, his blood glowed, so you got me there.”

Tohtella frowned, “This is serious. Lehesion’s legends are told orally across generations of gialgathens. My research indicates he’s a level 15,000+ being, someone comparable to Yawm.”

I shrugged, “Killed him. I’ll kill this thing too.”

Tohtella sighed, “If you believe so, then I’ll take your word for it. Despite your confidence, I must inform the public.”

I raised an eyebrow and crossed my arms, “Hmmm, you sure about that?”

She leaned back, “Of course.”

“The thing is, I don’t know if that’s a good idea. The tension between espens and gialgathens is already high. If you throw something like this out, then it will catch fire. Fire meaning civil war, mass genocide, or something else equally terrible.”

She frowned, “You are correct, but if no one knows about this, then no one will prepare. The proper funding won’t be provided for enhanced defenses.”

I shrugged, “I mean, we can tell them something’s up. It’s just not a good idea to tell the masses exactly what that something is. Is there some way you could...I don’t know, lie?”

Tohtella rolled her eyes, “I’ve spent all my life practicing to tell the truth.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Then why not just tell some of the truth?”

Tohtella looked down, deep in thought. She sighed, “I will...I will do my best.” She looked back up at me, “Are you ready to leave? We’ve done what we set out to do here.”

I shook my head, “I’m going to look for some answers. From what I’ve heard, Lehesion was the good guy during the gialgathen civil war. Him being the cause of all this seems suspicious to say the least.”

She frowned, “I can send my team to handle the investigations. When we figure out anything, we’ll inform you and your team.”

I walked up to the armor of Draygalga, “Even then, I’ll do my own inspection.”

Tohtella walked up, “That isn’t necessary.”

I turned my head, peering at her with my body facing the hollowed armor,

“You sound like you don’t want me snooping around.”

Tohtella’s brow creased.

“You have footage already. I want you to use your talents wisely and efficiently. My specialty is intelligence and subterfuge. I can handle this investigation effectively, but I cannot fight Skyburners. You can. I’m of the opinion that you should focus on what you’re already good at.”

I pursed my lips, “Hmmm...Maybe.”

Tohtella pinched the bridge of her nose, “Specialization improves productivity, especially in team environments. If we can synergize our specializations, this is even truer. Allow me to delegate duties and organize this. Please.”

I honed in, reading her response. Her palms were sweaty, and her heart beat faster than average in her chest. That could be from the fight earlier though. She met my eye, and her pupils dilated. She didn’t seem like she was lying, so I gave her a slow nod,

“Alright...fine.”

She jotted a note onto her clipboard, “Good. Thank you. Now, Are you willing to leave now?”

I sighed, “I suppose so.”

I lifted us up with a gravity well. By concentrating Event Horizon around us, I scared off most of the silvers. With our safe travel assured, I opened my status. I gained almost

1,000 levels. It was my biggest boost since facing Yawm. I put all the points into endurance as usual. As I selected finalize, I shifted.

My armor cracked, the splits filling in from my regeneration. One of the fractures cleaved one of the cipher marks on my forearm in two. My blood thickened becoming denser than mercury. The fibers and sinews weaving my flesh compressed.

Extra fail safes weaved into my organs. One heart or three, I couldn't tell anymore. The tendons and ligaments lining my bones turned hard as diamond yet flexible as rubber. My own survivability defied my comprehension.

My mana poured within the fortress that was my body. It permeated every pore and cell. The saturation extended until I radiated energy. In seconds, I pulled the energy in, adjusting to it. I squirmed as limitless vitality flushed through my system at every moment.

I felt like a nuclear reactor.

As I writhed, Tohtella shouted from behind a mana barrier,

“Are you ok? If the silvers infested you, we have removal procedures at my workplace.”

I growled, “No...I'm fine.”

My voice was deeper than usual, strained during the alterations. I shook off the growing pains, returning to normal. I glanced back at Tohtella, who floated while standing stiff as a board. I laughed, “Are you alright?”

She blinked, “Ahem, of course I am. Your voice...it unnerved me is all.”

I rolled my eyes, “It's part of gaining many levels. It should already be normal again.”

She looked up, checking out my level. She frowned, “I...I can't quite believe it really. You've gained over a 1,000 levels in less than a week. It's unprecedented.”

I shrugged, “There are some real monsters out there. I’m sure plenty outpace me.”

Tohtella shook her head, “There are few, if any.”

I swatted a giant, metallic dragonfly. The blood and mush splatted outwards and away from my antigravity field that covered us,

“I know one. Althea. She gained 1,400 in one fight. Besides, no one that’s gaining levels like this has time to brag about it. That’s why you haven’t heard about them.”

I narrowed my eyes, “They’re out there though. I feel it.”

Tohtella rolled her eyes as we shot across the metallic wasteland. As we did, I opened my character sheet to check the statistical difference.

Dimension-C138(Lvl 7,467)

Strength – 7,596 | Constitution – 13,107 | Endurance – 55,360

Dexterity – 3,246 | Willpower – 30,099 | Intelligence – 11,133

Charisma – 1,850 | Luck – 3,754 | Perception – 4,070

Health: 11.70 Million/11.70 Million | Health Regen: 34.21 Million/min or 570,160/sec

Stamina: 7.54 Million/ 7.54 Million | Stamina Regen: 108,952/sec

Living Dimension: 1.45 Trillion/4.30 Trillion

Mass: 741,910 pounds(336,524 kilos~)

Height: Actual -13(3.96 meters) | Current – 13

Damage Res – 98.5% | Dimensional Res – 49.25%

Phys Dam Bonus – 884,301% | Damage Bonus – 40%

Event Horizon – 20,000 + (100% of your total health)/min

I passed a few landmarks. My endurance exceeded fifty thousand now, and my health passed ten million. My Living Dimension meter increased by a noticeable amount for once too. Gialgathens must have provided a solid boost since mana saturated them.

All my attributes marched forward as well. Even my lowest straggler stat, charisma, was well over 1,000 now. I lacked many weak points in my build now, though I could always improve. The next goal would be augmenting my crafting since I just obtained Star Forger.

With that in mind, I pulled out a chunk of orichalcum from my dimensional storage. As we floated over the scenery, Tohtella whispered, “It’s beautiful.”

I nodded, “It is.”

She raised her hands, “Your method of travel...It feels so strange.”

I raised an eyebrow, “How?”

She pushed up her glasses, “We’re flying, yet there is no wind.”

I pointed forward, “I’m using two gravity wells to pull us forward. One pulls us forward, the other pulls us upwards. The wells pull the wind along with us, meaning the wind doesn’t blast us all the time.”

“It’s very pleasant compared with most flights I’ve been on.”

“I do it this way out of practicality. That’s it...Oh yeah, sorry for being so skeptical earlier.”

Tohtella raised a hand, “It’s nothing. You should be skeptical of me, of everyone.”

I sighed, “It’s just how it is. It’s like everyone is trying to use me all the time now, like that Thisbey fuck.”

She pursed her lips, “Ah, he’s an unpleasant fellow. I do despise dealings with him, but he is everywhere on Giess commercially. It’s difficult to avoid him altogether.”

I turned to Tohtella, “Let me know if he wears his classic leather jacket, alright?”

Tohtella frowned, “Why?”

I grinned, “Eh, you’ll see why in the news if he decides to wear it.”

We got back to the hotel in a few minutes. I put my gray armor on before we landed, keeping my identity under wraps. By the time I got back, everyone almost finished packing up. As Tohtella and I walked in, Kessiah sat down on a couch, watching tv.

Tohtella glared at Kessiah. The Speaker’s disdain oozed as she lifted her nose into the air at the sight of Kessiah. Kessiah turned to her and raised a hand,

“Yo Daniel. You guys made it I see.”

I nodded. Kessiah pointed at Tohtella, “What’s her problem.”

Tohtella uttered, “I see you’re allocating your time wisely yet again.”

Kessiah pointed to me, “Yup. Hey, you might want to see this tough guy.”

I walked up, looking at the shifting holographic projection. A newscaster sat beside a scientist, both of them espens.

The scientist raised a hand, “It’s incredible, but another unknown seismic event occurred, this time past the silver’s border.”

The newscaster frowned, “What does that mean for the people of Yildraza?”

“Well, it could mean nothing. I for one believe some ancient creature is creating seismic events.”

The camera panned out, and good old sleezebag mc’fuckface popped up. At least Thisbey wasn’t wearing the gialgathen skin anymore.

“Why, if I might be so brash as to offer my own opinion, I believe it was a gialgathen.”

The scientist raised his hand to Thisbey, “Of course you would believe that. You’re openly racist against them.”

Thisbey spread out his arms, “Such harsh words coming from a man who’s suggest’in the same thing. You did say it was a creature, correct?”

“Well, yes-“

Thisbey grabbed the collar of his shirt, “Well what other creature could wreck this kind of devastation besides a gialgathen? They’re the apex predators of our planet. If a beast is causing this, then it means an old and powerful gialgathen is the cause.”

The camera panned in on Thisbey, highlighting him. He turned to the camera, addressing the audience,

“I know my opinion isn’t weighed like a fancy scientist’s is, but please hear my me out if you wouldn’t mind. There are only two gialgathens we all know that can make earthquakes happen on demand. One of them was thrown into silver territory long ago. The other disappeared without a trace.”

He raised a hand, "I'm not the only person to suggest this, but I believe Emagrotha has tread out of silver territory. Her body must be full of them disgust'in yana, and they have clustered into an abomination. It's out on the loose, and the gialgathens aren't doing a thing about it."

Thisbey steepled his fingers, "How many times must we bow and suffer before these monsters until we put a stop to it. To every patriot on Giess, I let you give the answer."

Kessiah closed the footage, "See that?"

I dragged my hands down my tinted facemask, "Yup."

Kessiah bust out laughing, "Hah! Your fat ass is making everyone think Emagrotha is coming back. Damn, I knew you were getting up there in weight, but sheesh."

I rolled my eyes, "Oh yeah, go ahead and laugh it up."

Tohtella walked up, her arms crossed, "What is this about Thisbey?"

Kessiah raised an eyebrow at her, "What, asking questions to us lowlifes now? Oof, how the mighty have fallen."

Tohtella frowned, "Please answer my simple question?"

"Sure thing miss high heels. Thisbey's starting rumors that Emagrotha is coming back. From what I've seen on forum posts and a few social media sites, people believe it."

Tohtella cupped her chin, "Really now...I might be able to use him for something useful for once."

Kessiah leaned forward, "Oooh, really now? Do tell."

Tohtella walked back and forth,

“We discovered that Lehesion may be the cause of all the turmoil with the silvers. Informing the public that he caused it would ruin a hero of the espen people, inciting riots and mass hysteria. On the other hand, everyone already villanizes Emagrotha.”

I raised my hands, “So we pin it on Emagrotha to stop people from blowing up on the gialgathens.”

Tohtella gave a curt nod and one of her amused grins, “Precisely.”

Kessiah shrugged, “Better make sure you keep up with the news then.”

Tohtella looked down on Kessiah, “And why is that?”

Kessiah scoffed, “Thisbey’s going to spin whatever you say to fit his own story. It’s going to be a publicity war between you two.”

Tohtella’s eyes hardened, “I will win it, I assure you.”

Kessiah leaned back, crossing her hands behind her head, “Eh, do what you want. Glad to help out my superior.”

Tohtella stared at her. The Speaker snapped, “All you did was watch tv. You have no reason to be smug.”

Kessiah smirked, “Really? When’s the last time you watched tv or checked out some social media?”

Tohtella grimaced. Kessiah nodded, “Yeah, that’s what I thought. What about you Daniel?”

I shrugged, “I don’t know. Maybe a decade?”

Kessiah raised her hands up, “There ya go. If it was so simple, why didn’t you do it first?”

Tohtella gripped her petite hands into tiny fists. She stayed silent though.

“Aaaaand that’s about what I expected. Next time you want to look down on someone, just look in the mirror.”

I looked between them, relishing in the afterglow of Kessiah’s speech. Tohtella sighed, “I...I misjudged you.”

Kessiah cupped her ear, “Sorry, I couldn’t hear you. What was that again?”

Tohtella announced, “I misjudged you. I thought you were a useless, lazy cyst on society’s underbelly. I was wrong. You’re a somewhat useful cyst on society’s underbelly. There. Happy now?”

Kessiah grinned, “You bet.”

Tohtella adjusted her glasses, “Excellent. Now if you both will excuse me, I have a media campaign to organize.”

Tohtella turned on her heels and stomped out. As she closed the door, I turned to Kessiah, “Man, you really planned that all out?”

Kessiah smirked, “Of course.”

Torix walked down the steps, giving Kessiah a slow clap,

“Oh yes, truly an awe-inspiring display of wit.”

Kessiah rolled her eyes, “Looks like you decided and to come and kill the party.”

Torix shrugged, “Well as a necromancer, allow me to revive it.”

I winced at the terrible joke. The lich pulled Kessiah's remote away from her hand with telekinesis. He grabbed the device and clicked a button on it. A 2-D map of Giess popped up. He pointed at it,

"Here is where we are."

He pointed at a portion of the graph on the line between silver and common ground. Torix gestured far north, "Here is where we are going, the city of Rivaria." A blip on the map pinged, surrounded by white snow and the silvers. Torix crossed his arms,

"It's frigid there, so some winter wear will be necessary. As we travel, we'll be skirting the line of the silvers territory."

Torix pointed at me, "Do you remember how you plotted the point for the first silver base you found?"

I nodded, "Yup."

"Then doing so for the other camps should do rather nicely. Once we've plotted the points, I'll organize with Tohtella to orchestrate rescue missions. We'll be more than able to do so between your tournament fights, Daniel."

I grinned, "Alright, sounds good. Plenty of fighting."

Torix glanced at me as if he peered over a set of glasses,

"Speaking of fighting, I took the liberty to memorize your tournament schedule before we landed there. We wouldn't want you missing out on a mythical skill from forgetfulness, now would we?"

I frowned, "Uh, yeah...probably not."

Torix gave me a quick nod,

“I imagined that was the case. Regardless, with the quest rewards from the mission, we should be able to strengthen ourselves quite a bit. With Althea’s new class and your extended level cap, we have quite the force behind us.”

He closed the hologram, “We’ll find them, and we’ll destroy each of the three camps in much the same way.”

Kessiah and I nodded. Althea materialized between us before leaning onto me. She smiled at me, “Wow, you almost gained more levels than I did.”

I smirked, “I did kill five out of seven.”

She rolled her eyes, “Yeah, but I killed the ancient general. That counts for something.”

Torix nodded, “Both of you exceeded your goals from the start. Now, are we ready to leave?”

I looked around, “Uh, where’s Caprika?”

Torix dragged his bony hands down his face, “She’s in her room, preparing herself.”

I squinted, “For what?”

Torix sighed, “One of her relatives is coming to watch the tournament fights. In particular, to watch you and see if you represent Caprika well.”

Caprika’s door swung open, and she walked out in flowing robes. The accentuated her figure, and they matched her hair and mask, both red and white. She glanced between us all,

“Well, is everyone already ready to leave? I didn’t realize I was holding...Wait...”

She stepped up to us, her high heels clattering on the hardwood,

“You... You’re over level 7,000. I can’t see your status anymore either. What happened?”

I shrugged, “Eh, I fought a few people.”

She turned to Althea, “And you... You’re a Breaker now?”

Althea scratched the back of her hair and raised a hand, “It’s not that big a deal... Ok, it kind of is.”

Caprika shook her head, her smooth mane rippling, “You two were made for each other.”

Torix walked up, “I’m leaving. You’re all welcome to join me.”

I followed behind him, tired of Caprika’s perpetual state of amazement,

“We running this time?”

Torix nodded, “Most definitely. That car was far too slow for my liking.”

Caprika looked down at her fancy dress and stilettos,

“Wait... what?”

Kessiah walked up, patting her on the back, “Get used to it. We rough it, Harbinger style.”

I rolled my eyes. I walked out of the doorway, all my stuff in my dimensional storage. As I opened the doorway, I received two notifications.

Finished Quest!

Destroying the Fragments of Emagrotha(lvl 10,000+ | Party Size: 10+ | Guild Affiliation: Any) – The reason behind the encroaching infestation of silvers has been determined. Lehesion is leading a group of Skyburners, infecting the land with silvers for an unknown reason. Your intervention has stopped this spread near Yildraza.

While further intervention is necessary to stop this threat, you've made your mark on the cause. Such an initiative is commendable and deserves compensation.

Reward: 1 Blue Dungeon core, positive affiliation with Giess, positive affiliation with Speakers, Speaker class offer.

Bonus: Bonuses are canceled due to party size of 2 or more.

Finished Quest!

An Encroaching Invasion(lvl 8,000+ | Party Size: 10+ | Guild Affiliation: Any) – You discovered the camp spreading silvers near Yildraza. With your combined team, you decimated the cause of the obstruction. Excellent work.

Rewards: 50 red dungeon cores, 1 blue dungeon core, and allows the formation of one guild branch in Yildraza.

Bonus: Bonuses are canceled due to party size of 2 or more.

I raised an eyebrow. As I did, mana coalesced in front of me. Seconds later, a blue, humming sphere of energy radiated out. It was a tiny star floating in front of me. I grasped it, magic swimming up my arm. An icy sensation followed, leaving me numb.

I grinned at its vibrancy, a sense of excitement rushing up my spine,

“A Blue Dungeon core. Woah.”

Chapter 179: Rivaria

I analyzed the orb,

Blue Dungeon Core(lvl Req: 1,000 | Guild Tier: Any) – This is a blue dungeon core. Only the highest of tiers dungeons reward these pricey objects, and they enable guild owners to strengthen their strongholds. This is accomplished with three bonuses:

1st – The core creates a sphere of protective energy fueled by the occupants inside a city. By draining 5% of total mana produced from each occupant, the core shields the occupants from a variety of threats. The larger the city and the stronger its occupants, the stronger this shield becomes.

In larger cities, this protective barrier blocks nuclear attacks, orbital strikes, and other city destroying tactics.

2nd – A blue dungeon core obliterates any eldritch that attempt to walk into a city up to level 2,500. The shield damages eldritch that enter at a higher level. The barrier radiates a warning pulse from the entry point of the higher leveled eldritch. This allows guards to handle the threat quickly.

3rd – The core enhances the willpower and intelligence of guild occupants within the sphere of influence. This bonus ranges between 10-100 points depending on level. This bonus cannot unlock perks, trees, or skills. It only grants the raw bonuses from the attributes.

They enabled the creation of city-states. This explained how guilds competed against larger entities like the Empire. Even if the Empire sent a fleet to a city, it might take months to take the fortress down. In the end, it wasn't worth the waste of resources and time. Other means of assimilation worked better like buying a city or converting it.

As I contemplated what the core was for, Althea's forehead bumped into my back. As my armor rung, she rubbed her forehead,

“Why did you stop moving all of a sudden?”

I turned, showing her the tiny, blue star in my hand. Althea leaned over it, “Wow. That looks awesome.”

Caprika reached out for it, “A blue dungeon core...so you accomplished a great feat of some kind?”

Althea puffed out her chest, “We both did.”

Caprika crossed her arms, “Then where is your blue dungeon core?”

Althea deflated, “Uh, I got 100 red dungeon cores instead.”

Caprika shrugged, “Well then, that’s simply not equivalent. Though worth more, blue dungeon cores can accomplish far more over the longterm due to their value in establishing cities and bulwarks.”

I raised my other hand, mana thicker than water siphoning into my palm. In seconds, another blue dungeon core consolidated from the different streams. I glanced up at my notifications. Fifty red dungeon cores plunked right into my dimensional storage. I needed all of them.

Caprika grabbed the sides of her head, “Two blue dungeon cores?”

I nodded. I put them both into my dimensional storage, the cerulean light fading from the hotel’s hallway and rooms. I stepped out, “Come on, let’s go. We can talk about it while we move.”

After getting out of the hotel, we traveled out of Yildraza, using our mini-maps for guidance. Caprika suffered some serious shame from running and jumping over the crowds. She mentioned something about a lowly peasant’s method of travel. I told her it was better than the damn octo-car.

Caprika agreed.

After getting out of the city, I lifted everyone with a sizable gravity well. As I did, I began assimilating the red dungeon cores one at a time. A few minutes later, and I finished the process. I put 300 of the gained points into Force of Nature. With the 200 points left, I improved my Star Forger skill.

As I did, a ‘feel’ for particles and matter washed over me. It was as if I added a sixth sense, one for gaging temperature. Manipulating the heat and cold of an object became

simpler. Using this newfound sense, I altered the temperature of the air around the others.

I made it comfortable for everyone this way, but the main reason I did it was to train the Star Forger skill. Using all the new skill points, I reached the first milestone of the Originator tree. For once, it did disappoint.

Most tread the well-worn paths that others left behind. These walkways are straight, narrow, and simple. You choose to be different. You head into the unknown, your path unmarked.

Originator(Tier 1) unlocked! Creating new skills is easier than before!

I frowned. The bonus seemed underwhelming for five hundred points. I brushed my resentment aside, putting the attribute points into endurance. As usual, I surged a bit with mana, but I didn't hit any milestones. With that disappointing update out of the way, I got back on track with the trip.

Even if the tree sucked, I'd make damn sure this trip didn't. I practiced Force of Nature while keeping Star Forger active. It made the trip fruitful in its own way. That didn't even include the scenic views. As I pulled us along, we zoomed over forests, fields, and mountains.

Surrounded by greenery and a clear sky, Caprika turned to Kessiah and barked out,

“We're certainly ‘roughing it’ aren't we? It's quite difficult to be pulled along by magic. It even feels airconditioned.”

Kessiah shrugged, a cheeky grin on her face, “I told you we'd do it Harbinger style.”

Caprika stared at the abundant nature and flowing forests,

“I suppose you're right about that. This is as pleasant as travel may be in fact. To think they're so little wind.”

Althea turned herself, doing a front flip, “Yeah, it’s kind of weird at first. We’re falling towards his magic though. It’s like skydiving towards a place but with the wind on our backs.”

Caprika pulled a book from her dimensional storage, “Well, it’s lovely.”

Several hours of moving later, everyone grew hungry. I set us down onto the top of a field, plains surrounding us for miles. With wildflowers and the chirping of insects around us, we relaxed for lunch. Everyone set up food, preparing premade meals with gemstones, magic, or machines.

With all of us sitting in a circle, it was a pleasant break from Yildraza. The frenzy of activity was fun at times, but it got old. Appreciating the wind on my face and the warm sun on my back was nice sometimes. Good food didn’t hurt either, everyone’s meals smelling exotic.

Well, everyone’s meals besides Torix and mine. I just chugged down one of the dessert rations in seconds. The skin soluble liquid leaked into my face, giving me a nutritious meal. Torix was a lich, so he didn’t ever need to eat. He talked with the others, catching up on recent events.

I kept quiet for the most part. Instead of talking, I zoned in on my work. With my grimoire out, I remade the runic carvings of the cipher. Instead of carving into the pages with clawed hands, I used Star Forger.

I moved my fingers inches over the charcoal colored pages. Using tiny, telekinetic augments, I etched into the pages. These precise points of contact let me improve my detail work. I even heated these sites, making the black pages easier to carve into. These adjustments improved my finesse, boosting the detail of my work.

After getting the process down with a few practice etchings, I focused on the next step; I began fixing my broken forearm etching. My last status upgrade ripped one of the markings on my forearms in half. This dampened the cipher’s efficiency. It also irked me seeing the asymmetrical designs on each arm.

I mean, everyone gets picky sometimes. Even me.

Despite that desire for symmetry, I chose a different rune this time. My perception seemed high enough already. Other stats needed help much more like charisma and luck. After a bit of thought, I picked luck out of the two.

Luck assisted with every aspect of everyday life. Charisma helped in social situations for the most part. Another significant reason for luck involved how the stats fed into one another. Charisma was the bottom attribute, meaning it enhanced no other stat. Luck improved charisma, letting me shore up both weaknesses at the same time.

With that goal in mind, I delved into the deeper meaning of luck. My initial thoughts focused on luck changing circumstances to my favor. While decent, this definition lacked some serious punch to it. I dwelled on it, coming up with a more nuanced approach to its meaning.

Luck didn't alter situations under your control. It wasn't unlucky to fail an exam if I chose to not study for it. It was unlucky if a car ran onto the sidewalk and crushed my foot on the way to the exam. Using this difference, I came up with a better explanation for fortune.

Luck determined circumstances and situations outside of my control. If I was thrown into a situation, luck made sure I landed somewhere soft and cozy. I etched this improved variation of the attribute into the page. As I did, Caprika leaned over me,

“Hmm, that work is familiar though distant.”

I kept carving as I talked, “What do you mean?”

Caprika scratched the side of her head, “It reminds me of my uncle's work.”

I looked up from the page, using Hunter of Many to keep my lines crisp,

“Who's that?”

Caprika scoffed, “The Emperor.”

Althea leaned towards her, chewing into a sandwich, “Uh, what was he like?”

Caprika shook her head while leaning back, “He was tall and broad. His cape made him seem even larger, like a moving wall. Sometimes I thought he was a different, better species. Other people bent to him, his word law.”

Caprika shivered, “I remember when assassins snuck into the palace one day. The Emperor raised his hand, and it was like the entire planet quaked. They melted as if they weren’t ever real to begin with.”

Torix cupped his chin, “Sounds eerily reminiscent of Yawm.”

Caprika shook her head, “He’s far older than Yawm, and he’s more omnipotent than simply strong. He understood techniques and skills none has ever understood since. He out-leveled Overseers somehow.”

Caprika pointed at the marking on my page, “And he wrote and spoke in those runes.”

I finished my carving, “Well, good thing I don’t have to fight him.”

Caprika blinked, “Don’t let your guard down. My brother is coming here to observe you since you defeated Delilath. He’ll be assessing you. I am praying he doesn’t underestimate you.”

I shrugged, pouring mana into the page,

“We’ll roll with the punches then.”

The grimoire glowed, a stream of raw mana draining into the mark. In seconds, it finished. I clicked a button on my forearm, exposing my umbral armor. I wiped away the torn mark on my forearm before replacing it with the new runic marking. I clenched my fist, observing the difference.

I grinned, “Ahhh, that was a good session. The lines are clean and crisp.”

Althea leaned towards the new marking, “It’s crazy to me that you can make something like that with your big hands. The lines are so...intricate.”

Torix scoffed, “He’s using magic to enable his craft. It’s interesting to see so many skills integrated together in fact. Few can achieve the same feat.”

I shrugged, “I don’t think about it much. I go by feel. If I tried thinking about all the abilities, I’d never even come close to doing this kind of bullshit.”

Torix nodded, “A simple yet effective tactic. I wonder if I could integrate it into my lessons? Hmm...”

I directed my mana into the mark, my forearm ebbing out a gentle hum,

“I’d do it with combat or practical magic. Experimentation is more about understanding what’s actually going on. Using skills is all about practice. Well, in my experience at least.”

I stood up, clicking my forearm so that the gray covered my skin again,

“Anyways, it’s time we head out. You guys ready?”

Kessiah frowned, “Can we just chill for a minute?”

I shook my head, “Not unless you want to chill by yourself.”

Kessiah rolled her eyes, “You’re starting to sound like Tohtella.”

Torix turned to me, “Did either of you find it odd that she seemed surprised by the events on social media and television?”

I raised an eyebrow, “What? No. She was busy with planning the assault and whatnot.”

Torix shook his head, “Daniel, she doesn’t reform cities. She reforms worlds. Manipulating the masses should be second-hand nature at this point.”

Kessiah scoffed, “Unless you think she’s the best liar on the planet, you should probably just calm down. Besides, you’re stealing my thunder. I had a victory over her.”

Torix shook his head, “If anything, she might have had a victory over us.”

Kessiah rolled her eyes, “You’re an old, grumpy conspiracy theorist now.”

Caprika glanced between us, “It does seem strange. She’s cold and calculating as they come, rivaling even albony royalty. That’s a difficult feat, I promise you. Even a master of manipulation like Thisbey shouldn’t overwhelm her in the slightest.”

I frowned, “Really? Damn...Maybe I should keep focusing on perception. That slipped past my notice.”

Caprika crossed her arms, “She might open up more around you for some reason. That could be throwing you off.”

Althea frowned, “Oh, I have an idea why...”

Kessiah nudged Althea with her elbow, “Hah, told you she wanted the D.”

I rolled my eyes, “Alright, enough wild speculation. I’ll look into it once we get to Rivaria. Until then, we have things to do and places to be. Let’s go.”

Everybody packed supplies back into storage, some dimensional some not. With everything ready, I pulled us back up, our group soaring through the skies. Conversation lulled as everyone busied themselves with reading, status work, or playing with their obelisk.

Off in the distance, a storm loomed. As we neared it, Kessiah shouted,

“Yo tough guy, I don’t want to get rain all over me.”

I rolled my eyes, “We’ll be fine.

As we neared the gray clouds, I enveloped us in a hollow, spherical well of antigravity. It pushed us inwards and everything around us outwards. When we crashed into the rain, the water flowed around us. As if in a submarine, our party dashed through the tempest unscathed.

Lightning beamed around us. Before it struck someone, I raised my arm. Acting as a lightning rod, a flash of lightning cracked into my hand. It left my palm white hot, but my health didn’t even dip. Over the next two hours, I took the brunt of a dozen lightning strikes.

By the time we escaped the storm, my armor hummed with electrical energy. I reached out to it, pulling the electricity. Using a bit of mana, I grasped the sparks.

Skill gained! Electrical Clasp(lvl 1) – Others cower before electricity. You wield it. +1% to using outside sources of electricity.

I raised my eyebrows, stunned by the ease that I gained the skill.

I moved on, attempting to get rid of the electricity. To do so, I reversed the grabbing process, converting the stored voltage into mana. I imagined Yawm’s own conversions mimicked this process, except with nuclear fission.

Skill gained! Lightning Eater(lvl 1) – Braving the terrors of tempests, you’ve earned an appetite for galvanism. +1% to the conversion rate of electricity to mana.

At this point, I thanked the Originator tree. Gaining skills this easy never happened before unlocking that bonus. After dampening the electrical charge of my armor, I sped up our travel. I wanted to reach Rivaria in a day at most. With my mana stores, I had the tools to do so.

Ramping up our speed, we accelerated. Within hours the climate chilled, and the air thinned. We reached far North, mountains dominating the horizon in every direction.

We spotted gialgathens just flying around, enjoying themselves. Some of the peaks were active, pits of magma glowing with snow around them.

The gialgathens built cities around these warm spots. Their architecture carved into the mountains. Gialgathens practiced with their tail whips by beating into the stony cliffsides with them. The old beasts even created sculptures with well-timed attacks.

The pinnacle of these carvings stood as monuments in the cities. Models of Lehesion littered the landscape, his image everywhere. In smaller towns, Emagrotha statues stood on mountaintops as well. Other historical figures dotted these towns as well. I even spotted a large figurine of Delilath, Lady of Yellow.

Not long after entering gialgathen country, we reached the tallest mountain on Giess – Aether's Kiss. It rose above the clouds, the incline gradual. I parted the clouds, the air vapor freezing near the mountain-top. We shot up over the fog, finding the vibrant city of Rivaria.

All along the sides of the mountain, many pools exposed magma. Buildings centered around these pits, built to take advantage of the heat source. At the center of the city, a massive pit of bubbling lava smoked. Many gialgathens played or flew over the smoke, their hides resistant to the scorching air.

Around the volcano's edge, buildings of marble and granite stood tall against the cold wind. They reflected an orange sheen, the sun setting in the distance. Cloud tops rolled beneath the city line, gialgathens darting in and out of the clouds.

Gemstones lit their way, crystals shining over doorways, magma pits, and landing zones. They brimmed with mana, collected from Giess's depths.

Gialgathens flew over the streets, using the crystalline lights for guidance.

They kept just above the buildings, flying over the streets.

Their doorways and exits suited their size, everything mammoth in proportion. Espens walked along the streets, bundled up in fur. They looked like ants compared to the colossal monoliths and monuments. These memorials lined around every building, the gialgathens' wealth obvious.

As we neared the entrance, I adjusted the size of my gray armor. With the doorways so big, I didn't need to walk around at nine feet. I could stretch out my legs so to speak and enjoy my full size. As I did, Torix pointed towards a behemoth feasting hall. It rose taller than skyscrapers.

"So there is the location we'll be staying at. It's some kind of a warrior hall. All the other combatants will be there as well."

Caprika looked in a mirror, adjusting her outfit and appearance, "How much time do we have before we reach there?"

I frowned, "Seconds."

Caprika shook her hands, "I need more time. My brother's down there. It's of the utmost importance that I make myself presentable."

"Aaaaaand we're landing."

On one of the landing pads, I set us down. As I rested my feet on cold marble, two gialgathen guards stared down at me. The tallest of the two grunted,

"Who are you, dirtwalker?"

I grunted back, "Daniel."

The guards stared at each other, their necks stretching up to twice my height. I matched the stature of their main bodies, however. They looked at the others. The short one grunted,

"They are small. You aren't as small. Are you the one that killed Delilath?"

I winced, "Yes."

The tall one growled, “The other contestants will wrench your guts out you filthy dirtwalker.”

I shrugged, “We’ll see. Will you let me through or not?”

The tall one glared down at me, “Only as we are compelled by tradition and honor. Two qualities you know nothing about.”

I ignored them, walking past. Torix scoffed, “They must believe defeating the Lady of Yellow isn’t a feat worthy of admiration. If what they say about Daniel is true, then even a simpleton could do it.”

Kessiah smirked, “Yeah, really shits on her memory, doesn’t it?”

Torix nodded, “Quite.”

The guards sunk their gazes, both of them blushing with shame. As we walked past them, Torix and Kessiah high fived. Torix murmured, “Only this once.”

Kessiah nodded, “Duh.”

We entered a massive hallway. Our footsteps echoed as the steeped walls stretched up to absurd heights. Marble alcoves lined the walls, doorways leading to rooms along the sides.

Statues of various gialgathens decorated these alcoves and entrances. Pillars supported many of them as well, keeping the building upright. Floating lights hovered throughout the entire expanse, keeping everything lit with white light. It was beautiful in a natural kind of way.

At the center of the hall, an apparent life-sized replica of Lehesion stood. It was over two hundred feet tall, dwarfing most gialgathens by tenfold. I figured it was exaggeration, but it was hard to say. If Lehesion was really that big, then he was going to be a tough fucker to put down.

As we walked deeper into this hallway, a gruff, old gialgathen landed in front of us. A scar ran down the side of his neck, and he walked on a metal bracer for one his front feet. His faded, blue skin blended in with the white spots along his side. He growled, more because of his grizzled voice than out of anger,

“Hello there, little ones. I’m Malakai. Who and what are you doing in the Hall of Heroes?”

I reached out a palm, “I’m Daniel Hillside. I’m here for the Honoring of Lehesion.”

Malakai’s eyes widened, “Ah, you know of its true name. Good. Your room is this way, fair warrior. You’ll find it’s more than large enough for you and your comrades.”

He turned and hobbled on one foot, metal clanking against the marble. He kept his head held high, even as other gialgathens looked down on him from the alcoves. I glared around,

“What happened to your foot?”

He grumbled, “I lost it in the finals for the Honoring of Lehesion many years ago. The scars still burn this time of year.”

Torix said, “You wear those scars well.”

Malakai nodded, “Thank you. Though they limit me, they always serve as reminders of my fighting days. Even the memories are dwindling now that I age. This bastard clanking always remind me before the memory fully fades, however.”

He turned to one of the doorways along the walls of the hallway. It was the only small, wooden doorway here. All the others were massive in size. Malakai gestured a wing to the door,

“Here you will find our small rooms and areas. We lack much in the way of espen-sized rooms here.”

Kessiah scoffed, “Because espens don’t make it this far that often, right?”

Malakai nodded, “Blunt but yes. I pray thee well in your upcoming battles. You will need them.”

Malakai turned to fly off. Before he did, he turned his face to us,

“Oh, a fiery fellow is waiting for you all inside the main room there. He snapped both the wings of an arrogant youngling earlier. Be careful with that one.”

Caprika stiffened, her hair rising along her back. As Malakai flew off, Caprika swallowed and stared at us, “Oh by Schema or Baldowah or whatever god there is, please, please don’t befoul our first impression. Helios doesn’t take kindly to weakness, rudeness, arrogance, pride, fear-“

I waved my hand, “Or any negative quality. Yeah, yeah, we get it.”

I pushed open the wooden entrance. We found a hallway with ten doors. The high ceilings let me walk in undeterred. A set of stone coaches lined the doors, a lit fireplace keeping them warm. A giant sat down on the nearest couch, sprawled out like a king on his throne.

White fur brimmed from neck and face, his black mask absorbed light him. Palpable, black mana ebbed from him, tangible in form. He wore a fur cape from some giant animal, the brown clashing with his own white hair. He tapped his ivory claws against stone, a pair of gauntlets leaving his fingers exposed.

He turned to us, his mask hiding his face. He pushed himself up, standing two feet taller than me. He was wide as a wall. Caprika paced up to him, “Helios, it’s so good to see you again.”

He lifted his hands, staring at his nails,

“Is this your champion Caprika?”

She nodded. Helios gave me the time of day by looking down on me,

“Rather underwhelming, isn’t he?”

Chapter 180: Helios, Ruler of Worlds

I frowned, already prepared to ignore this guy. Before I walked past him, Caprika raised her hands,

“Now brother, I’ve proven my judgment to you on many an occasion. Would you mind trusting it once more?”

Helios looked at her, his boredom fading as he spoke to her,

“Surely you understand my skepticism? He’s under-leveled, and he hides his status. That usually bodes poorly. Even excluding those factors, you’ve chosen losing candidates on numerous occasions. Every occasion, in fact.”

Caprika wrapped her hands together, “Daniel is different.”

Helios scoffed, “As were the last three candidates father had me evaluate.” The big guy tilted his head and looked back at me, “Would you explain why he’s hiding his status? Is he that ashamed of who he is and what he’s done?”

Caprika shook her hands, “Why, he has several very acceptable reasons for veiling his identity. It’s not out of shame either, dearest. I swear to you that he’s more than competent. He defeated Delilath, Lady of Yellow even.”

Helios straightened up, his utter disdain for the situation fading some,

“Ah, she was the warrior that defeated several of your nominees, including you?”

Caprika winced, “Ah, yes she did...multiple times.”

Helios turned to me while crossing his arms, “Then you’re actually helping my sister and not putting on a false pretense? Excuse my initial rudeness then. Your disguise as a weak peasant worked overly well.”

I shrugged, kind of surprised by the apology at this point. I tried analyzing him as I spoke, “Eh, it’s not even worth excusing. Your opinion isn’t worth caring about at this point.”

He was hiding his status as well. The hypocrite scoffed, “Likewise. Now, what makes you worthy of representing my sister?”

I raised a hand, “Well, for starters, I’m stronger than her.”

Heliod sighed, “While my sister is fluid in courts, she lacks the same refinement on a battlefield. You understand if that isn’t enough?”

Caprika placed a hand on Helios’s arm, “Helios, I understand your brotherly concern. In fact, I find it endearing. At the same time, it’s insulting to my allies.”

Helios stared at Caprika, “Ah, then I’ve conveyed myself well.”

He turned back to me, “Understand something, little one. This is my sister’s chance to redeem herself. It’s essential so that she may return to our homeworld once more. Otherwise, she’ll rot here in this abyss for yet another year.”

Torix spoke up, “I wouldn’t fret about it too much. This isn’t the first, nor the last time Daniel has been underestimated. His level is deceiving.”

Helios raised a hand, “That’s grand news, but I need more than words to prove his worth. Father has been attempting to send one of the royal guards here for the past decade. Winning the tournament on an underdeveloped world like this would be nothing for them.”

Helios shook his head, “Yet Caprika’s wanted to finish the task on her own. She’s been stubborn that way since we were cubs.”

Helios shook his head, his massive mane moving with the twist and turns of his neck,

“I need some kind of evidence to prove, hmm, Daniel was it? Yes, Daniel’s competence. Ah yes, excuse me if I forget all of your names. I meet many people, and their faces bleed together over time.”

Helios glared down at me, “Especially when they wear a mask.”

I rolled my eyes, “You’re not hurting anyone’s feelings here man. Good try though.”

Caprika waved her hands, “Ahem, as for proving my nominee’s worth, what if you were to watch Daniel’s next fight in the tournament? That will more than assuage your concerns.”

Helios shrugged, glancing back down at his nails, “It’s as good a plan as any, I suppose.”

Helios walked up to me, “Then I’ll watch your next fight. One last message before I leave you to prepare.” He placed a hand onto my shoulder. It ebbed a vast and primal energy,

“Treat my sister well, or else I will tear you apart. Do you understand?”

I grabbed his hand, wrenching it off me, “Uh huh. Tell me then big man, are you finished yet or do you have to swing your dick around some more? I understand if you’re not done compensating.”

Caprika raised both her hands to Helios, “I would like to remind you that it’s difficult to get out of this ‘abyss’ as you put it without Daniel’s help.”

Helios pulled his hand out of my grasp, his strength surprised me. He gripped his fist, “Your relationship with my sister is why you’re still alive. Remember that.”

“Sorry man. You forget names. I forget orders.”

Helios looked up, exhausted with the conversation, “Then...so be it.” He turned to his sister, “If he loses this tournament, he will die. I’ll leave the remembering to you.”

Caprika pressed her hands together, “I understand. Of course, of course.”

Helios created a portal, much like Torix’s own teleportation. He walked through the purple rimmed void, disappearing in an instant. As he left, one of his gauntlets faced me.

A marking of the dimensional cipher was carved on it, the mark gorgeously rendered. As a fellow craftsman, it impressed me quite a bit. I raised an eyebrow as I turned to Caprika,

“Where’d he get that marking?”

As her brother disappeared, Caprika walked over towards the stone couch he sat on. She flopped onto the furniture, and she lifted her hands. They shook with fear as she looked at me,

“Do you see these hands?”

I nodded. She continued, “My brother isn’t someone you make snappy retorts with. You’re lucky he spared you.”

I turned a hand to her, “But if a fight broke out, that would’ve been an easy way to prove myself.”

Caprika shook her head, “Winning the tournament is much easier than defeating my brother. Besides, he’d tear you apart. I say that while respecting your own capacity for carnage.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Damn, is he that strong?”

Caprika sighed, “Allow me to send you a copy of his status the last time he let me analyze him. It’s improved since then I’m sure. It will paint a better picture than I could do so.”

She fiddled with her status. Seconds later, the file uploaded. I opened it, and Caprika's fear made sense all of a sudden.

Helios was a monster.

Helios Nova, Ruler of Worlds(lvl 15,000 | Guild: The Empire | Ownership: Belka-623(planet), Meliton(planet) | Class: Fringe Walker | Titles: Winter's Wrath, Cold of the Void) – Helios Novas is a shining example of a galactic citizen. He has accomplished many feats during his relatively short lifespan. He's an accomplished Fringe Walker, having cleared over a dozen worlds. He's established outposts on even more planets, allowing him to expand his influence outward.

Outside of his class distinctions, he's proven himself time and time again by serving the Emperor. He is known as the Empire's Hammer, and he is used as such during wars or skirmishes. His overwhelming control of ice and spatial magic has left worlds uninhabitable should they provoke the Empire's wrath.

He rules over two of the worlds he's saved, Belka-623 and Meliton. Belka-623 is a mining planet, rich in rare minerals and alloys. It's gem reserves help fuel the empire, and many fortunes have been made thereby aspiring tycoons. Meliton is a world with typical development in Schema's system. There, Helios is praised as a messiah and savior of the world.

Though he lacks tact, his prowess in battle is nigh unmatched. Stay on his good side, or you will most certainly die.

I whistled, "Damn, no wonder the guy was bored when we arrived. He's used to making some serious waves."

Caprika nodded, "He's very icy and quick to act. Our father called him the family's ice golem, his every move calculated and cold."

I frowned, "Well, I assumed he was all bark and no bite...Man...I was wrong about that."

I assumed since Helios was royalty like Caprika, he and her would share a lot characteristics. For the most part, they varied quite a bit. Even if Helios was an asshole, he deserved some respect for what he'd accomplished.

I kept that in mind as Caprika shook her head,

“You’ll find Helios’s teeth are quite sharp. Try not to instigate him into biting you next time, or you won’t make it out in one piece.”

I nodded, taking another mental note of the cipher mark on his forearm. The intricate marking exceeded my own ability. Based on what Caprika said earlier, the Emperor made it. It was partway to blame for Helio’s success no doubt.

If the Emperor used the cipher to such success, it might be time for me to sink my teeth into the cipher. I waited till now because of what the cipher did to Yawm. He lost his mind, driven mad by the allure of power. If I progressed with the cipher, I might go down the same road.

To stop that, I decided to progress in baby steps. Practice would be my first step. With that in mind, I pointed towards the rooms at the back of the hall,

“So, who’s sleeping where?”

We walked up, looking into each of the rooms. It turned out we didn’t have much choice in the matter. All the spaces were identical, each one bland and barren. It worked fine for us except Caprika. Our entire group was used to roughing it in the wild or sleeping on stone. On the other hand, Caprika turned her nose up at the straw mattresses and outhouse bathrooms.

Caprika shouted from the inside of one of the said bathrooms,

“I can’t believe our living arrangements are this primitive. To think they treat guests with such a careless attitude.”

I waved my hands, “They intended on this being a space for hardened warriors, not for royalty.”

Caprika let her hands flop on her sides, “So warriors defecate in a hole inside their house?”

Kessiah walked up and nudged Caprika, “Told you we’d be roughing it.”

Caprika spread out her hands, “This will be rectified tomorrow. I swear to you all on the Novas’s name.”

Torix already set up dozens of charts on the wall, pinning the graphs with adhesive. Caprika walked up to him, “Malthazar, what are you doing?”

Torix pointed at the graphs, “I’m adding visualizations to help with my ideation process.”

Caprika shook her hands, “Surely there’s a better place for that?”

Torix shrugged, “It won’t bother me one bit. It’s not where you live. What matters is how and who you live with.”

Kessiah snapped from inside her room, “So it’ll be a shithole regardless.”

Torix rolled his eyes. Althea and I walked into our room, shutting the door as Caprika raised a fuss. I was done with royalty for the day, and I agreed with Torix. It didn’t matter where we were. All that mattered was what we could get done.

That being said, I pulled out a soft blanket to put over Althea and my bed. After that, I warmed the room up to a comfortable temperature with my Star Forger skill. Even if I didn’t care about my comfort, I did care about Althea’s.

After laying in the bed for a couple of minutes, Althea fell asleep. With one of her arms draped over my waist, I pulled out my grimoire. Intent on practicing, I opened my personal tome and went to work. After a bit of reflection, I got an idea of what my problem was with the cipher.

It was simple really – my creativity limited me more than my skill. I could execute on almost any idea that popped up in my head. I needed a good idea to pop up though before I could use my cipher skills.

Understanding that limitation, I spent a long time brainstorming. So far, I kept my cipher encryptions tame and strict. With the knowledge Eonoth and Etorhma armed me with, I could bend the rules a bit. By doing so, I might be able to push past some of the plateaus I experienced with the cipher.

The issue came with the danger involved. The cipher twisted anyone that used it. They rushed into the process of warping reality. In the end, the corruptor became the corrupted. Instead of unloading all of my newfound skill at once, I restricted myself to one step at a time.

Sticking with small progressions, I tried curved lines on my first rune. I etched in subtle shifts in the depth of the rune as well, giving it a dual meaning. As I worked on it, the glyph annoyed me because it looked sloppy the entire time. As I finished the mark, the last few lines cleaned it up. It came together, looking profound and powerful.

I kept my progress measured from there. As the night dragged on, I implemented more curvature, variable depths, and triple meanings. As the morning sun came up, I even tried out some multi-glyph work. By the time Althea woke up, I had sketched entire sentences of the cipher.

The progress sounded ridiculous, but it crawled compared to what I could do. Writing sentences wasn't an issue at all. Hell, I could carve out novels in the cipher, bringing stories to life with a bit of mana. Even if I could do that, I didn't know what writing out passages would do though.

So before I walked down that path, I studied the effects of each new technique. As I varied the depths, the intensity of the marking's effects intensified. It cost more mana, however, making the runes less efficient after a certain depth. Each of these 'sweet spots' varied depending on the effect of the etching as well.

Every nuance I applied carried with it that kind of profound impact. It overwhelmed me at first seeming impossible to master. I took bite-sized chunks at a time though. I took my time, learning my application of the new tools at my disposal. There was no need to rush into it.

With the night of practice under my belt, I enjoyed breakfast with Althea. We hit the town, wandering through it and enjoying the sights. The food and comforts paled when compared to Yildraza. The art took my breath away, however.

The gialgathens created enormous sculptures, murals, and engravings. They used all varieties of rock, from granite to pumice. This substituted painting for the most part, relying on the substance itself for added flair. Stone was cool and all, but my favorite statues were made of this ice that never melted.

These chilly statues only appeared on the upper ring of Rivaria, near the mountain's peak. The cold maintained the frozen water, creating views of lava and the snow. I loved the contrast, both fire and ice right beside each other in harmony.

Alright, you caught me. I stole that line out of a poem on a statue.

Those same poems were limited in length though, each one being a few words long. I guess quotes were the better word for them. Using their enormous tails for carving meant gialgathens wrote in huge letters.

This meant that every sentence took up a ton of space. Gialgathens condensed their stories because of this, keeping them simple. I enjoyed them all the same.

I thought of them in terms of food. If a novel was a hearty meal, a quote was a piece of candy. Just like candy, the mini-poems were easy to read but lacked substance. After all, making a compelling narrative in a single sentence was damn near impossible.

All that was nice, but my favorite part about the city was how the gialgathens lived with nature. The magma pits were a good example, but the gialgathens didn't stop there.

They created wind halls that played music from the wind blowing through them. Animals of all kinds roamed the city, helping out the gialgathens. We discovered armless, ice-hydras roaming around as pets. They stood a foot shorter than me, their breaths forming snow.

These ice-hydras created the raw chunks of ice that the gialgathens use for sculptures. Enormous, fire bulls dragged these and other resources around the city, keeping everything moving. Gialgathens negotiated with the creatures in their native tongue. It looked cordial on the surface, but their discussions didn't hold up to scrutiny.

I eavesdropped on a conversation, and I figured out that the creatures were slaves. They were like the espens, sapient races with their own languages, emotions, and customs. The gialgathens commanded them with thinly veiled threats, forcing them to obey.

It ruined the city's mystique for me. Althea wasn't bothered as much, likely because of her upbringing with Yawm. It was more usual for her. Either way, I was done exploring Rivaria by the time we returned to our rooms. As we walked into the hall, Kessiah and Caprika sat around the fire. Kessiah raised her hands,

"I'm telling you, the water tastes different hear. It's like filtered water or something."

Caprika moved her head as if rolling her eyes, "Oh yes, these backward savages filter the city's water. It most certainly is so."

Kessiah turned to us as we walked in, "Have either of you tried the water here? It tastes weird as fuck."

I leaned against the wall, "Eh, we explored more than anything. So far, its pretty on the surface but ugly underneath."

Althea weighed her hands back and forth, "I thought it was pretty cool, though Rivaria isn't the most comfortable place to walk around in."

I glanced down at Althea, noting her fluffy jacket, scarves, and gloves. The freezing temperature wasn't exactly pleasant, though it didn't bother me. With bits of snow hanging off Caprika's mane, she leaned back in her chair, "I might as well expose my shortcoming while we're all here. I couldn't procure better lodgings. The gialgathens won't offer Delilath's murderer a nicer room."

I scoffed, "I think we'll pull through."

I walked towards my room as Caprika stood up, "Fine? There's nothing fine about this place. It's utterly drab."

As walked into our room, "Yeah, go complain to one of your servants. They just might give a fuck. Malthazar, let me know if there are any real problems here, alright?"

Torix gave me a nod, “Of course.”

I closed the door as Caprika deflated while Althea walked up to make her feel better. I figured someone should let her know she was whining. Maybe I could’ve been more subtle, but eh. She’d be alright.

The next two weeks passed like that. I went out two more times to eat with Althea. Other than that, I holed up in my room and practiced the cipher. At the same time, I grinded out Force of Nature and Star Forger. It kept me productive and focused until the first day of the tournament arrived.

On that day, I walked out of my room while sighing. I hit a wall the day before on the cipher. I worked on complex passages, attempting to write out an artsy sort of carving. I locked up at the start of it, unable to just open up write it out. I got lost in the process, wincing at my own work.

It didn’t seem like me. To progress further with the cipher, I needed to lose myself in the artistic side of the process. I mean, let’s face it, I wasn’t a cultured kind of guy. The closest thing to art I created in the last year was blood splatters I left behind on battlefields. This was outside my realm of expertise.

At the same time, pushing past this sticking point was a challenge. It wasn’t about the necessity of it anymore. The runic glyphs were taunting me. I’d be damned if I let them win this little war. It was like I was using my face against a brick wall.

The runes were the wall you see. For some reason, I could only progress by smashing the wall with my face. The runes thought I would let up. Oh, they’ thought wrong. I’d keep smashing my face against the runes until they broke or I did.

And to be clear, I had a hard face.

All the ranting aside, I figured letting off some steam at the tournament would do me some good. With that goal, I walked up out of my room to Althea, Caprika, and Kessiah. They chatted around the fire about court politics.

“Few albony men are willing to even consider courting me, to begin with. As you can imagine, my brother scares them off long before a romance can bud.”

Kessiah nodded, “Oh yeah. Malthazar has a similar problem, but it’s his face that does the scaring part.”

They giggled as I walked up. Everyone stared at me before leaning away. I frowned, looking at all of them, “What?”

Althea raised a hand, “Ugh, are you ok?”

I nodded, “Yeah. A bit frustrated but I’ll be fine.”

Kessiah nodded, “Guys, get out of the way. There’s a raging bull on the loose.”

I rolled my eyes before the girls giggled again. I knocked on Torix’s door, “You ready to leave?”

His dry, raspy voice replied, “I’ll be staying here today. There are a few details that simply must be ironed out. Do excuse me if you would.”

“Yeah, sure man.”

I walked out, “Anyone coming with?”

They all stood. I raised an eyebrow, surprised by the enthusiasm, “Damn, no one showed up to my fight with Delilath. What’s different this time?”

Althea sighed, “Uhm, well, the gialgathens don’t do very much.”

Kessiah dragged her hands down her face, “They’re boring as fuck. They don’t do anything. Clubs, dancing, shows, none of that is here. They just lay around like giant cats. Either that or they go off to prove their honor. It’s very blegh.”

I scoffed, “So now the tournament is actual entertainment?”

Kessiah locked her hands behind her head, “Yup.”

I walked out of the room, “Then let’s hope the fights are fun to watch.”

We walked through Rivaria, passing by the modern buildings. After descending past the cloud line, we passed ancient ruins. After a few minutes, we reached an archaic colosseum.

The massive walls crumbled as the wind whistled around its many cracks and crevices. The arena surrounded a pit of magma, a tiny island of metal at its center. If average people fought here, they would roast on the ground. Considering all gialgathens could fly, it gave the beasts a massive advantage.

Yup, lots of upholding honor there.

Thoughts of false nobility aside, we reached the high walls. With a thin layer of snow crunched underfoot as we stepped in. We all found many gialgathens lounging around, doing a lot of nothing. Even though I hated the crowd from Yildraza, they hyped the fight to no end. Their excitement was infectious. This was nothing like that.

Every gialgathen looked bored here besides the fighters. At least a few gialgathens did drills with their tailwhips or their magic. A few humanoids even practiced in a small, portioned area at the back of the arena’s entrance. That’s where our seats were at.

We walked up a few flights of stairs, walking around the arena. As we did, Caprika scoffed, “At least the lava and wind look excited. You’d think this was a funeral with how these beasts are acting.”

I shrugged, “It’s different to these guys. In Yildraza, a tournament is an entertaining event. To the gialgathens, it’s more about honoring their history and heroes.”

I sighed, “I say all that, but damn I do miss some of the excitement.”

We chatted before reaching the back wall where we settled down. We rested at the very edge between the gialgathens and humanoids. Several of the beasts glared at me as we sat down. To me, it made no difference. I was here to get a job done, not make friends.

As we settled in, a portal appeared beside us. From it, Helios walked out, his frame enormous. He looked down at Caprika, "It's good to see you, sister."

Caprika brushed herself, fiddling with her hair, "Ah, you as well brother. I didn't expect you to appear so suddenly."

He sat down, his body too big for the stone seats, "Did you expect me to waste my time walking here then?"

Caprika shook her head, fumbling on her words, "No, not at all. I actually expected a ship of some sort. You usually loved riding in them."

Helios sighed, "Hmmm...a reasonable assumption to make."

They chatted for a bit, Caprika and Helios staying casual. I ignored them, leaning back and closing my eyes. Part of it was out of shame for snapping at Helios like I did earlier. The guy has a lot to offer, and I might have burned a bridge between us just to squeeze in a few one liners.

To make up some lost ground, my performance in this next fight had to be incredible. I visualized my next fight, using my Mental Preparation skill. I imagined using my magic and swinging my fists. It served as a mental warmup.

As I reached the deepest part of my meditation, something hissed in the air above me. One of the gialgathens beside us whipped its tail towards my neck. I reached out a hand, ready to block the attack. Before it hit me, a portal appeared from above.

Helios's hand reached out from the void, catching the gialgathen's tail. He stayed sitting beside Caprika, not even looking at the beast. Helios sighed, turning to the conflict. He crushed the gialgathen's hardened tail in his hand,

"To think someone is attempting to sabotage my sister."

Helios reached up with his free hand, the air crackling around us. The runic marking on his gauntlet glowed a deep, navy blue. An azure aura crept out around him. A shiver ran down my spine as I realized what he was doing. Seconds later, and the mana coalesced into Helios's palm.

Helios reached out to the gialgathen,

“That simply won't do, now will it?”