

## New World 181

### Chapter 181: Unchained

Helios unleashed the volatile magic stored in his hand. The gray gialgathen convulsed, its mouth gasping out. From the inside of the creature, azure crystals grew from its body. Like a percussive beat, the expanding jewel resonated out a chilling sound. The shards sapped the creature's life force, converting the beast into a gemstone.

A fog ebbed from these crystals. The mist sunk down onto the ground, hissing as it burnt stone. Red shards of frozen blood pierced out from the gialgathen's skin, the creature already dead. As the crystals finished gorging on the corpse, chunks of the gialgathen fell off.

The meat chunks shattered against the stone. Where the crystal touched flesh, the meat disintegrated into the fine mist. To call it ice magic didn't do the spell justice. The incantation evaporated, cooled, and ate the gialgathen all at once. It even enfeebled the monster, causing it to be softer than stone.

It was impressive, to say the least.

Without missing a beat, Helios pulled his hand back from his portal. As the void disappeared from beside him, he leaned back against the stone seat. He steepled his fingers, and his voice echoed across the arena,

"Let his body display itself as a lesson to all of you. Stand against my sister through unlawful means, and you will perish."

The entire arena gawked at him, jaws agape and cold sweat running down several backs. I sat right beside the crystal, scooting away from it. As I did, Kiki Mosk flew in from above the cloud line.

On top of his trusty podium, he wore an iridescent plate mail. It reflected a multi-colored sheen, keeping Kiki's over the top theme going strong. Within it, charged gemstones ebbed with power. He already changed his strategy from the last fight.

He didn't stop there. Not by a longshot.

Two Sentinels floated down from the clouds right after. Armed with their dimensional slicing spears, the Sentinels struck an imposing scene.

Their gargantuan frames and faceless masks oozed intimidation. Even the gialgathens respected them, showing a rapt attention instead of boredom.

Kiki floated above the arena, keeping over the action. The Sentinel's landed on either side of the metallic pit at the center of the arena. Kiki raised his hands and announced,

“Now, due to the recent death of a valiant fighter, we've raised the security this time in the tournament.” Kiki gestured to the Sentinels, “You'll find there's more than enough muscle to guarantee your safeties.”

The Sentinels pounded their spears onto the platform, ushering forth a shockwave. A burst of wind passed over us, the Sentinels' abilities indisputable. Kiki raised his hands, “And now it's time for the first of three different days of amazing bouts. Who here is ready!”

The gialgathens remained quiet, too cool for cheering. Kiki sighed, “And as always, you gialgathens give a warm welcome to the tournament. Great. Just great.”

Kiki coughed into his hand, “Anyways, we've changed the setup somewhat from previous years.” Above Kiki, a massive zeppelin floated down from above the clouds. With mist billowing out from around it, thousands of people stacked up on its seats.

Every recipient along the windows cheered with excitement, bringing life to the fights. There was only one window along the zeppelin with one person in it. I glanced up at it, finding Thisbey staring down at the contest with his hands locked behind him. He wore a sleek, mahogany colored suit. It wasn't gialgathen leather, that much was certain.

Kiki pointed up to the blimp, “And here we have a crowd of people who are actually excited for this year's fights! How about that?”

Kiki gave the gialgathen's a glowing grin. It covered his disgust with the beast's casual attitude. Kiki nodded,

“Now, let the first fight commence!”

I stood up, remembering I was the first contestant up for the day. Helios sighed, “At the very least I won’t have to remain here for long, or will I?”

I shook my head, “I’ll make it short. We both have shit to do.”

Kiki pointed at me, “On one end of the fight, we have the Gray Giant, a crowd favorite for the espens. Everyone give it up for the mysterious, masked marauder!”

The crowds on the blimp went crazy as usual. I jumped from my seat, landing on the back side of the metal arena. With lava bubbling behind me, I planted my feet on the heated metal. I planned on showing Helios just how destructive I could be given some time.

With my mana charging, Kiki pointed at the other side of the arena,

“Here we have Daniel’s opponent, the fierce and feared general of Emagrotha’s third division. Let’s welcome Krog Borom!”

A hulking gialgathen stood up, covered in Skyburner armor. With his many gemstones crackling with mana, he flew with his wings wide. Most of the gialgathens gave him a quiet bow instead of a loud cheer. The gesture felt fitting.

The gialgathen’s black and red colored skin gave him an eerie, monstrous aura. Unlike other gialgathens, the marks along the side of his face and neck were smooth lines. The scarlet lines flowed with the pitch black hide, making him appear even more majestic.

With his head low, he glared at me with his vertical pupils. The beast grinned at me,

“I see a fellow warrior in the arena. Are you like the other dirtwalkers, parading in salvation’s skin?”

I raised an eyebrow, “Honestly, I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

The beast scoffed, “You know nothing of your history then? Perhaps I’ll teach you after our bout.” He cackled, his deep voice echoing in my mind, “If you survive.”

I grinned, “Eh, I wouldn’t be worried about me.”

The air around me bent from my mana. It blurred, heat building around my entire frame. I leaned over while raising my fists, ready to charge,

“You better bring your best.”

Krog Borom leaned his head down, keeping his grin plastered to his face,

“Emagrotha be praised if you make this interesting.”

Kiki kept trying to promote the fight. As he did, I analyzed the general in front of me.

Krog Borom, Emagrotha’s Offerer(lvl 11,021) – Krog Borom served a general during the civil war of the gialgathens. Siding with Emagrotha, Krog believed that every species should earn their freedom.

He fought for the espens to gain the right to battle or buy their freedom through action. In Krog’s view, giving the espens freedom without any effort on their part sold the entire espen species short. Lehesion opposed this viewpoint, saying that the espens were incapable of achieving freedom on their own.

Aside from his extensive history of political alliances, Krog is ruthless in combat. He utilizes alteration magics to create illusions against his foes. This allows him to apply an unusual style of flowing combat against his enemies.

This also allows him to reconstitute his enemies should they be weak-willed. Even against the strongest of minds, Krog can apply high level, crippling debuffs. These include hallucinogenic images, scents, sensations, and thoughts. This mental warfare proves effective against almost any combatant.

Face him with your full strength or else you risk severe injury.

The status gave me the information I needed to know. I centered myself, preparing for the onslaught of mysticism magic. At the end of Kiki's elaborate introductions, my runes were saturated with mana. I could produce a singularity and then some. I was ready as I could be, and with the Sentinels guarding him, I didn't have to hold back.

Kiki raised his hand,

“Are both combatants ready?”

I growled, “Yes.”

Krog nodded, keeping low and composed. Kiki slammed his hand down,

“Then battle!”

I molded Event Horizon over Krog, the unseen force causing him to wince. At the same time, I raised my hand and unloaded a singularity. Aimed at the center of his chest, I bent my knees. I kept my gaze sharp, preparing to dash whichever direction Krog ran.

As expected, Krog darted sideways, his senses sharp. He crawled at a lightning pace on all fours, slithering away from my magic. The tiny black hole sucked in the air from around the arena, disrupting his escape. As the singularity imploded, a tidal wave of kinetic force sent Krog flying.

Ready and waiting, I detonated my runes, giving me a burst of strength. I smashed my heels onto the metal beneath my feet, firing myself forward. Leaving a dent in the arena behind me, I catapulted myself towards Krog's flopping body. Like a cannonball, I slammed into his shoulder, crushing his collarbone.

I frowned. I aimed at his chest, but he flowed around me, preventing a direct impact. I barreled past him, my collision causing the gialgathen to spin in the air. I flipped around, landing on the invisible forcefield around the arena. As I looked up, Krog landed on the stadium, his form impeccable.

He limped away from me, channeling his mana. Before he escaped, I blitzed him again. His mana crystals rippled, magma cooling around the arena. The gialgathens not only made flying superior, but they could also draw mana from their environment. This meant we were fighting on a giant mana battery for him.

In most circumstances, Krog's magic would've taken minutes to channel. With the magma around us cooling, it took seconds. Before I reached him, the beast breathed in and let out a cacophony of magic. The shockwave slammed into me, rattling my bones and ears.

Harsh lights and discordant sounds overwhelmed me from all angles. Pins and needles spread up my arms, and my dots scattered into my vision. It was like my entire body was my arm after hitting my funny bone. Even worse, the shockwave bounced off the arena, causing an echo.

The magic crashed against me once more, leaving me disoriented and dizzy. Krog wasted no time, skulking over and slashing his claws at me. Without my mental prep, I'd have taken the brunt of his attacks. I kept some of my awareness, however.

Using that last scrap of self-control, I slid away from his blows. Like a drunken fighter, I wiggled my way around a series of his slashes. He rotated his strikes, using all his limbs in conjunction, creating a hurricane of attacks. A tail swipe into a slash of his into the chomp of his teeth, Krog was relentless.

I wobbled my way around the rush by the skin of my teeth. Each blow left wind grazing over my cheeks. With each passing second, however, I regrouped myself. Every passing moment, I came back to the fight. As I did, my movements became more measured.

I blocked and deflected, wasting less time on defense. After a minute of his assault, I regained my composure. With my full capacity back, I stormed him with strikes. He fared far better than Delilath. Using his awkward, flowing style, he prevented my attacks from landing flush on him.

Despite his defense, the damage stacked up in a few minutes. With many bleeding cuts, oozing wounds, and broken bones, Krog tripped on a notch in the arena. As he flopped down, I raised my foot. I trained myself to kill, and I stomped down with the aim to crush his skull.

Before my foot landed, two hands clamped against my arms, pulling me back. The other Sentinel popped up in my vision, lunging over Krog's head. They stopped me from killing Krog with ease.

Glad I didn't have to hold back, I sighed with relief. My combat style didn't suit giving a half-assed effort. Because of that security, I shaved the fight from several hours down to several minutes. As the Sentinel set me down, I raised a hand in triumph.

The blimp exploded with noise, fireworks exploding nearby. Kiki clapped his hands, a bead of sweat dripping down his forehead,

"And there you have it folks! It looks like the Gray Giant learned his lesson from Delilath and came prepared. Despite this, it was a good effort from Krog Borom. Let's give him a hand everybody!"

The blimp full of people booed while the gialgathens gave him another bow as they had before. It reminded me why the crowd annoyed me in the first place. Either way, Kiki didn't miss a beat, "Let's move on to the next fight everybody. It's action all day long!"

Before anything else, I pulled Event Horizon back into my armor. I turned to the Sentinel, almost eye level with the behemoth. I patted his shoulder, "Thanks for stopping me."

The Sentinel pushed my hand away with the handle of his violet spear,

"I did so only because Schema commanded it to be so."

I sighed, "Well, can't say I didn't try to play nice."

I turned around, taking a few steps forward and facing the crowd. With an air of victory, I raised my hand and the masses cheered. After enjoying the cheers, I landed back on the stone bleachers. I wrapped my arm around Althea, and she hugged me,

"You did great baby."

I grinned, "Thanks."

I was unharmed besides a few dents in my armor. The closest to danger I got was the hissing crystalline corpse beside me. With her hands crossed over one another, Caprika leaned over to Helios,

“I told you I chose an admirable representative. He even learned from last fight with Delilath.”

Helios gave her a slow nod. He cupped the bottom of his mask, deep in thought, “I suppose he did.”

After a moment, Caprika’s chest puffed out with pride, “Well then, are you satisfied?”

Helios nodded his head, “Yes. I am.” Helios stood up, his shadow looming over all of us, “Excuse me then. I’ll report to father and the Emperor of this new information. Before I do, I have one last question.”

Helios met my eye, “Do you serve or work for anyone, or are you your own ruler?”

I raised a hand, “Er, I guess I’m my own ruler. It sounds kind of melodramatic when you put it that way though.”

Helios scoffed, “Good. That makes the situation far less volatile. We’ll speak with one another later about alliances with the empire. I’m certain we’ll come to terms that we can agree on. Do try to be more polite during those proceedings. Neither my father nor the Emperor will forgive rudeness.”

He created a portal, the black energy warping the air near him, “It would be a shame to lose a potential ally so soon. Farewell.”

He stepped through the portal, disappearing. After he left, Caprika stood up and raised her hands, each of them clasped as fists. She shouted,

“Yes! I did it. I finally got him.”



Caprika looked at us, realizing what she just did. She coughed into her hand as she sat down, “Ahem, excuse me. I’d like to apologize about my indiscretion.”

Althea grinned, “That must have felt amazing.”

Caprika nodded, “Indeed it did. Helios has always disapproved of my choices. It’s always been like a ghost that haunts me.”

They chatted away, discussing their feelings and relationships. I rolled my shoulders and stood up. As I did, Althea turned to me, “Hey, what’s up?”

I cracked my neck, “I’m going back to our room. I’ve got studying I need to get done.”

Althea sighed, “Ok...Uh, have fun with that I guess.”

I gripped her shoulder, “You have fun too. I’ll miss you.”

She grabbed my arm, “Me too.”

I jumped out of the arena, wasting no time walking out. After about two minutes, I arrived back into my hotel room. Seated and in the right frame of mind, I got back to my research of the cipher. As I sunk my teeth into my work, Torix sent me a message.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill (Giess: 2:15 3/17/26) – I don’t meant to pester you, but I’ll be needing the locations of at least one Skyburner base relatively soon. The sooner the better in fact.

Dimension-C138 (Giess: 2:15 3/17/26) – Of course. I’ll have them by tomorrow or the next day. Sorry for the hold up.

I closed out my status and got back to work. I intended on finding the Skyburner bases when it was dark out. That lowered my chances of being seen or caught. Even if I was strong right now, I didn’t want to fight a dozen Skyburners all at once.

With that in mind, I stayed there, studying until the sunset off in the distance. Althea returned from the tournament, chatting away with Caprika. She got back into our room and fell asleep with me by her side. After an hour of her sleeping, I stood up from my study.

I gripped my fists and rolled my shoulders. I prepared myself for diving into silver territory. With my eyes closed, I visualized the carnage and destruction. It was a different world there, a darker one. I wasn't going out to get groceries. I headed out for a bloody war.

Ready and waiting, I opened my eyes.

It was time to rip and tear.

#### Chapter 182: A Masked History

Prepared for diving into the silver's territory, I stepped toward the door of our room. As I did, a light voice chimed in from behind me,

"Hey, where are you going?"

Althea rubbed her eyes, sitting up from her bed. I raised a hand and whispered, "I'm going to find the Skyburner base. Go ahead and get some sleep."

She yawned while stretching her arms. Her figure showed in all its glory. As I admired her, she murmured, "Come on. You won't even know I'm there."

Before I could reply, she dematerialized. A second later, she bled back into reality beside me. She grinned,

"The Skyburner's won't find me either."

"That's the thing. I might end up hurting you."

She shrugged, "I'm not some damsel that needs saving." Althea frowned, "Besides, I've been missing you a lot lately. We can spend some time together this way."

I scratched the back of my head, “Hmm...Alright. Get ready and let’s go.”

Five minutes later, Althea finished getting ready by pulling her cannon out from under our bed. She aimed down the iron sights,

“Ready to go, captain.”

I leaned closer to the cannon, “Damn...I need to make you another one of these soon. It looks so rough.”

She raised it up, hugging the weapon, “What? This here is what I call old Betsy. There’s nothing wrong with her.”

I rolled my eyes, “Uh, yeah right. That weapon looks like I used my bare hands to make it. Why? Because I did.”

Althea kissed the rifle then looked up at me, “That’s what makes it special.”

I scoffed, “If you say so. I’m still making you a new one when we get back.”

We walked out of our room. Torix already converted the hallway into a base, charts and graphs on every surface. He installed a holographic projector besides the fire as well. Working with a graphic image of Giess, he consulted his status for info.

He added markings, drawing out routes and circling issues. I walked up,

“Looks like you’ve made this place your new evil lair.”

He nodded, “Ah yes, as I always do. It suits me after all.”

He pointed at three large circles near and on an enormous mountain,

“These are the three areas where we’ll find the Skyburner’s bases. When will you be able to discover their locations? Excuse my rush, but it’s difficult to create a plan of action without the necessary details.”

I shrugged, “Today probably. My next slot in the tournament is in two weeks. That means I can go ahead and iron this shit out.”

Torix clapped his hands,

“Excellent. As you go and inspect our surroundings, do note any nearby anomalies. We may discover a few useful gems of information to act on.”

Torix waved his hand at the 3-d map, “Though this chart is detailed regarding geography, it doesn’t note any high-level dungeons or that sort of thing. We could use any advantage we can get, both politically or in combat.”

I gave him a thumbs up, “Sounds good. We’ll go ahead then.”

Althea walked up and hugged Torix. She smiled at him, “See you later.”

If Torix could, he’d have blushed. He laid a hand on her shoulder, “Likewise. Be safe, both of you.”

We paced out of Torix’s newfangled base, finding Malakai standing guard beside our room. With a torch casting his smooth skin with an orange sheen, he glanced down at me. He gave me a bow,

“Good to see you, warrior. I pray you’ve been resting well?”

I shrugged, “I don’t need to get shuteye. No rest for the wicked and all that. In fact, I’m more curious about why you’re standing guard.”

Malakai chuckled,

“Hah, you’re quite relaxed, aren’t you? As you may have already gathered, many worship Lehesion here. Quite a few of them despise you for your fight with Delilath. I’m here to prevent any foul play or assassination attempts while you and your comrades rest.”

I tapped the side of my helmet, “Good thing I never sleep.”

Malakai nodded, “Indeed it is. You’ve already made more than a few ripples around here as it is.”

I raised an eyebrow, “What kind of ripples?”

Malakai glanced at the Lehesion statue off in the distance,

“To understand your impact, give me the chance to explain the situation.”

His tail whipped behind him,

“Rivaria serves as a capital for the gialgathen race. We lack a formal government or the like, but we do serve a higher code of ethics. Rivaria decides what those ethics are, and these unspoken rules affect all other gialgathens.”

Malakai glanced down at us, “So your utter dominance over Borom changed how gialgathens view your kind. To those that follow Emagrotha, they view it with admiration.”

Althea crossed her arms, “I thought she was the leader that was trying to keep the espens enslaved?”

Malakai scoffed, “What? That’s nonsense. Emagrotha believed that espens should earn their freedom rather than be granted it. She believed in the potential of your race. Obviously, she was correct in that regard.”

I cupped my chin, “Why should espens have to earn their freedom?”

Malakai looked back to the Lehesion statue,

“It’s a piece of forgotten history that the espens neglect to mention. We uplifted their race, bringing them from the oceans and giving them knowledge of fire and magic. We offered our protection from the elements, and they handled menial work for us.”

Althea tilted her head, the sheen on her facemask shifting,

“Wait, what does uplift mean though? From what I heard, you guys put the espens into slavery using your brute strength.”

Malakai rolled his eyes, “We enslaved no one. The espens followed us onto land willingly.”

My eyes widened, “Wait a minute, onto land?”

Malakai gasped, “They’ve told you all nothing but lies, haven’t they? The espens were a symbiotic race of marine origin. They served the leviathans that swim under the water. We waged war so that the espens could have the choice to come to the surface.”

The old beast sighed, “In the end, we were victorious. The espens took no time to hesitate and followed us. We gave them the foundation to form their own society.”

I tapped my chin, “Then you guys enslaved them.”

Malakai shook his head, “They offered it to us. I will not deny that our dependence on the espens grew over time. We asked for more labor, and they conceded. It became twisted over time. The relationship began as mutual trust, however.”

Malakai pointed his tail at the Lehesion statue, “He is the one that looked down on the espen race. Emagrotha is the one that saw the espens have the ability to rise above their humble beginnings. We fought another war over this.”

Malakai grimaced, his massive head covering in wrinkles,

“Emagrotha would’ve had our kind ween our dependence from the espens over time. At the same time, the espens would’ve gained confidence as a race. Instead, we waged yet another war for your race.”

I shrugged, “It’s not my fault man. Find someone else to blame.”

Malakai took a deep breath. He bit his tongue, “No...no it’s not. Excuse my indiscretion warrior. I find I’m far more set in my ways since I’ve aged. I’m less bitter now at least, but it does leak out from time to time.”

I pat his shoulder, “Don’t worry. It was interesting to hear.”

He laughed a bit, “Well at least you found entertainment in my accusation. Don’t let this old beast drag you into further conversation. At this rate, you’ll both be old by the time you leave!”

Althea walked up to him, giving him a bow,

“Thanks for the wisdom. We’ll use it.”

Malakai gave her a bow, “And thank you for your respect. I will return it in kind. Farewell.”

With the history lesson over, we walked out of the hallway of heroes. Once outside, I flew us my way out towards a vast ocean. It was on the other side of Rivaria’s mountainside. In a few minutes of flying, it popped up in our view in the distance.

Althea murmured, “It’s beautiful.”

After reaching the ocean, I took us to Draygalga’s first hint – a camp near the River of Tears. It turns out that it was an actual river, named for the many bodies dumped here during an epidemic. To my surprise, it took a couple minutes to reach the mouth of the river from the mountaintop.

The gyalgathens used it as a freshwater source, so it had to be nearby. Rivaria wouldn't function otherwise. That same river flowed into the blue-green ocean. As we neared it, details cropped up in my view.

The shallow waters carried pits of algae on its surface. The green algae bled into the water, spreading the color outwards in massive blooms of color. Fish nibbled at the center of these pits, growing fat off the abundant greenery.

Along the outskirts of the emerald colored blooms, leviathans Malakai mentioned swam. Just under the surface, their black, blurry silhouettes roamed around the pits. They opened massive mouths like anacondas unhinging their jaws. The beasts devouring enormous amounts of fish in single gulps using this technique.

This wildlife waned towards the river, the water's coloration turning clear. As I neared the water, I realized why. The stream was damn near sterile. This explained why Kessiah thought the water tasted funny. Something upstream was killing all of the wildlife in the water.

With curiosity guiding me, I hovered us both just above the river's surface. We peered at the crystal clear water, spotting our blurry reflections. I passed miles of the vast waterway, finding next to no life.

After many miles, I uncovered why the water was clear and sterile. At the border between silvers and Giess, there was a yellow damn blocking the river. Eldritch walked in and out of a dungeon along the edge of the damn. These eldritch took the form of spiky, blue crabs except for their faces and backs.

Many tiny arms surrounded their gaping mouths. From the opening, a thin, filmy net expanded out. An electrical charge fired off around this next, killing anything in the water. The electricity was so dense, lightning shot up and out of the water every few seconds.

Any of the creatures that weren't filter feeding maintained the yellow, crusty dam. They spit onto it, their saliva hardening and expanding outwards. With their many arm mandibles, they sculpted the smooth wall of the yellow structure.

These blue crabs took turns at a pipeline at the dam's center. They feasted on the fish and water swept through it. They swelled up, pumping water into tubes behind them. These tubes ran out towards a giant embryo lying beneath the pool.



A colossal creature squirmed within it, feasting on the crab's excess food. The swollen, bulbous egg sack shivered, ready to burst at any moment.

Before I ran in, I analyzed the crab things.

Shagura Larva(lvl 1,104) – These crustaceans create massive blockages in waterways. While initially helpful to primitive and local populace due to treating the water, they harbor dark intentions. By funneling the resources of a river, they create a Shagura Queen.

Even though these monsters are created solely for their queen, they're more than able to defend themselves. They absorb the hardest minerals they find to build their shells. This in conjunction with their incredibly durable glue makes them very sturdy.

Their claws can snap through steel even, killing someone in power armor instantly. They charge the waters with high volumes of voltage as well. Shagura warriors can also use this charged lightning to attack at a distance.

For you, the colony should prove a simple task to dispatch.

I analyzed the queen next.

Shagura Queen(lvl 4,892) – Though this creature is young, it proves an exponential threat in the future. Shagura colonies can lay claim to entire oceans, converting all waterways into sterile pits. This destroys the life on a planet, and if evolved enough, Shagura Queens can launch their larva into space.

This makes them a current priority on Fringe Worlds since they spread so quickly. Immediate and thorough elimination of this dungeon is highly recommended. It is also recommended that you inform a guild to regularly clear this area out before it spirals out of control again. Schema will provide compensation for the work.

For you, this is a small concern, but handling it will help many in the future if you choose to do so.

It was an easy dungeon clear, so I pressed my chest pad. My gray armor peeled off as Althea whispered,

“They aren’t too strong. You can just set me down on that tree over there and do your thing.”

I gave her a nod, floating her over to a nearby branch. She watched as I raised myself high into the sky, spending a minute falling up. I flipped my gravity wells, pulling me down. In seconds, I impacted the Shagura Queen’s egg sack. The water vaporized as I crashed through the hardened shell of the creature.

Surrounded on all sides by the giant crustacean, I absorbed it from the inside. Event Horizon devastated the nearby guardians, melting them. My armor sent out hundreds of tiny needles, soaking up the creature’s mana and health.

Within minutes, it disintegrated. At the same time, I absorbed the ambient charge in the water, converting it into mana. The Shagura colony discovered their queen’s death and swarmed me from all directions. They were enraged at their queen’s demise. All it did was make hunting them down easier though.

After slaughtering the entire population, I flew up over the river. A purple blot spread out over the center of it. Curious about the cause, I floated behind the damn. It was a cesspool, full of mana pollution. The Shagura filtered it, making the water sterile after ingesting the poison.

I frowned at the sight, but I shrugged at the same time.

The queen needed to be eradicated before it spread out like a plague. When I got back to Rivaria, I would inform someone about what happened here. Having someone build a filtration plant or the like would solve this.

With that in mind, I went down into the dungeon itself. If I didn’t clear it, the Shagura would infest the river once again. The smaller, shriveled up larva dwelled deep in the bowels of the cave. I stomped out their guts. I smashed shells to a pulp. Over the next few minutes, I culled them all.

At the bottom of the cavern, I found a deep pool of bright, red water. A dungeon core ingrained itself on the cavern floor. Diving into the abyss, I wrenched the dungeon's heart out. Using the extra points, I enhanced Star Forger before moving on.

Without missing a beat, I jumped back out of the water. Maneuvering through the cave's depths, I reached the top in about a minute. I soared right out of that cavern with one last task at hand. Before parting with the leftovers of the Shagura, I lifted enormous amounts of soil from nearby.

I added height and width to the damn and even clogged its one opening. This gave Rivaria time to save its drinking water from toxicity. With the odd job handled, I picked Althea up and soared towards the edge of silver territory.

Before we reached it, Althea murmured, "Hey, can we talk?"

I turned to her, "Yeah, of course."

Althea rubbed her hands together while staring down, "Uh, so you've been working a lot lately."

I glanced up, thinking about what I'd done recently. I shook my head, "Eh, I've been doing about the normal amount of work I think."

Althea sighed, "My point is, you work...like, a lot. I don't get to see you often, and when I do, it's like your minds on other things."

I looked at her, keeping us moving forward,

"What do you mean?"

She weighed her hands back and forth, "It just...I want us to settle down once we're finished with Giess. You know after we clear our bounties and all that."

I scoffed, "Of course."

She shook her head, “I mean my kind of settling down. Not your kind.”

I grinned, “What’s the difference?”

Althea snapped, “Oh, there’s a world of difference.”

Hearing some genuine frustration, I slowed us down to a halt. I turned around, facing her. I crossed my arms, “Alright, something’s up. What’s wrong?”

Althea bit her lip, staring at the small moon in the sky. She sighed, “I don’t think you’ll slow down once we get back. If anything, I think you’ll speed up. You know, working even more.”

I spread out my hands, “What makes you think that?”

She threw up her hands, “I don’t know, the fact you’re working 24/7 right now?”

I crossed my arms, “Look, I don’t even understand what the problem is. Is this really that big a deal?”

Althea nodded, “Yes. It is. I never get to see the guy I want to see all the time. Do you have any idea how frustrating that is?”

I raised a hand, “Just join me when I’m training.”

Althea rolled her eyes, “When you’re training, you’re in a different world. I might as well not even be there.”

A spark of irritation flared in my chest. I spread out my hands, “This feels ridiculous. My work ethic is why we’re all still alive. It’s going to keep us alive too.”

Althea shook her head, “There’s a difference between surviving and living, ok? You don’t live. You just survive all the time. There’s a difference.”

I shook my hands, “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Althea waved hands in frustration, “I don’t know. You never relax. You never rest. Do you know how hard that kind of person is to be with? I can never just sit down and take a breather.”

I pointed a finger at her, “Easier than being with a lazy slob.”

My eyes widened after I said that. I raised my hands, “Wait a second, I didn’t mean that.”

Althea grimaced, “No, I heard you loud and clear.”

I grabbed the sides of my head in frustration, “Ok, look, I’m sorry I said that. I’m just all defensive for some reason. I guess it just feels like you’re turning one of my better points into a problem.”

Althea grumbled, “Maybe not for you. Then again, if it’s not about you, then you don’t care.”

I dragged my hands down my face, “What? Now you’re being ridiculous. I’ve went through hell for you.”

Althea pointed her finger at me, “Are you sure it was for me and not for you? I’m starting to wonder.”

I rolled my eyes, “Ok, you’re just in one of your moods or something. It must be your time of the month.”

“Great job dismissing my feelings. I’m just trying to tell you how I feel. It doesn’t matter what I think though, does it? You’re never going to just relax.”

I raised my hands, “I don’t know if I can relax anymore, ok?”

Althea snapped, “Why? You haven’t even struggled fighting anyone since Yawm. Why do you keep pushing so hard?”

I raised up my hands, “Because you almost died...”

Althea’s face unwrinkled. Concern spread over her face, “Wait...really?”

I let my hands flop onto my sides, “Of course. Some assassin planted a bomb under our bed and blew us up. I was fine, sure, but you almost died. Do you know what that felt like? You’re closer to me than my family. Losing you would be worse than losing a limb. I would be crushed.”

I spread out my arms, “Even before that, I haven’t taken my foot off the gas pedal in over a year. Hell, I can’t remember the last time I slept. I’m always on guard and trying to improve because I don’t know if I’ll be able to handle what comes next.”

“But, nothing is coming. We got rid of Yawm. Nobody is out to get us anymore once we get rid of these bounties.”

I pointed a finger at her, my voice firm, “You don’t know that. It’s irresponsible to say that shit because you can’t know that. If everyone dies, I’ll be the one left behind. Why? Because I’m the hardest to kill. That’s why I work ten harder than everyone else to keep you all alive.”

I raised a hand, “Hell, every time I’ve let my guard down, some evil creature rears up and tries to kill us. First, it was Baldag Ruhl then the plague then Yawm. I have no idea what it will be next. Maybe Lehesion or maybe Helios. I don’t know. All I do know is this.”

I clenched my hand into a fist,

“When the next horror does come, I’ll ready.”

Althea bit her lip, staring down. She sighed, wrestling with her conscious. A second later, she reached out a hand, wrapping it around my fist,

“But if you’re always living for tomorrow, you never get to enjoy today.”

I blinked, confused by what she said. I glanced down, thinking it over. In a way, she was right. I lived in fear all the time. Focusing on those fears made me strong. Now that I wasn’t under the constant threat of death though, slowing down might be a good idea.

At the very least, I could find a better balance. Even though she wasn’t working as hard, Althea was keeping up with me from a strength standpoint. Well, probably... Honestly, I didn’t know if she was. Her class closed the gap between us, but it was hard to say by how much. To be honest, I thought I’d thrash her with ease.

The point is though, Althea wasn’t sacrificing her entire life for being strong. She enjoyed nights out and time with friends. I didn’t have anyone I could call a friend outside our tight-knit group either. Maybe focusing on my friends would do me more good than focusing on my enemies.

Coming to a conclusion, I looked at the silver’s border off in the distance. I looked up and took a deep breath. I let out my frustration as I looked back at Althea,

“I’ll think about it. What you said that is.”

Althea perked up, “Wait, really? I thought’d you’d just ignore me.”

I frowned, “Good to see you have some faith in me. But...yeah. I’ll give it some thought. You’re probably not, you know...completely wrong.”

She smiled, “Oh really? Thanks for the compliment.”

I shrugged, “Eh, I try.”

Without anything left to say, Althea reached out to me. Giving me a bear hug, my chest caved under the pressure of her arms. She hissed, recoiling back. I reached out a hand,

“What’s wrong?”

She waved her arms, “Agh, you’re too dense. I hurt my arms hugging you to tight.”

I scoffed, “How about you try not to kill me with your hugs of doom?”

She grabbed her wrist, “Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.”

I rolled my shoulders, “Uh, you ready to go?”

She winced, “Yeah. I think I pulled some muscles in my arms. Ouch.”

I smirked, “I know some training that might help with that.”

She frowned, “I think I’ll be fine.”

I opened my dimensional storage and tossed her a green health potion. Althea caught it with ease, downing it in one go. She wiped her mouth and gasped, “Thanks. I needed that.”

I smiled, “Anytime. You ready?”

“Yeah, let’s go.”

With the conversation over, I pulled us along toward the silver’s border. Steel spires rose up on the horizon, mountains of steel looming. Minutes later, we reached the border between Giess and silver. As we did, I set us down on a hill beside a crossfire of the two factions.

A set of elementals smashed silvers attempting to cross the border onto Giess’s land. These elementals were floating masses of lightning, ice, and stone. Beside the atronachs, fiery anteaters lashed out with whipping tongues at any Saysha that tried passing the border.

The wildlife worked in sync, keeping the oncoming silvers at bay with razor-sharp efficiency. Inspired by their teamwork, I turned to Althea,



“So I’ll head out and clear most of the silvers. You can trail behind and finish off any stragglers.”

Althea grinned at me, giving me a salute, “Aye, aye captain.”

I turned back to the warring anteaters and atronachs. As I walked up, they turned towards me. Without having to speak, they backed up and gave me plenty of space. As they did, a cluster of engorgs rolled towards me. I cracked my knuckles and grinned as one of them neared me.

I wanted to try something new.

Instead of beating it to death with my fists, I molded my gauntlets into sharpened blades. Using Starforger, I heated the swords until they glowed white hot. With the hot air pluming around my knived hands, I charged mana into my arms. A crimson aura permeating them as I lifted my right arm.

The engorg crashed into me as I sliced down. I rived it in two, each half rolling past me. Its blood hissed, evaporating under the heat. Spiky tendrils of my armor reached out, piercing each half of the engorg’s corpse. They siphoned the creature’s lifeforce, disintegrating it into nothing.

The group of silvers ground to a halt, each of them unraveling. Some of them even turned around as I paced up. I kept patient, sharpening my blades by swiping my arms together. Sparks flashed from the edges, illuminating the darkness around us.

I frowned, “Come on, I’ll show you what a real monster is.”

### Chapter 183: Something Wicked

Between the silver and giessian border, I spread my arms wide. The engorgs rolled past me, cutting off my options for escape. Their hardened shells clattered against the silverscape until they crossed onto the grass. The greenery muffled the sound, turning into a growl instead of scream.

Encircling me, they tightened their looping attack. The engorgs reached within about a car’s length away before I activated Event Horizon. The aura crippled them, causing them to slow down. With pain fogging their minds, I bolted towards my left. Spreading

out my arms, I leaped up. Falling towards the monster, I pulled my arms in causing me to spin.

The centrifugal force whipped me in circles like a drill. With my bladed arms overhead, I bore into the creature. As I passed through the mongrel, I reached out my bladed arms. The monster fell apart, a loud hissing reverberating through the battlefield.

With its blood evaporating on my blades, I rolled across the ground. As I stood up, the engorgs innards spilled out. I walked up to it. The needles from my black armor spread out like roots in a tree, drinking up the fresh corpse. I raised my bladed arms, finding the other engorgs rolling at me.

Before they crashed against me, I tried incorporating something new into my fighting. I concentrated heat on the nearby steel landscape. In seconds, it melted into a glowing pool of molten metal. I swiped my arm towards an incoming engorg, pulling a blob of steel over it.

The creature howled as the liquid metal spewed over it. Its blood evaporated in vibrant splashes of bubbling white, the monster boiling alive. I condensed Event Horizon over the giant beetle, amplifying its agony. Another engorg came crashing towards me at the same time.

I met the monster's charge, slamming my sharpened arm into the creature. Like slamming into a wall, the engorg impaled itself before crushing against me. I lifted the beast and faced the other, melting monster. Its skin peeled off, destroyed by my attacks. I abused its injuries.

I created an antigravity well inside of the monster. Without skin or its shell holding its insides together, they ruptured and spilled out. The metal splattered onto two other nearby engorgs. One of them lost balance, falling sideways and barrel rolling towards me.

Using its brethren as a club, I smashed one engorg into another. Vibrant, steaming blood burst from them both. My armor soaked it up like a sponge. The last engorg let out tiny stopping legs that skid it to a stop. With trails of upturned grass around it, the monster tried turning around to escape.

Too late.

I pulled it to me while dashing toward the monster. With a final slash, I cleaved the creature in two. The pile of carcasses disintegrated as my armor feasted on them. In seconds, the battlefield was clean outside of the ruptured turf.

The Giessian creatures escaped, horrified at the display of brutality. I wasn't here to make friends with the wildlife. After ridding us of the corpses, I cleared the way for Althea. As I walked forward, she gave me plenty of distance to do what I did best.

Diving deeper into silver territory, I kept my work clean and precise. I left little for Althea to handle as I tore the silvers apart. Immersed in carnage, I blitzed through the silver territory, leaving nothing behind me but sterilized earth and steel.

Even as I chopped the silvers apart, details about their life popped out at me. These details formed a bigger picture, unraveling a complex ecosystem.

The merjects preyed on the organ caterpillars. Their squishy, vulnerable bodies were like crawling smoothies to the merjects draining mouths. At the same time, the engorgs preyed on the merjects if they took too long feeding. Their massive, rolling bodies crushed the merjects, smearing them across the landscape. Once squashed, the engorgs unraveled and ate the merjects remains with their many mandibles.

The engorgs seemed like the top of the food chain at that point. However, if an engorg slept in the wrong spot, an organ caterpillar would inject itself into the monster. The engorg swelled up from the inside, feeding many caterpillar eggs. Some engorgs ballooned up until they couldn't move. There they awaited a slow, painful death being eaten from the inside.

This cycle of dependence gave a flow to the life here. I wasn't as surprised by clusters of certain creatures anymore. If tons of engorgs were present, there'd be very few merjects. This culling principle played out for the caterpillars and engorgs as well, each kind of monster eating the others.

This same hostile logic followed up into the skies. I believed that flesh whales were at the top of the food chain. I was wrong. I found other floating monsters preying on them in a sense. Amorphous, liquid beasts devoured them.

These blood slimes as I called them would congregate into colonies. They floated over the landscape using magnetic pulses. Sparks of lightning crisscrossed these massive clouds of crimson mist like thunderstorms from hell. As they passed over the wasteland, they acted as locust, stripping all wildlife bare.

The land creatures hid under metal alcoves, keeping them safe. The flesh whales had nowhere to hide, so they were consumed by these hordes. By the time a red cloud passed over a flesh whale, the behemoth would be a shiny skeleton supported on spires.

Even these red clouds weren't safe. Hidden in some spires, something like plant-life flourished. These creatures hid inside the pillars, using them as lightning rods. As the clouds passed, they soaked up the electrical charges. This caused many blood slimes to fall onto the ground.

Before they recharged escaped, gray roots expanded up from cracks in the metal landscape. These roots drank up the blood slimes, absorbing their essence.

I found dozens of other interactions just like those ones. It astonished me with the sheer complexity of the life here. It all interconnected into this haunting, brutal world where everyone eats and is eaten. The only exceptions were the saysha who built the hard matrice that everything based their lives off.

It left Althea shaken, her paranoia rising as we darted further into the landscape. While I was safe here, she wasn't. She needed sleep. Her health pool wasn't large enough to tank many of the creatures. Worst of all, if she were surrounded by a horde of them, they'd eat her alive. She didn't have armor that could eat them right back like I did.

It left her afraid. I sent her messages as we traveled, trying to keep her composed. They worked for the most part, though she still wrestled with her growing sense of dread. It made me realize how much more survivable I was in a hostile environment than she was. Even if she could assassinate a person, she couldn't wipe out swaths of hostile life.

We each owned our niches of combat, this kind of slaughter being my specialty. As we traveled, Althea gave me a lot of praise. Seeing me in action gave her pause, making her question our earlier argument. Without my help, she'd be done for out here. This kind of circumstance reminded her of why I fought so hard for my abilities in the first place.

To survive and thrive in anything.

I argued her belief with my actions here, and that felt good. There were no two ways about it. I still wanted to give her points some merit, however. Balancing my life some would do me some good. Besides, I could focus on leveling some speech skills for once. The only way that would happen was if I actually took some time talking to people. Go figure.

Of course, keeping my combat sharp was a necessity as well. With that in mind, I kept on edge as I fought. I molded my armor and tore strips of it off. I melted them, holding a pool of glowing metal above me with a gravity well. It rippled waves on its surface, the glowing mass like an ocean of white fire. I acted as a dim light, illuminating our way through the darkness.

I splashed this amorphous blob over the silvers that attacked me. If they resisted heat, I cooled the material over it, galvanizing the creature. They suffocated in steel. Otherwise, I melted them, their bodies bubbling and frothing under the glowing mass. If they survived the heat, I sliced them apart. No matter how they died, I absorbed the corpses for their mana, using the resources spread out in front of me.

I never lost sight of my goal, however. After several hours of searching, I found my first clue to the Skyburner's location. Along the edge of a spire, large claw marks etched out onto the pillar. The gashes matched the wounds of large talons, mimicking the wounds on espens. This kind of damage on metal required a Skyburner's strength.

Before I went any farther forward, I flew up high into the sky. I pushed my senses, straining my eyes to spot any other marks in the pillars. After several minutes, a pounding headache formed in my skull. Several beads of cold sweat poured down my forehead after a while longer of exerting myself. I found what I was looking for, however.

Far in front of me, I found another set of claw marks on a spire. Towards my right, I spotted another marred column. They were scouting marks, places the gialgathens used for rest. I plotted these points in my head, seeing them make a slight curve.

If I were right, their surveillance zone would be like a big circle since they flew over every obstacle. Once the gialgathens went out a certain distance, or for a certain time, they'd head back. I used this knowledge, making use of my mini-map.

My map only showed a trail we covered on our route here, along with large landmarks like the river of tears. Interacting with the software, I created the curve I found with the marred pillars. I extended this arch until it formed a massive circle.

I made a marker on my map at the center of that circle, hoping for some sense of direction. With that in mind, I floated back down into the wasteland, crashing through a flesh whale as I did. With a rain of blood pouring down, I consumed the creature before sending Althea my idea.

As I turned around to her, she gave me a jittery thumbs up. She looked terrified by not only the silvers but a little bit by me. I rolled my eyes at her, letting her know she was ridiculous. The gore was getting to her.

After getting some sense of direction, we trekked off through the forest of silver towers. Hours later, we neared the circle's center. As we did, the ground rumbled in a chaotic rhythm. It was like earthquakes of random intensity were going off. As we got even closer, far off echoes ebbed around us, growing in intensity as we got within eyesight of the camp.

With the same towering walls, the camp appeared simple enough. As I observed the bulwark, strange signs sent off alarm bells in my head, however. Several scorch marks showed on the fortress, some spots glowing white hot. Dents littered the entire wall, some places even showing cracks. None of this was too concerning.

What threw me off was that the dents bulged out. This meant they came from the inside, not the outside. The battle happened from within. With this in mind, I rendezvoused with Althea. With less than an hour left before sunrise, I whispered,

“Listen. There’s something off about this Skyburner camp.”

She nodded, “Did the earthquakes tip you off or the massive booms?”

I scoffed, “Both, actually.” I pointed at the walls, “The dents are from the inside. There might have been some sort of mutiny from the inside if we’re lucky.”

Althea frowned, “Eh, I doubt it.”

I nodded, “Same here, but we can hope. You ready to check it out?”

She gave me the ok before dematerializing. We already discussed that she’d be the surveyor here. She risked far less than I did with how hard she was to spot. After a minute of waiting, Althea appeared in front of me. Her eyes wide, her pupils dilated, she stammered,

“Daniel...There’s something bad in there. Something really bad.”

I creased my brow, “What is it?”

Her hands shook a bit, something testing her nerves. She wrestled out her words,

“There’s, uh, something eating the Skyburners.”

My eyes widened, “Wait...what?”

Chapter 184: The Hybrid

Althea pointed at the destroyed arena, “I...You just need to see it.”

She turned and skulked over towards the arena. I followed. Once beside the wall, I lifted us up until we reached the edge of the steel barrier. Exposing as little of myself as possible, I lifted my view of the monster. As I saw it, my jaw dropped.

A bulging mass of flesh and wires pulled its mouth over a Skyburner’s neck. Tiny wires squirmed into the Skyburner’s body, draining it. The Skyburner still breathed, but it could hardly move. It gazed off at his fallen brethren, gasping in agony as the thing absorbed it.

And it made sense why the ‘thing’ had won. It was mountainous, a behemoth of meat and metal. Muscles contracted all over it, wires lining beneath its gray, gooey skin. It lacked an overall structure, having many limbs jutting out in many directions. Each one carried a latent power, the threat of explosive violence evident.

It reformed itself, continually shifting its form and adapting to whatever it was up against. From its many feet, wires expanded outwards, growing as I looked at it. It uprooted its feet each time it took a step, cables snapping as it did.

What disturbed me most were the eyes of the creature. It had many on the upper half of its head. Every eye was different and unique, some glowing and some not. What made them haunting was the intelligence hidden within them. Each eye carried a purpose with how it looked around as if driven by a conscious.

Before its many eyes saw me, I analyzed the creature.

The Hybrid(lvl 13,413) – Little is known about this creature outside of its grotesque appearance. Initial scans reveal a mismatch of various DNAs from several sources. Its devastation in combat cannot be denied given the victim's surrounding it when it was discovered.

The only other element of the creature that can be analyzed is the persistent radiation the creature emits. As if a walking reactor, it ebbs gamma radiation like an odor, killing nearby creatures with ease. Be wary of its potential for nuclear abilities coming from said radioactive potential.

I turned to Althea, sending her a message.

Dimension C-138(lvl 7,587 | Giess: 4:15 A.M. 3/18/26) – Don't talk. We need to kill this thing right now before it spreads.

Althea Tolstoy, the Shapeless Arbiter(lvl 6,221 | Class: Breaker | Giess: 4:16 A.M. 3/18/26) – What? Let's make a plan with the others.

Dimension C-138(lvl 7,587 | Giess: 4:16 A.M. 3/18/26) – It's gaining levels as we speak. If it finishes those corpses, it might be more than our entire group can handle. We need to kill it. Now.

Althea Tolstoy, the Shapeless Arbiter(lvl 6,221 | Class: Breaker | Giess: 4:16 A.M. 3/18/26) – How do you expect to do that?



Before I could answer, the Hybrid turned its head. The many eyes locked onto us as if searching for something. I froze in place as did Althea. For a tense moment, it locked eyes with mine. I charged my mana, preparing for carnage.

The moment any of my mana charged, the monster dropped the Skyburner. It lifted a huge foot and stomped the Skyburner's skull. With a surreal burst of movement, the creature reached us. It moved faster than a car, nothing about it slow or exaggerated.

I'd never faced anything like it. In most movies, massive creatures moved slowly. This thing carried a vitality that enabled it to charge like a living storm of metal. It raised its titanic hand before swiping it at us.

At the same time, a sunrise peaked over the horizon in the distance. The light cast a shadow off the giant's hand, engulfing us in shade. Before the attack landed, I shoved Althea away from me, launching her into the forest of spires. The hand squashed me from above, crushing me into the metalscape like a mallet.

An endless number of wires crawled over my armor. At the same time, veins groped for some way of infecting me. They found purchase in my helm, an ocean of the mass crawling it. My armor fought back, reaching out with its own storm of needles. I lashed out with my arms, tearing through the creature.

It kept trying to infect me, wires and flesh regenerating over my body. I activated Event Horizon, collapsing the aura until it covered a tiny circle around me. At the same time, I created a dense blob of antigravity over my chest. As I waved my arms, I sliced through the many cords and veins.

An oily sludge covered me, as I cut my way through the abomination. I kept slicing, and I found nothing to grab onto or push off of. I was surrounded by this thing in all directions. After a few minutes of struggling to escape, an old emotion crept up inside my chest – fear.

This thing wasn't struggling to hold me in place. If it kept regenerating like this, I might be trapped in here for a long time. Just as the emotion formed, my feet flopped onto the steely ground. As I landed onto the floor, I gasped with relief. Finally able to get a grip on something, I waved my arms and pushed off my heels.

At the same time, I reformed my arms into blades. With all my weight behind each of my swings, I lopped my surroundings into mush. The Hybrid let out a whistling scream loud enough to crack glass. It glared down at me as it raised its foot.

I stood in a puddle of black oil, my armor soaking it up and drinking its blood. The monster raised its foot and stomped on me once more. The collision sent out a massive shockwave around us, resembling the booming sounds we heard earlier.

Despite the overwhelming force, I withstood the impact, though it rattled my bones and gave me a headache. I thought I would crush under him, but that wasn't the case. The metal ground beneath me was only a few inches deep. After that, there was just soft earth.

The ground failed the Hybrid, not his actual strength.

Not willing to ignore the advantage, I burrowed downwards. I kept myself within range of Event Horizon, sucking the monster's health dry. At the same time, the creature smashed its many limbs into the ground. I kept my distance, not willing to test the creature's might.

Even as parts of its body disintegrated, the monster regenerated others. Its sheer vitality rivaled my own, sustaining it through my own aura. After a few minutes, the tiniest inkling of damage exposed itself on the lower end of the creature. It would die, given time.

As half an hour passed, I moved towards the other Skyburners. Killing two birds with one stone, I dived from corpse to corpse, eating them with my draining abilities. By the time the Hybrid grew restless, I had eliminated all six of the remaining Skyburner corpses.

Losing all semblance of patience, the creature plowed through the Skyburner camp's walls and into the silver wasteland. It gave up its pursuit of me, choosing to ignore the thorn in its side. The behemoth left a trail of broken spires behind it as it feasted on the many silvers infesting the wasteland.

These silvers sustained the creature through my aura. It used them to rejuvenate itself, this cycle perpetuating. Throwing a wrench into its plan, I charged my mana for a singularity. After five more minutes, I unleashed onto at the center of its head.

Before the spell finalized the monster's eyes closed. They traveled through its body opening at the end of a different limb seconds before the singularity collapsed. A portion of its body fed the black hole before it imploded with a colossal explosion.

The shockwave knocked spires down in all directions, the absolute power of it awe inspiring. The Hybrid was left smeared around the singularity's blast radius. I pulled myself from the ground preparing to clean up the mess. I gawked in horror as pieces of the monster crawled back together.

The monster survived a singularity.

Before it fully formed, I jumped into the writhing blob. The Hybrid shifted like a turbulent sea around me. My strikes met air as it wobbled like a liquid, keeping its distance. Far off, Althea lifted one of the broken spires. Like a lightning bolt from Zeus, she radiated with arcane mana.

Bright, purple electricity formed around the spear. With unbelievable strength, Althea chunked the giant pillar of metal right at the monster's newly formed head.

The giant spear impaled the monster, black muck gushing from its wounds. Arcane ripples traveled through the beast, sapping its life force. With a way of killing the creature right in front of us, we came up with an impromptu plan.

I radiated heat around me, creating a pool of metal underneath the forming creature. As it created legs to stomp on the ground, I molded the molten mush over its feet. Before it ran away, I hardened the steel over the creature, pinning it down for a few moments. It scrambled to form more legs to escape our grasp. I gritted my teeth as I turned the steel beneath us into an orange, glowing sea.

As I kept the monster busy, Althea threw broken spire after broken spire. More wounds formed on the beast, and the hybrid grew desperate. It jerked and writhed around me, trying to escape Althea's firing range. I kept it contained with dozens of gravity wells and hardening pools of metal.

We fought until the creature's black blood pooled into a darkened sea. It shrunk in size, becoming harder to hit. I held my ground, keeping the monster still with greater ease than before.

At the same time, Althea couldn't keep up. On the side of my HUD, her health bar dipped to one third as she threw yet another pillar of steel. Without the beast surrounding me, I turned to spot her in the distance. Portions of her skin and clothes were worn off around her arms and feet. Several of her fingers were broken. If I looked right, so were her toes. I realized what was happening at that moment.

Even if she was strong enough to throw the spires, her body wasn't resilient enough to keep up. In a way, anytime you threw something, it threw you back. Newton's third law and all that. It turns out that several ton spears threw back hard. In a way, she was killing herself by continuing her attacks.

If a stray silver happened upon her at the wrong moment, she could die. Before that happened, I took the initiative. With the monster's reduced size, I wrangled it into a single, wobbling mass with a gravity well. The gravity well pulled on me, but I stomped my feet into the steel beneath me. I dragged forward as the molten steel pooled around the creature.

At the same time, I heated the metal over my armor until shined white. With the sweat on my brow evaporating, I dived forward. I sunk through the shell and into the beast. Just as I reached inside the iron, I cooled the surrounding metals.

We were both trapped inside.

The wires and veins tried invading me. Using my armor, I fought back. I molded my armor into a thousand spears in every direction. From each spear, I launched even more needles. The beast swirled in its cage, wrestling for escape. I gave it no leeway or opportunity to do so.

Without a direct means to get away from me and feed on other silvers, I slowly whittled it away into nothing. As my armor devoured the final piece of the creature, I tapped against something ephemeral. Blue light illuminated the darkness around me, revealing a dungeon heart.

As I tore out of the hollow iron ball I created, I held up the blue dungeon core with a notification of the Hybrid's death. We killed the damn thing. Althea cheered with one of her arms flopping at her side. I sat down, splashing into a pool of the black blood. After a few minutes, my armor sapped even that, leaving nothing behind.

With the beast finished, I stood up, put the blue dungeon core into my inventory, and paced over to Althea. She laid back on a crag of metal, blood dripping down her hands. I grinned at her, and she grinned back. As I got beside Althea, I laid down beside her,

“You look like you could use a hand.”

Althea raised her arm, showing several fingers twisted in wrong directions,

“Oh hah hah, very funny.”

I reached into my dimensional storage, “What? Something looks off about them. I can’t quite put my finger on it...”

Althea winced, “Ok, stop it, or you’ll actually kill me.”

I laughed, pulling out a green health potion. As I poured it over Althea’s shoulders, she gasped in relief. I put her fingers into the right directions, Althea grunting in pain as I set each of them. After she healed up, we laid there for a moment. Her healed hand wrapped around mine and Althea leaned her head on my arm. With Giess’s warm sun shining on us, she fell asleep.

I let her rest for a bit before lifting her with magic, suspending her in the air. She pulled an all-nighter by fighting a giant monster. She deserved a break. Carrying her behind me, I traveled towards the Skyburner’s base to investigate what happened. If I waited much longer, the silvers would strip any evidence left behind.

As I got there, several engorgs already scoured the blood stains on the steel for nutrients. I threw blocks of sheered metal at several of them, killing them at a distance. Althea slept through all of it, her exhaustion absolute. After clearing the camp, I combed the area for any clues about what the Hybrid was.

I found several odd signs in seconds. The hybrid traveled by land, destroying a lane of spires as it did. Where its feet landed, it stripped the metal beneath it as well. These factors made following its trail obvious.

That’s why it threw me off that there was no oncoming trail of destruction here. It was as if the hybrid just popped up in the middle of the base.

Another strange signal came in how the Skyburner's died. I expected burn marks from their fiery breath in all directions in the base. The few scorch marks I did find were right beside the blood stains where the Skyburner's were crushed. Even worse, the trails of blood were short, meaning they didn't fight for long. From what I could tell, none of the Skyburners escaped by flight either.

That giant mass of screeching metal had somehow snuck up on the Skyburners while they were asleep. Gialgathens owned sharp senses, the Skyburners even more so. They'd hear something like the Hybrid coming from a mile away. That monster being stealthy was impossible without some kind of intervention from an outside source.

I was sure of it.

With that conviction, I found the final clue. At the center of the camp, there was a sludge well that fed the now dead slaves here. Around the bubbling pit, the metal was stripped at odd angles and places. Putting the pieces of the puzzle together, I came up with a picture of what happened here.

The Hybrid crawled out of the well beneath the camp. It devoured the surrounding slaves, evolving into a threat. After killing the zombified espens, it must have infected a nearby Skyburner. If anything, it crawled into the Skyburner's mouth or something while it absorbed the gialgathen from the inside. Otherwise, it would make too much noise.

After that, the Hybrid lashed out and crushed the surrounding Skyburner's before they could retaliate. Before I made any more assumptions, I pulled Althea to me. I held her against my side while casting an antigravity well at the center of my chest. Without delay, I jumped into the bubbling pit of purple sludge.

The gunk molded around us, the antigravity keeping it from touching Althea or me. After about thirty seconds of sinking down, the sound of rushing liquid passed by my ears. Using Hunter of Many, I used the sound of rushing water to find an opening in the well. Althea and I crashed out of the sludge tunnel, uncovering a vast cavern.

In all directions, multi-colored fungi glowed in hues of blue and orange. Crystalline creatures darted between these faunae, hiding under the caps of the glowing mushrooms. Birds of glass hid inside clusters of gleaming moss. The light passed

through the bird, making them hard to make out among the curtain of lichens and mosses.

Several crystal shards glowed here, created from pure mana crystals. They hummed with a radiant power, untouched by the surface world. Many tiny, subterranean animals fought for dominance over this glow, harvesting the latent energy. I analyzed everything here as I walked, but none of the species were categorized by Schema.

No one had seen these creatures but me.

Pacing deeper into the cavern, I found the opened rift deep underground. Behind a set of intricate stone doorways, a vast collection of starfish hung onto rocks on the ceiling.

Well, starfish wasn't the right word. The tiny critters were like sea cucumbers with many legs spread out in all directions. Before stepping further in, I analyzed them.

Harvesters(lvl 32) – These creatures wobble their way around caverns and eat the native plant life. They're attracted to sources of energy of all kinds, giving them some potential for growth. This kind of expansion is rare as there is often times very little to eat deep under the earth.

This stunts the growth rate of these monsters.

Despite this lack of danger present from these creatures, an unarmored individual can be killed by these creatures. Harvesters are sticky, and their entire bodies are composed of a multi-purpose cellular composite. All of the creature's biology is simultaneously muscle, nerves, and brain. This gives them surprising strength given their rather limp forms.

They can also eat in all directions, making them hardy survivors. These interesting characteristics make them the subject of much study from scientists. They aim to hone the survival characteristics of the harvesters into biologically enhanced power armors. While little progress has been made, they still attract many biologists to research them for their potential uses.

You won't struggle against the creatures at all.

I cast event horizon over the harvesters. They disintegrated in an instant, raining down black liquid as I passed by them. The vermin fell from half-eaten lichens, giving the cavern back its natural lighting. As I did so, I found no marks from the hybrid traveling up to the surface anywhere.

After a few minutes of exploration, I found a collapsed portion of the cave. It was a reasonable enough occurrence in most caverns. What made this piece different was two factors.

First, it was the only portion of the cave split off from the rest. The rest of the expanse was a single, wide tunnel that twisted and turned. Second, the cavern smelled like gunpowder and ash. Armed with my curiosity, I pulled the stones out of the cavern, setting aside large piles of rubble. A few minutes later and I cleared the room.

Inside, I found broken test tubes, ripped up electronics, and burnt papers. Someone studied the creatures here and ran after doing something. As I searched closer, I came across several unharmed vials of purple sludge. They sat on top of a bent, metal desk.

Beside them, a cluster of saysha formed a matrice from a cracked vial of the muck. The saysha almost covered another glass container. Almost. I crept closer, finding a language on the jar. I tore a strip of my armor off, melting it. As I did, it glowed white-hot above me, giving me a light.

I read aloud, "Saysha Sample-B103. Hmm..."

I stood and wiped some dust off the battered desk, pulling open the drawers. No papers were left, but I discovered several suspended jars of the harvesters. I picked one out, dusted it off, and read aloud once more,

"Hybrid Sample-B103."

I sighed while crushing the container in my hand.

Someone had created the hybrid.

Chapter 185: Conspiracy



The implications of that single fact defied belief. Someone with advanced tech set up shop in the middle of an eldritch dungeon in the middle of silver territory. This was a classified area, and they destroyed it to hide something from someone. Either that or the Hybrid cleaned them out. I couldn't be sure.

Before I made any more assumptions, I inspected the rest of the room. As I did, I pulled out my obelisk and recorded footage of the area. Little else remained here outside of the stray flask of purple sludge. At the same time, the broken machinery offered me a few clues.

For starters, someone with resources made the electronics. It required advanced tech and the ability to create the parts. The metal plates lacked any welding marks as well, meaning someone manufactured the parts with molds. In other words, whoever made this lab could've set more of them in other places.

The torn wires were also excellent quality. They used glass fiber optics lined with some kind of heavy metal. I tore off a piece, putting it away in storage along with a few vials. It threw me off since Schema handled most information transfer through obelisks. It took a lot of effort to make infrastructure, especially when Schema gave it away for free.

All these points painted the picture that someone with a lot of resources was running these experiments. My mind raced with possibilities, but I figured an outside perspective would help out. With several samples, footage, and Althea in tow, I walked out of the room and into the cave.

I cleared out the rest of the harvesters, culling the population. After scouring the cavern, I reached a pool of water with glowing fauna in it. Intent on exploring, I dived in, keeping Althea dry and safe. Passing under a tunnel, I identified a few wires on the side of the wall. Using them as a guide, I wove through the twisting, underwater pit before passing up into a tunnel full of the glowing moss.

The cavern's rough, bumpy walls and ceiling led to a flat floor. Someone dusted off the tread marks from vehicles driving here. I sprinted through the tunnel, enjoying the burst of speed as I did so. I leaped over collapsed bridges and sludge pits, I relished in the wind on my face. It felt good to go fast.

After an hour of running, I reached the end of the tunnel. I slipped by a wall of tree roots, upturning a pile of leaves and branches. Around me, flowing water and trees flowed in the wind. Althea and I were in the middle a Giessian forest.

The trees looked normal besides for a dirt road leading here. At first glance, this place looked like an abandoned logging site or something like it. I walked up to a few of the trees and banged on the bark. They rang with a hollow clunk, nothing inside the trees cores.

With that in mind, I pushed my hand through one of the trees. Inside of it, there was nothing. I tore more of the tree's exterior, revealing singe marks on the inside. They burned the cores from the trees. I jumped into the hollowed tree, finding snapped cables on the bottom of the tree.

It was cleaned to a T, everything spotless. I narrowed my eyes, searching even closer. Along the edge of one of the wires, a tiny chip of some gemstone glittered. It was as small as sand, but as I channeled mana into it, the jewel stored some of my energy.

I pulled out a gemstone from my dimensional storage and connected it to the sheered wires. Using the gem as a conductor, I charged mana into the cable. Around me, the tree trembled as my mana flowing into it. The bark darkened, and the roots ran wild. The tree wasn't prepared for a rush of my mana. Few things were.

My experiment was for a purpose, however. Hollowed trees wither and die, yet these empty shells stayed alive and vibrant. If I guessed right, it was because someone channeled mana into the trees. With the living trees, these guys hid their supplies.

I pocketed my spare crystal, the portal to my storage rippling as I flicked the gem in. After closing it, I created a reminder in my obelisk about this process. With my status already opened, I ran down the dirt road while checking my status. I could kill two birds with one stone.

With that in mind, I surfed through the sweet status gains. I ended up gaining 411 levels from the massive creature. I dumped all my points into endurance, pressing the finalize button without missing a beat. As always, mana roared in my veins like an engine full of fuel. As I gripped my hands, a measure of strength flooded my body.

Midway through running, I appreciated the boost in speed. I tried to hold onto the addictive, euphoric sensation of vigor. This was my final big boost from a status screen

until I unlocked my class. After a few minutes, the feeling faded as I adjusted to my new limits.

My status handled, I opened my character screen and inspected the stats.

Dimension-C138(Lvl 7,998)

Strength – 7,910 | Constitution – 13,762 | Endurance – 58,758

Dexterity – 3,350 | Willpower – 31,628 | Intelligence – 11,673

Charisma – 2,154 | Luck – 4,647 | Perception – 4,599

Health: 12.96 Million/12.96 Million | Health Regen: 39.47 Million/min or 657,772/sec

Stamina: 8.40 Million/ 8.40 Million | Stamina Regen: 121,106/sec

Living Dimension: 1.71 Trillion/4.30 Trillion

Mass: 817,371 pounds(371,532 kilos~)

Height: Actual -13'1(3.98 meters) | Current – 13'1

Damage Res – 98.5% | Dimensional Res – 49.25%

Phys Dam Bonus – 968,581% | Damage Bonus – 40%

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

My perception came along nicely, my cipher runes propping the stat up. As always, my endurance defied belief. My willpower and intelligence mirrored this ridiculous overflow, being high stats without investment. I gained a jump in Living Dimension too, though it was still a long time coming before I evolved my armor again.

It might rise faster than I imagined if I fought the right enemies. From here on out though, I relied on skills and the cipher to keep progressing. It wasn't too disappointing though. My foundation for skills and the cipher was excellent, my mana regen fueling any changes I made. My progress would slow regardless.

I turned back to Althea. Her progress wouldn't slow down at all. She was level 6,711. Somehow I managed to outlevel her this time, probably from all the silvers I killed on the way to the Hrybrid. She'd pass me in level if I didn't get a class soon though. After the last big battle, I doubted that her level mattered much.

If she exceeded me in that regard, my other bonuses more than compensated for the difference. My mentality for fighting was better too. In a sense, my strength was a sword and my health a shield. I'd never stop sharpening or shining either of them, so I would never fall behind. Focusing on a few social skills wouldn't hurt anything either.

With my intentions clear, I raced through the Gessian forest with one of the Skyburner camps destroyed. After running past the woodlands and up the mountainside, I crossed the cloud line and reached Rivaria. Before I swung into the town, I put on another gray suit of armor from Torix. My identity still needed to be hidden after all.

With Althea floating behind me, I landed in the Hall of Heroes. As I jogged up to my door room, Malakai grinned with his grizzled old mug,

"It's good to see you return, warrior. I see your companion is...ahem, unconscious?"

I shook my head, "She's asleep. I'll be setting her in bed."

Malakai's eyes glazed over, and he looked away. I frowned, "You alright?"

He paused, unable to speak. After a few seconds, the gialgathen sneezed, some snot splattering on a nearby stone. The sound of the sneeze echoed far into the cavern, and Althea snapped awake.

"Wait, what happened? Where am I?"

I walked up, grabbing her in my arms, “The old guy just sneezed. You woke up because it was louder than a cannon going off.”

Malakai blushed, the shades of his skin reddening, “Ah, excuse me. I believe I’ve come down with something. A part of my age perhaps.”

Althea giggled, “You’re alright.” She rubbed her eyes, “I’m so tired.”

I smiled, “Let’s get you to bed.”

We walked into our room, Torix scanning through a variety of papers that his students made. He sighed,

“As always, they’re a rather drab read. I don’t understand why students don’t spruce their papers up with something...controversial.”

He closed his status and stretched, “Ah, it’s good to see I’ve new company.”

I gave him a curt nod, “She’s tired. After that, we need to talk.”

Torix crossed his arms, “Sounds rather serious.”

I nodded, “It is.”

With Althea in tow, I walked into our bedroom and set her down on the blanketed bed. I warmed the room before pulling the covers over her. Peeling my helmet back, I kissed her cheek. Before I lifted my head, Althea grabbed my cheek and met my eye,

“Hey.”

I raised an eyebrow, “What’s wrong?”

She frowned, “I might’ve pushed a bit too hard with the whole training thing. Your training is why we stopped the Hybrid.”

I pulled a strand of her lavender hair behind her ear, “You were right. I don’t think a couple hours a week talking to other people would’ve made the difference against that guy. Besides, we couldn’t have known it would be that damn strong.”

Althea shook her head, “But you did know. You knew something was coming, and you were ready. I wasn’t.”

I scoffed, “How about this then. I’ll train a little less, and you can train a little more. That way we find a balance...If that’s possible.”

Althea smiled at me, her pearly teeth sticking out in the darkness,

“I guess I could do that...for you.”

I kissed her forehead as she closed her eyes. She fell asleep before I left the room. With Althea able to sleep soundly, I walked into Torix’s new evil lair. He walked up to me, leaving one of the series of charts on the wall behind. He crossed his arms and looked up at me,

“So what’s the damage this time?”

I weighed my hands back and forth, “Oh, there’s good news and bad news.”

Torix sighed while looking down, “Well at least your venture wasn’t boring. Let’s begin with the good news perhaps?”

I raised a hand, “So, we found and cleared one of the Skyburner camps.”

Torix’s blue, fiery eyes flared bright purple instead of their calm blue, “What? How?”

I raised my other hand, “That’s the bad news...”

Torix looked down again, pinching the bridge of his bony nose,

“Ah...As always I suppose.”

I pulled my obelisk from my armor, and the glassy sphere opened a 3-D hologram of the Skyburner camp. I pointed at it, “An eldritch called the Hybrid ate the Skyburners before we arrived. It was strong, but we managed to kill the damn thing. The problem is this.”

I swiped the hologram, showing the lab within the base, “I found a lab with some samples of eldritch and silvers. It’s a guess here, but-“

Torix gasped, “They fused the silvers and the eldritch...into a hybrid.”

I shook my head, “I know, it sucks, but yeah, they did. Even worse, the parts in the lab were made in molds. That means there are more labs out there.”

Torix walked towards the stone couches and sat down, “This is...far worse than I’d feared. To imagine that an organization of magnitude is creating abominations and setting them loose. This is a conspiracy of epic proportion.”

I scratched the side of my head, “Yeah, and the shitty part is that these Hybrids are more virulent than either eldritch or silvers.”

Torix shook his head and placed a hand on the side of his hood, “These beings break the primary tenants of Schema. Giess isn’t the only planet on the line. These creatures could populate and spread across many worlds. Several could land on remote locations on Earth even.”

My eyes widened, “Wait...really? It’s that bad?”

Torix stood up, “It’s far worse. This threat rivals Yawm. We need support before the situation destabilizes. Our team is too small for something of this immensity.”

I spread out my arms, “Who can we get to help?”

Torix opened his status, typing in a few messages. As he sent them, he looked up at me,

“The Overseer.”

#### Chapter 186: Countdown

I crossed my arms and leaned against the wall behind me, “Really now? This is that big a problem?”

Torix raised a hand, “Indeed it is. The silvers themselves already placed Giess among a few planets with residents that require experience gain outside of eldritch. This incident tips the scales against the planet in more ways than one.”

Torix’s eyes narrowed, “Besides, from what you describe, the Hybrid seems more than simply virulent.”

I shook my head, “Yeah, it was more like a moving plague than a monster.”

Torix leaned back, “So the evidence is overwhelming .”

A portal in spacetime ripped beside us. From it, the Overseer walked out. Covered in his enormous, glowing hydraulic suit, he rivaled my height as he glanced between Torix and me,

“You two again. Did you both find yet another interplanetary horror or are you wasting my time on friendly chit-chat?”

Torix walked up to the Overseer, “Ah, as personable as always. In fact, Daniel did happen upon something rather nasty. It’s a being I believe you’ll be quite intrigued with.”

The Overseer let out a long, drawn-out sigh as he looked at me, “Then inform me of what other problem you’ve found.”

I explained the situation, detailing the organization and the Hybrid. As I finished my story, the Overseer laid his head in a hand,



“Schema recommended glassing this world immediately after assimilation. I should have listened to his wisdom.”

The Overseer stood straight up, opening his red status screen, pressing a variety of buttons. I tilted my head, “Wait...glass the planet?”

The Overseer nodded, “Yes. You superheat the surface of the world then cool it rapidly. This converts the world’s surface into obsidian. The term glass came about since obsidian is considered volcanic glass.”

He raised a hand to me, “Wait one moment.”

A few seconds later, a holographic projection appeared with Tohtellah’s face on it. Torix pointed at her, “Well well, why is she here?”

The Overseer kept fiddling with his status screen, “She is a valued asset of Schema. She will assist in this operation.”

Tohtella gave the Overseer a bow from her desk in Yildraza. She stated,

“What is it that you need, Overseer?”

The big guy closed his status and raised a hand, “There’s a problem you should be aware of.” The Overseer gestured towards us,

“This is Torix Worm and Dimension C-138. They are trusted allies of Schema despite restrictions on their statuses. Trust them as you would trust me.”

Tohtella gave her subdued yet amused smile, “We’ve already met.”

The Overseer raised a hand, “Of course you have.” The big guy let his hand slap on his thigh, “Before I restate the obvious once more, let me ask a question. Do you know about the Hybrid?”

Tohtella furrowed her brow, “No sir.”

The Overseer raised a hand, “Scientists inside of silver territory have fused the eldritch and silvers into a hideous abomination. I’ve already initiated a meltdown sequence for Giess. The planet is to be glassed in 30 days.”

I turned to the Overseer, my eyes widening. Torix’s jaw went slack as well. Thirty days wasn’t anywhere near enough time to evacuate a planet. Schema’s agent continued, “You are to evacuate useful personnel to the appropriate worlds. This should prove simple since very few residents on this forsaken world have decided to even level above a hundred. I’ll leave the sorting process to your discretion.”

Tohtella didn’t even flinch, “Of course sir. May I ask a question?”

“Go ahead.”

“Can you extend the time limit by thirty more days?”

“You understand that Giess is a low priority world given its many problems. Posing a hazard to nearby worlds was the last nail in its coffin. You need to justify it’s delayed culling.”

Tohtella steepled her fingers, “I believe that, Dan...I mean Dimension C-138 can produce a breakthrough. It’s in his hands to create a cascading series of changes in the social hierarchy here. They can lead to the prevention of more mana pollution, less silver outbreaks, and greater system engagement.”

The Overseer shook his head, “Impossible.”

Tohtella raised a hand, “Before you condemn the plan, allow me to lay out a framework that we could follow.”

The Overseer stood still, but his impatience was obvious.

“...You may proceed.”

Tohtella raised a finger,

“We can call in a group of Fringe Walkers to clear out the silvers. As they clear the planet, Dimension C-138 and I will work towards spurring the espen people into changing public opinion of culling the eldritch. After a few weeks of his campaigning, I have confidence that we can turn Giess in the right direction.”

The Overseer crossed his arms, metal thudding on metal, “No.”

Tohtella closed her eyes, swallowing her disappointment. She collected herself before opening a palm to the Overseer, “May I ask why exactly?”

The Overseer mouthed,

“All your other plans on Giess have failed. It isn't you that is the problem, Tohtella. It is Giess. This will not reflect negatively on your record.”

Tohtella's left eye twitched, “You know it will. I've reformed nine worlds before this. Nine. I can do the same with Giess. I just need more time-“

The Overseer announced with his metallic voice, “No. Your chances of success are too low, and the threat level is too high. Fringe Walkers will take years to clear Giess. That's an investment I'm not willing to make. End of discussion.”

Tohtella leaned forward, her voice rising, “But sir, this is my opportunity to put myself ahead of the pack. I've devoted my life to Schema's vision. I've sacrificed everything for him. Please give me this chance.”

The Overseer spoke with finality,

“No. End of the discussion.”

Tohtella smacked her hands on her table, “All I'm asking for is thirty days-“

The Overseer gripped his fist, his voice heavier than iron, “Do not raise your voice at me, little one.”

Tohtella’s eyes widened. She glanced down, her violet colored skin flushing red with embarrassment. The sidelong shame had me cringing as the Overseer continued,

“You are one of Schema’s best agents. That is that. One of the best. Not the best. Giess proves that. The situation has destabilized, and now we’ve lost a species that may have proven useful. Accept your failure. Learn from your mistake. Move on.”

I spoke up, “Now wait a minute.”

The Overseer leaned back and looked up at the ceiling. He let out a long sigh, “Now you are to question my judgment as well? You two are children? You understand that your planet is also at risk? All the nearby planets could spiral out of control. I will be responsible for that.”

I raised a hand, “I stopped your ass from activating your kill switch against Yawm. We killed that fucker and saved Earth against impossible odds. Im-fucking-possible, remember?”

I stared the Overseer down, “I’m no child, and you know it. Don’t give me that shit.”

The Overseer peered at me, meeting my eye. After a few seconds, he backed down, glancing away for a moment. He pondered something for a moment. A few seconds later, and he opened his status,

“Hmm... You have all grown. Althea gained a class. Your level is essentially capped. Your group’s progress is admirable.”

He breathed in,

“I...erred in calling you a child. Both of you. I spoke without thinking. Understand my situation. This Hybrid incident reflects negatively on me. If that anathema you speak of spreads, I will receive an immediate firing. For me, that means Schema activates my killswitch...I will die.”

The Overseer raised a fist and glared at me,

“It’s obvious, but we risk more than a single life should this plan fail. If we allow this hybrid to spread, trillions may die. Tell me, are you willing to risk that?”

I frowned, stunned by what he said. To be honest, I didn’t have the kind of resolve to take that kind of risk. Before I faltered, Tohtella chimed in,

“Let’s deliberate further.

I raised a fist, “I’ll fix this just like with Yawm. That must have turned your record around, right?”

The Overseer raised a massive palm to his chin, “I...I suppose it did. I was on the brink before then. I have breathing room now.”

I spread out my arms, “Then let me do it again. That’s all I’m asking for. Give us the extra thirty days. That’s all we need.”

I gestured to Torix, “You know us. We’ll get this shit done. We always do.”

The Overseer scoffed, “Hmmm...I suppose I’ve placed worse bets on you before. I’ll extend the deadline as you asked.” The Overseer turned to Tohtella,

“If the Hybrid is found elsewhere, I will erase you before I am culled. Understood?”

Tohtella nodded, “Absolutely sir. Thank you for this opportunity.”

The Overseer opened his portal, “Sixty days. That is all.”

I gave him a sarcastic salute, “Aye aye, captain.”

The Overseer moved his head in an arc, rolling his eyes under his helmet, “Competent as you are, you’re insufferable to work with.”

I grinned, “Same for you. Cya later.”

The Overseer scoffed, “Good Luck then, Harbinger.”

He stepped through his portal and disappeared as quickly as he popped up. As he left, Tohtella’s transmission remained. She leaned onto a hand,

“Now you’ve both seen me at my worst. This is...humiliating.”

Torix laughed, “It’s not so bad. When Daniel and I first met, he was worse than useless. Protecting him was a chore.”

I scoffed, “You have a pretty lenient definition of protecting.”

Torix nodded, “When it comes to you, most certainly. You’re quite resilient after all. Regardless, we need to organize ourselves to sort this out.”

Tohtella pointed at us, “How is the search for the Skyburners going?”

I shrugged, “Althea and I destroyed one of the camps already. We’ve got two more to go.”

Tohtella nodded, “What about the Hybrid?”

“That’s where I found it. It killed the Skyburners before we killed it.”

Tohtella’s eyes widened, “Are you serious?”

I nodded, “Yeah. It was ugly. If we let that thing go, we’d have been eaten alive. The Overseer wasn’t wrong about that thing being a threat.”

Tohtella shook her head, “To think it was so powerful...”

Torix raised a hand, “And that is precisely why we must destroy the organization behind its formation. If I may offer a suspect, I recommend we begin with Thisbey.”

I nodded, “Yeah, I think that’s a good idea too. Thisbey owns a company that harvests silvers. That means he has the know-how to go into silver territory, survive, and collect samples. Considering that’s what the lab did, that puts him pretty high on the list of suspects.”

Tohtella nodded, “I’ll send a team to search through his offices. Are there any other suspects?”

I shrugged, “I don’t know. Anyone with a lot of sway and resources on Giess could be the culprit, though Thisbey’s motivations line up perfectly with this.”

Torix nodded, “He might have let the heinous abomination out on the camp to test a genocidal tool against the gialgathens. We’ve no evidence to support the hypothesis, unfortunately.”

I smacked my right fist against my left palm, letting out a metal ring, “I know just how we can make it happen though.”

Torix pulled out his grimoire and pointed at me, “As usual, I’m behind you on this. We find the other camps and gather evidence there. Tohtella, make sure you inform us about any of the comings and goings you find.”

Tohtella blinked, “Understood.”

Torix clapped his hands, “Wonderful. We’ll see you after we’ve found the other camps.”

Tohtella turned to me and gave me a warm grin, “As the Overseer said, good luck... and, ahem...thank you, Daniel, for helping me. I wouldn’t have gotten that second chance otherwise. I’m grateful.”

I gave her a thumbs up, “Don’t mention it.”

“Oh, and remember the tournament. That social change is doubly important now. If you need a speechwriter or public speaking coach, call me, and I’ll set up appointments. Goodbye to both of you.”

She closed her call, her holographic projection dissipating. Torix raised a hand, “It had to be Thisbey’s doing. Who else could justify killing the Skyburner’s with a monster like that?”

I sighed, “Eh, it does look like that’s the case.” I cracked my fingers, “I’ll go find the other bases and make sure of it though.”

Torix stepped up, “Would you mind me going with you? We’ve no time to lose, and having another analytical set of eyes would no doubt be helpful.”

I grinned, “Alright, sure. I’ll be honest, I’d like some company. It gets lonely out there.”

Torix’s eyes brightened, “Then we’ll be off soon. I’ll go prepare my things.”

I gave him a curt nod. As Torix rummaged around, I stood there and thought about the situation. The lab being beneath the Skyburner camp was too much of a coincidence. That had to be a part of the organization’s goal.

At the same time, there were at least fifty organizations that hated the gialgathens. Schema didn’t exile the gialgathens from the system without reason after all. Narrowing down the pool of options would be difficult because of that.

It didn’t sit right with me that Thisbey was such an obvious choice for all this though. The guy was a slimy, spineless snake, but that’s what let him deceive and mislead people. The guy had a knack for manipulation. Even if the lab tried covering its tracks, leaving something for me to find seemed off for him. He was smarter than that.

Interrupting my thoughts, Torix placed a hand on my shoulder,



“Should we be off?”

I raised my head, my hand supporting my chin out of habit,

“Oh, sure thing.”

We walked out of the building, Torix pulling his hood over his head. We found Malakai standing sternly. He glanced down at us, “It sounded as if there was an argument in there. I pray I wasn’t the cause.”

Torix shook his hands, “Of course not. You’ve done an excellent job Malakai. It’s easy to rest with you watching over us.”

Malakai’s chest rose as he heard that,

“Well, I do my best to keep you all safe. Good outing for you both then.”

We walked on as Torix waved, “You as well.”

Pacing out of the Hall of Heroes, I lifted myself with magic. Torix stepped onto one of his black clouds, and we flew off into the sky. As the mist-shrouded us, Torix raised a hand to me,

“If you wouldn’t mind sharing the footage from the camp with me, I’ll review it while we head out towards the other clues that the Skyburner gave us.”

I sent the files, “Sounds good.”

As we traveled through the air, Torix went full-on lecture mode,

“As you may remember, Draygalga told us to search in three places. You found the camp near the River of Tears. Now we must search for a mountain of fire and ash or Lehesion and Emagrotha’s battle site. The historical records of the civil war’s end are blurry at best. However-“

Torix sent me a few coordinates, “The location of Mt. Ash is not.”

I laughed, “What? It’s seriously called Mt. Ash? I never thought the Skyburner’s hints would be so literal.”

Torix shrugged, “He gave us the locations without lacing his words with riddles. I say we count our blessings.”

I ducked under a flock of birds, “Eh, I guess...How long is it before we reach the mountain?”

Torix waved a hand, “A few hours at most given the speed of our travel. The silvers will slow us down, but I intend to use them to our advantage. In order to do so, I’ll need time.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Are you going to be writing out some runes or charging some spells?”

Torix shook his head, “Not precisely. I’ll restock my private reserve of troops. I’ve been so preoccupied with preparing your legion that I neglected my own.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Where are you going to get the soldiers?”

Torix pointed down towards the approaching silver territory, “Among those heathen beasts, actually. I’ve yet to test out my new abilities since we killed Yawm. It will do me some good to stretch these old limbs and practice a few of my incantations.” Torix rolled his shoulders,

“It will feel good to test my new limits as well.”

I raised an eyebrow, “What kind of new limits?”

Torix steepled his fingers, cackling like an evil overlord, “Oh, you shall see disciple. All you need to know now is that I aim to impress.”

Torix steepled his fingers while descending towards the silver's border. We landed right between metal and grassy ground. Merjects and engorgs crawled off in the distance, weaving between the forest of spires. Before stepping in, Torix messed with his status screen. I imagined he was fiddling with his stats and skills.

I was wrong.

After a few seconds, Torix took a sharp breath and pressed something on his status with a dramatic flair. I stared at him, waiting for something to happen. Nothing did. After a few more seconds, the atmosphere around him blurred. A forcefield encompassed him in white light, letting out a blinding light.

Streams of dense, white mana flooded him from all directions. The air around him siphoned inwards, bending the grass and trees to him. As the winds howled, the ground beneath his feet cracked. These fissures spread outwards, energy coalescing in breaking waves.

Each pulse built the mana condensing over him. The power saturated Torix's entire body, showering him in white light. The glow around him bent inward, reality warping around him. At the apex of the display, the ritual siphoned the sound. It left my ears ringing.

A moment of peace passed over our surroundings. That calm shattered as a shockwave ebbed from Torix. It ripped the grass from the ground. It uprooted nearby trees. The clouds above yielded, the mist scattering out from Torix. Nearby silver spires bent, and even the metal ground beside him crumpled.

As the destruction approached me, I leaned over to take the brunt of the wave. As I did, I dragged back to the treeline, leaving me stunned. The surroundings were left devastated as Torix floated above a crater. He looked the same to me, nothing unusual about him. As he dropped down to his feet, I jogged up,

“Hey, you alright?”

He waved his robed arms, his black mana funneling into his palms,

“I'm feeling better than ever in fact.”

As I reached him, Torix raised his hand up. He pointed towards the silver line, and Torix funneled the black mana at his palms into the metal. All along the border, purple, glowing eyes opened on the steel.

Polygon beasts rose from the silver's territory, the saysha beetles skittering off them. Each monster took on a different form, their bodies were random but functional. Curious about what they were, I analyzed them.

Ore Golems(lvl 1,000 | Controller: Torix Worm, of Darkhill) – Machinations of metal, an ore golem are mindless minions made of some lustrous chemical element. Whether made of copper, iron, or whatever the free element, these creatures are physically imposing as minions come.

The robust, natural materials they are made of decide their overall toughness. If made of tin, these creatures are far more flimsy than if made of steel for instance. This requires more mana for their creation. Likewise, the strength and intelligence of the golem are decided by the amount of mana infused into the monster.

The main issue of using these beings involves commanding many minds at once. Without direct control, these creatures will attack ally or foe alike, including the caster themselves. This means that mental partitioning is significant. Many young casters have been torn apart by their own beasts given a lapse in focus.

If done efficiently as this creature was, ore golems are a valuable tool in any conjurer's arsenal, however.

I leaned onto one foot and crossed my arms, "Did you, uh, need that white light to summon these things?"

Torix scoffed, "Of course not. That light spawned from something else altogether more interesting."

I pointed at them, "You've got what...a couple dozen of these things? I can see why you wanted to make them before we kicked the Skyburner's asses."

Torix shook his head, “I own more along the lines of several hundred, not several dozen. However, these creatures won’t be the armada I use against the Skyburners.”

He waved his hands at the ore golems as if they were garbage,

“You’ve seen and felt the breath of those beasts. These creatures will be puddles in seconds against those monsters. The ore golems aren’t scalable either. They require a portion of my mind in each of them. I could create a few hundred more perhaps, but a thousand of these creations pales when compared with a true army.”

Torix shook his hand, “No, I want a formidable force. For that, I’ll be ensnaring the stronger silvers that you’ve found deeper in the territory. These creatures will be used to hold those stronger beasts down in place.”

I gestured to all of Torix, “Then what was the shockwave from earlier all about?”

Torix pointed above him, “Look at my title.”

Torix Worm, of Darkhill(lvl 5,000 | Guild: The Harbinger’s Legion | Class: Speaker)

My jaw hung as he cackled,

“I’ve been debating my class for the longest time. Since we’ll be facing the Skyburner’s, I assumed its time I took the leap. Too much wasted experience otherwise.”

I blinked a few times, “Well damn...I didn’t think getting a class would be that flashy.”

Torix nodded, “Neither did I. Otherwise, I’d have told you about my decision before the fact. I didn’t mean to surprise you.”

I walked up and patted his shoulder, “Eh, I like surprises. Either way, I can’t believe you got a class before me. That’s damn impressive.”

Torix puffed out his chest, “A master must tread into the unknown. There’s nothing unexpected about it.”

I waved my hand at Torix, “What did the class do?”

Torix weighed his hands back and forth, “The class revolved around charisma, perception, willpower, skills, and a few utilities. It synergized quite well with my current build, though it came with a few chores I’ll need to handle from here on out.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Chores?”

“You’ve seen other Speakers no doubt. They’re always working, aren’t they? That’s because every class comes with a quota of tasks. Some people overdo their responsibilities. Others neglect them. For a Speaker, we are to enhance the overall prosperity and well being of worlds we’re stationed on.”

I crossed my arms, “So you’ll be sent somewhere soon?”

Torix nodded. I winced under my helm, my stomach sinking. Torix placed a hand on my shoulder and looked at me with a mischievous glint in his eye,

“Don’t worry, Daniel. I’ll be heading out to Earth. It’s my choice to be stationed there.”

Relief washed over me, but I had a few questions all the same,

“Why Earth though?”

He raised a finger, “I’ve already formed an academy there for mages and warriors. That alone fulfills my duties as Speaker. Just as well, my class grants me enhanced rights, such as quest giving and the like. With those added tools at my disposal, I can motivate my students even further.”

Torix spread out his arms, “I’ll form academies on several parts of Earth before extending my reach outward to other planets. Over the next century,

my schooling will become a sign of a remarkable mage off reputation alone.”

He shrugged, “The warrior part, well, that may prove more difficult. I’ll get there given time, however.”

He pointed at the silver border, “We’ll have to discuss the details later. We have a task at hand, and we must hurry.”

I grinned, “Alright, alright. I’ll quit interrogating you.”

With Event Horizon’s aura spilling outward, I killed off the Saysha in front of us. As I stepped onto the metal floor, my foot rung out. It reminded me of what we were up against. There were two camps left. If we didn’t find the cause for all this, then we’d have to rely on Tohtella to handle the problems.

That wasn’t a risk I wanted to take. Before I made my next step, Torix stepped up beside me,

“Would you mind if I took the lead on this venture?”

I turned to him, “You sure? The silvers can overwhelm you if you don’t have a stout defense.”

Torix raised a finger, “You’ll find I’m more than prepared.”

I let him step in front of me. As I covered his back, we skulked deeper into the forest of spires. After a few minutes, a group of merjects leaped from pillar to pillar, traveling towards us. Within seconds, they circled us like vultures. I raised my hands, my mana building in my runes. Before I let loose, Torix raised a hand to me,

“Wait.”

He blackened the landscape with his mana, darkening the air around us. As his energy built, he raised his hands and cackled,

“I wonder which spell I’ll disembowel them with?”

He pointed a finger at one of the merjects,

“Perhaps this one.”

Chapter 187: Exposed

From Torix’s palm, a funnel of white magic poured outward. A radiant, holy light enveloped the merject, giving it angel wings. I crossed my arms and raised an eyebrow,

“Uh, it looks like you buffed it rather than blew it up.”

Torix laughed, “Watch.”

Torix raised his other palm, releasing a horde of ravens covered in black fire. The creatures swarmed toward the merject, piercing through the new white light. They stabbed the merject with their beaks, crawling under their skin through the open wounds. The merject swelled, its body bulging as the blackbirds squirmed through the merject’s flesh like maggots.

The merject exploded, unleashing a thick mist of black ash. The plume darkened the sky, spreading a dark shade and leaving nothing left of the monster.

Torix squinted his fiery eyes, “So I was correct. The holy magic incantation worked wonderfully.”

“Mind explaining?”

“Of course I don’t mind. I’m a professor at heart after all.” Torix pointed at the cloud of dust, “I augmented the creature with a divine attribute. The silvers aren’t resistant to this enhancement. That enhancement over triples the black magic attacks I use against it.”

I raised a hand, “So it’s like giving a monster a fire element then using water magic against them?”



Torix snapped his fingers, sending a blinding shockwave up towards the pack of merjects.

“Precisely.”

The merjects lost their balance, several of them blinded. As they fell from the spires, Torix raised his arms. From under his robes, the crows came in throngs. Casting the battlefield in shade, they tore the merjects apart with their beaks and talons. Any merjects that landed on the ground faced the ore golems.

They didn’t do so hot. The merjects that is.

One of the atronachs lifted a merject overhead from the ground. With a mechanical, hydraulic strength, it tore the creature in two. As blood poured over the atronach’s purple eyes, a merject landed on its back. The merject tried piercing the back of its neck to suck out its brains. The merject broke its tongue on the end of the golem’s neck.

The atronach’s neck and arms turned 180 degrees. It hugged the merject to itself before pulling its head back. Like a hammer smashing a rotten tomato, it banged its metal skull against the merject. The creature’s face caved in, blood masking the grievous injuries. After a few seconds, the golem pulped the remains like a living jackhammer.

The entire battlefield erupted in scenes of cold carnage, mimicking that golem’s savagery. The ore golems, as dumb as they were, worked with efficiency, ripping a dozen merjects into pieces. The entire time, Torix inspected the edge of his robe, mouthing out,

“Blagh. A drop of blood plopped onto my robe. Blasted it all. I’ve become sloppy.”

I gazed around, impressed by his ease of handling the group,

“Damn Torix. You just mauled them.”

Torix rolled his eyes, “No differently then you would have I’d imagine. Come, we’ve much ground to cover.”

We paced out into the land of horror, Torix at home here. With each passing silver, Torix practiced his holy dark combo, fusing the two techniques over time. I took a backseat, letting him level and get some experience with his wizardry. Some practice did him well, turning theories into devastating techniques.

After a few hours, we stopped near a pool of sludge. Around us, stronger silvers swarmed. They feasted on the excess purple mud here. This abundance of food led to stronger, abler silvers as a result. Observing this shift in the monsters, Torix rubbed his hands together,

“This area shall do nicely.”

Instead of asking another question, I bided my time for Torix to show me what he was talking about. Without waiting, Torix collapsed mana into a sphere over his hand. With a dramatic flair, he raised it overhead and smashed it into the metal beneath us. A series of runic carvings branded into the steel around him, glowing orange.

Torix raised his hand and tightened it into a bony fist. His robe rippled as a pillar of light lifted into the sky. It flashed for half a second like a bolt of lightning. Torix outstretched both his hands, pressing his fingertips together, pulling them apart.

Like strings of charcoal, lines stretched between his fingers. He twisted them, creating a series of magical shapes. As Torix did so, his grimoire flipped open, settling on a page. The incantation glowed blue, and wisps formed around him, each one quivering with newfound life.

Torix moved the black strings in his hands. As he did, he corrupted the bright wisps into darkened sprites. Each creature lengthened, turning into blackened eels. Torix pulled his hands apart, the strings snapping. As he did, the eels scattered in all directions, searching for prey.

I glanced around, finding each eel homing in on a high leveled version of the silvers. They sunk into the eyes of whatever creature they detected, drilling into its brain. After seconds of struggle, the silvers fell to the ground and convulsed without further conflict. Several dozen silvers fell to these eels before Torix sat down and crossed his legs.

He glanced up to me, “I’ll be overwhelming the spirits of these silvers. As I do, would you mind keeping guard of my body?”

I sat down beside him, “Sure. Go and do your thing.”

He cackled, “Gladly.”

Torix glanced down, his robe enveloping his face in shadow. With Torix debilitated, I glanced around and made sure nothing came by. Torix incapacitated all the nearby silvers, leaving me little to do. Without wasting time, I whipped out my grimoire and set to work. There were runes still left undone.

After molding Event Horizon around us, I guarded us both while investing myself in my work. I needed more practice with the flowing lines I tried earlier. Without missing a beat, I stenciled out a blueprint of the new rune I intended on making. Fifteen minutes later, and I lifted my grimoire up in the air.

Yup. It was a scribble at best.

I figured out the problem pretty fast. My idea for my creation was fuzzy. Without a clear vision, the blueprint fell to the wayside about halfway through. I lacked creativity instead of ability, and that realization frustrated me. It was like waking up in Micheal Jordan’s body and trying to nail some free throws.

Turns out it still takes a lot of practice and experience. Set on gaining that experience, I jotted down a few notes about my ideas on the topic. A generalized rune would suit the flowing rune best. If I tried something specific, the smooth lines would bleed some of that precision. That bleeding effect weakened the runes.

For a general rune, that same effect worked to my advantage. It could fill in gaps in my understanding, filling out the skeletal message I created. With that in mind, I decided to create an augmentation rune for my whole being. It would be my most massive undertaking yet, and I wanted to push my abilities to see what I could do.

To make something of that scale, self-introspection was vital. I racked my memory for my history, keeping a log of it in my obelisk so I didn’t forget. I wrote down my short childhood, my mother getting cancer and my father’s rants about the Vietnam war. All of it was distant, like seeing through a haze.

At the same time, the emotion lacing the memories fizzled like a firecracker. At first, I tried to recall these meaningful memories in detail. That failed. Even if some of my skills made me remember better, they only worked for memories I gained after getting the skill. These instances, while impactful, lacked the same crisp clarity I had for recent events.

Instead of trying to force detail that wasn't there, I focused on the emotion of the time. Stabbing sadness, harrowing heartbreak, even obvious anger, the feelings still left me wincing. These old memories acted as the foundation for the spell just like they acted as a foundation for me.

After compiling a list of these meaningful memories, I brainstormed my next step. I decided to collect some of my most meaningful decisions. I mean, I am what I do, right? If that's the case, then my choices were a big piece of who I was. With that in mind, I found a few that stuck out.

When I was twelve, I resolved myself to fight my dad instead of giving in. He wouldn't make me hate life, even if he tried his hardest. Two years after that, I chose to never cry about my mother again. She told me to keep my chin up. I'd be damned before I spit on her memory by ignoring it.

During those times, I found solace in fighting. I supposed it wasn't that different from what I did after Schema, but I digress. I ended up absorbing myself in my boxing, and I was tough. The thing is with fighting, if you take too much damage you end up losing your edge.

Coaches called it being punch drunk, and I showed minor symptoms even at seventeen. I almost appreciated the dulling of my senses. Sure, I was ruining my future, but I had a bad case of fuck-it-itis. I didn't care about anything at the time. I was young, stupid, and angry. To no one's surprise, it was a pretty damn volatile mix.

The system came at the apex of that anger, and I needed an outlet. That might have been why I survived my first few encounters with the eldritch. It freed me in a way like I didn't have to hold back anymore. Something about the violence did prove cathartic in a way.

The memories stung as I brought them back up. At the same time, bringing all this back up was necessary for the cipher. Even if my situation sucked at the time, I could look at

it in a positive light. The discomfort made me strong and sturdy. Not just my body but my mind as well. Because of all that, I ended up taking control of my situation.

Hell, I saved Earth...with more than a little help.

Since I got some semblance of control, I never let it go. Ever since the system initialized, I was running full sprint forward. I never rested. I never stopped. I was a machine, trying to latch onto that control I so desperately wanted, no needed. That led me here, where I was trying to move on to a different part of life. One where I didn't need to control everything anymore.

In a way, I found it more comfortable to keep on living this way, even when there was no real reason for it. I was so used to it by now. In fact, taking a break was much harder now than continuing to work. As I dwelled on all this, I leaned back from my grimoire, looking up.

It was beautiful. Clear blue skies, white clouds floating overhead, and light sheening off nearby spires. Alien as Giess was, it showed its good side more often than not. With my mind clear, I took a deep breath and etched out another blueprint for my complex rune. I filled in the emotion, the meaning, and the choices I made in my history.

It took far longer than making the framework had. Kind of like how a good idea was easier to get than a good plan. With my idea set in motion, I stayed relentless. Torix and I ended up sitting there for ages, both of us preparing ourselves for the worst.

Torix didn't stop with the silvers around him, however. From each of Torix's new minions, he spawned more mind eels. They spread like a plague, several hundred hosts turning into several thousand over two days.

At the same time, I came up with a better framework for the runic inscription. The draft came together like a tapestry, stretching over many pages. It read like an autobiography, detailing my life while dishing out plenty of my opinion about each event. As I finished my task, I glanced at my work and smiled. It felt right.

Torix interrupted my task's afterglow, pulling the robe from over his head.

He glanced up at me, "Ah, you're still here. Good to see we're still alive."

I snapped my grimoire shut, putting into dimensional storage,

“Yup. You ready?”

Torix gave me a nod, “Yes. My new army is complete.”

“How many did you end up with?”

“Around 5,000 silvers, most of them falling to around level 3,000.”

My eyes widened, “What the fuck?”

Torix snickered with glee, “Now it’s finally your turn to be surprised. Ah, it feels as wondrous as I envisioned it would. Wait one moment as I let this moment sink in.”

I pat him on the back as I stood up, “As I was saying, damn that’s just, you know, so few.”

Torix jeered, “Oh yes, thank you for the support.”

I spread out my arms, “Hey, don’t mention it...For real though, how did gain control of so many so fast?”

Torix waved a hand, “The silvers lack much in the way of a mind. This makes manipulating them easy. Combine this with my enhanced persuasion abilities from my Speaker class, and I amassed a sizeable force in a fraction of the time it would otherwise take.”

I looked around, “Where are they?”

“Good question. Ah, here’s your answer.”

A raven landed on Torix's shoulder, glancing towards him. It cawed a few times before flying off. Torix sighed,

“Well, the silvers aren't as good at reconnaissance as I hoped they'd be. In fact, few of them even have eyes that rival a mole's vision let alone a hawk's.”

Torix threw out his hand in disgust, “Even when armed with so many eyes at my disposal, I still cannot find the base near Mt. Ash. If anything, the silvers seem blind to it.”

I shrugged, “Hey, if you want something done right, do it yourself.”

Torix sighed, “Part of being a leader I suppose.”

With our goal set, we traveled towards Mt. Ash. Torix kept his silver army spread out, keeping them from clustering. This prevented him from giving their position away. At the same time, we stayed to the ground, the pillars of steel hiding us from anyone's eyesight.

After a day of hard-fought travel, we reached Mt. Ash. We came up to it as a blip on our minimap. Since we stayed low, we didn't make out the actual mountain even as we got close to it. I figured we'd never know we were on the hill beside for some steepness.

I was wrong.

The forest of spires thinned as we approached it. As I rushed out of the final few pillars, I gawked at the fabled peak. It wasn't owned by silvers, not even in the slightest. Giessian creatures swarmed the mountaintops, flowers, and trees sticking out from the gray wasteland. It didn't take long before we found the cause of the flourishing life.

A moat of lava encircled the entire mountain, warding off any grounded silvers. At the same time, some kind of electrical aura warded off nearby flying creatures. It acted like a magnet of the same charge as the silvers, pushing them away when they tried to enter.

This protective, magnetic forcefield was fed by some strange species of Firefly. A swarm of the bugs circled around the mountaintop as we approached. Night approached fast, so we passed onto the mountain and made a camp.

As the sunshine died down, the fireflies acted like a living light show. A symphony of yellow cascaded over the sky in waves, keeping the mountain well lit. Torix and I finished our base of operations and wasted no time, scouring the land with an eye for detail. We split ourselves up, giving us a better range to search.

I discovered many familiar species of plants and animals from around Yildraza. A variety of animals ran through the bushes, most of them charged with elemental mana. The sheer volume of life amazed me as well. Even though the mountain was a small area for an ecosystem, the animals thrived.

To our dismay, finding any source for the Skyburner's was next to impossible. We grew restless, and Torix and I continued the search nonstop. It didn't help that Althea sent me a message every five minutes asking what was going on. Of course I messaged her back, but texting wasn't my thing. It was more annoying than anything.

Several hours passed with us searching the mountaintop. With no notable progress to speak of, Torix and I specialized our searching. I burrowed beneath the ground, diving through the mountain. Torix's hordes searched the surrounding silver territory. The actual lich kept to the mountaintop, scrutinizing every pebble and blade of grass. The giant dragon frogs eluded us somehow, but we remained relentless.

Just as I believed that Draygalga lied to us, Torix got his breakthrough. He called me over towards the moat of lava. Besides the pool of molten rock, the fireflies swarmed above. Torix pointed up to them, "Do you see those creatures?"

I nodded, "Yeah. I'm tired of them."

"As am I. Their wanderlust faded a while back, and now they act as a persistent buzzing in my ear. In fact, allow me to rid you of them."

He snapped his fingers. As Torix did, an opaque shield enveloped us both. Seconds passed as the blurred surface of the forcefield faded. As it did, the fireflies disappeared. I glanced behind me, finding a Skyburner camp at the mountaintop.

I smacked my forehead, and glanced back to Torix, "You're telling me it was here the whole time?"



Torix sighed, “Yes. The fireflies were an illusion style of magic. Think of Delilath’s yellow spheres, but many in number and tiny in size. They created the field that confused us.”

Torix gestured towards the mountain, “What caught us was a very old and very powerful kind of illusion magic. The electrical field we felt was, in fact, mana used to maintain the spell itself. The magnetic resistance acted in much the same manner. It fooled the silvers into avoiding this place, and it fooled us into wasting time.”

Torix turned and pointed towards the mountain’s center, “A group of the Skyburners is hiding within the mountainside. From what I could gather, they’re a collection of mages considering the illusion magic.”

I shook my head, “Well shit. At least we only wasted a few hours searching.”

Torix shook his head. He murmured, “We’ve been here for a week.”

I sighed, “Fuck.”

Torix nodded, “That’s right. The illusion magic made us lose our sense of time as well. It’s a rather potent combination of magics really. I’d be more impressed if it didn’t hack into our constrictive time limitations already.”

Some frustration welled in my chest, “They took us for fools. I’ll tear off their arms and force their limbs down their throats.”

Torix laid a hand on my shoulder, “Oh, we will do so. I’m equally displeased that they tricked us like this. However...”

Torix pointed towards the mountain, “Since I discovered the location of the base, I’ve ordered my silvers to guard any and all exits. The Skyburners are trapped inside without any means of escape.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Any plans to kill them off?”

“I’ll send in my army. Once they’ve exhausted their stamina and mana on fodder, you’ll rush in and finish them one by one. I’ll offer support from a distance.”

I turned a palm to Torix, “Sounds pretty solid. Are we going to go get Althea first?”

Torix shook his head, “We’ll be all that is needed.”

He turned towards the fireflies, “Before we set out, I’ll need you to dispel the magic here. I unable to do so.”

I pointed at the swirling masses, “What’s this barrier doing then?”

“It allows us to view without any illusion magic. Unfortunately, I cannot keep it cast on a permanent basis. On the other hand, you should be armed with quite an effective measure for disrupting the illusion.”

Torix waved his hand, “The magnetic field here is used to repel the silvers. When we traveled to Rivaria, you were able to absorb lightning, correct?”

My eyes widened, “Ahhh, I’ll be a lightning rod and absorb the field, dispelling the magic.”

Torix put his hands on his hips, “Precisely.”

Torix pushed my back, shoving me out of his illusion barrier. As I left it, the empty Skyburner camp disappeared. It mirrored a rocky cove, unassuming as a cloud in the sky. I passed it several times in my search. It convinced me now, my mind assuming that it existed with certainty.

Without letting the deception fool me again, I activated my Lightning Eater skill. The electricity around me drained inward, but the range of my draining was in the inches. I needed miles of pull, so I pushed out the scope of my draining. The aura bent, allowing me to drain the energy for several feet around me.

At the same time, the inklings of a headache formed. There was no pain from it, but the pulse of heart rang in my head. I ignored it, pushing further outward. As I reached ten

feet, my skull itched and something popped in my nose. Seconds passed as a pour of silver blood drained from my nostrils into my helmet.

I grunted out the blood, used to it by now. That shit wouldn't stop me at this point. With my resolve set, I pushed out with my arms. As I did, the range of the electrical drainage extended out. Behind my eyes, my brain throbbed with a dull pulse. The first piece of pain poured in right after.

I laughed at the aching sensation while demanding my field of influence to expand. Every inch of growth felt like miles, but I pushed past it. A piece of my brain howled at me to stop this nonsense. I silenced it, relishing in the challenge. I was dead set on proving that part of my mind wrong.

With about zero percent of the mountain cleared, I clenched my teeth and clasped my fists. I strained my magical abilities, remembering the feel of my other skills. The electrical draining compared with my armor's needles in a way. Even more so, it mirrored Event Horizon.

Using my experience with those tools, I condensed the electrical drain. A moment later, I molded it into different shapes. It fought against me, not as willing to change as Event Horizon. At the same time, I wrestled my skill's resistance as if dropping it to the ground and smashing its face in.

Metaphorically speaking of course.

A bead of sweat dripped down my forehead as I took a deep breath. After getting a handle on molding the aura and condensing it, I used both at the same time. I pulled the area of effect inward, easing the process. Once I changed the field's density and shape, I enlarged it. As I struggled on, a notification appeared.

Lightning Eater(lvl 8)—>(lvl 33) Breakthrough achieved!

A wave of relief passed over me, the skill bending to me. Without skipping a beat, I pushed the range further out, covering several car lengths. The ability leveled a few more times over the next thirty minutes. Once I got several more car lengths added to the range, I turned to Torix,

“Alright, I think I got enough of it uncovered. I'll level the skill as we go.”

Torix closed his status, turning to me, “Perfectly fine. It’s a somewhat new skill so I wouldn’t expect mastery of it already. We need a field for battle. That is all.”

I grunted, “I...should be able to do that.”

Torix scoffed, “I’d prefer it if you could do so without sounding constipated.”

“No can do...Not yet at least.”

Torix tsked, “Well...I suppose I’ll deal with it. Can you battle like that?”

I raised my fists, my hands shaking a bit, “Yeah...I’m good.”

Torix’s eyes narrowed, “It’s rather opportune that I gathered that army. Here I believed it wouldn’t be necessary, but maintaining that aura of yours appears more than merely difficult.”

Torix pressed his hands together, “I’ll be pulling more of the weight than usual.” As he pulled his hands apart, a wave of dry air spilled out,

“It looks as though I’ll be able to apply a few tactics I’ve been planning.”

We stepped towards the gialgathen mage’s base while Torix cackled,

“I pray they’re painful.”

Chapter 188: Eclipse Makers

I raised an eyebrow, “It has something to do with the dry air?”

Torix shook his head, “Most definitely. I’ll be sapping water from the mountain and its innards. The amphibious gialgathens will suffer.”

I scoffed, “Yeah. Chapped lips and dry skin. Real deadly.”

Torix brushed a hand at me, “You’ve no understanding of the extreme those discomforts may inflict. On the desert world where I gathered the rations you eat, I explored some of their water magic. They mastered the art of weaponizing dehydration.”

Torix spread his hands, “I watched many a soldier’s skins crack wide as trenches. It was as if they turned their skin into a brittle paper. Thick blood oozed out of the wounds, coagulate in massive scabs that ruptured as they moved. This was against a reptilian race who’s skin resisted said parching magic.”

Torix brought his hands in, “The gialgathens aren’t so fortunate.”

I winced, “Well shit. Remind me not to get on your bad side.”

Torix waved his fingers with delight, “Oh, you won’t need reminding after this. This display will carve itself into your memory if all goes as planned.”

As we stepped up the mountain, Torix raised a hand, “To explain further, the coagulated wounds also serve as stroke inducers. Giant blobs of congealed blood float in their veins, wreaking havoc on their circulatory system.”

Torix waved his hand,

“Of course Schema’s system assists greatly with repelling these health problems in a normal sentient. The eldritch will likewise resist this kind of death as they own many hearts and many circulatory systems to fall back on. The gialgathens are normal creatures, a fact I realized when I watched your battle with Delilath.”

I bit my lip, “Yup.”

We stepped in front of a cave leading into the mountain. Torix placed a hand on my shoulder,

“You did well in that fight. She was a worthy foe, and you expect far too much of yourself.”

I took a deep breath, “Yeah, you say that and I know that. I saw her family though. Hard to ignore the consequences of your actions when they throw themselves at your face, yenko?”

Torix gave me a curt nod, “We’ll have time to reflect later. Are you prepared to enter the cave?”

I nodded, sweat still pouring down my brow from channeling my Lightning Eater skill. Torix raised his hands, dominion mana flowing like fountains. He converted it into the light, airy blue origin mana, his experience evident. With further skill, he transformed the blue mana into plumes of dry air.

It was like watching a math professor do complex calculus. Before he fumigated the mountain, I reached out a hand and heated the air with Star Forger. Torix turned to me, and he gave me an approving nod,

“Well done, disciple. This eases the constraint on my own mana.”

I grunted out, straining under the demands of Lightning Eater. My other skills were inherent by now, so it required next to no thought. Lightning Eater was like using a different part of my brain all of a sudden. That increased the demands of the skill by leaps and bounds. Torix relished his role as our team’s driver. I was fine with taking a backseat for once.

Along for the ride, my ears popped as the pressure changed around us. With the air pooled, Torix flourished a hand up. His blue fire eyes flared red, and he whispered,

“Kill them all, save any espens you find.”

Hiding among the many spires, crags, and crevices around the mountain, an army of silvers crashed into the magnetic field. The entire mountain rumbled as the feet of the horde quaked the ground. The distant echoes of starving cries racked the air like a whip across a sinner’s back. They crowed for a meal of soft flesh, their mutant eyes consumed with hunger.

At first, the magnetic field around the mountain held against the onslaught. The silvers repelled against an invisible barrier, some silvers breaking limbs on the repulsing force. It mattered not. More and more silvers stacked behind their brethren. Less an army and more a moving wall, the endless troops built up.

They stacked up taller, silvers atop one another. They reminded me of ants covering a grasshopper, their victory inevitable. Torix kept his hands spread wide, relishing in the sense of power. At the same time, he maintained absolute focus on the task at hand.

The thousands of silvers never relented, his command unmitigated. The dry air siphoned into the mound, choking the life out of its inhabitants. After minutes of his assault, the magnetic field on the outside of the island faded in strength. The gialgathens were losing mana liked a sliced tire losing air.

Their time was running out.

Within ten minutes, the forcefield dissipated. The silvers swarmed across the greenery, tearing trees and rocks apart in their wake. They were a tidal wave, washing away the living creatures on Mt. Ash. As the dense wave of silvers passed, they left nothing but dirt behind them.

Several silvers keeled over, choking on the organic matter. Just as a Giessian creature rejected silver matter, the silvers rejected normal animals, at least in excess. That's why they stayed contained within their metalscapes.

Torix pushed them past this impulse, forcing them to cleave a path through the life here. With no survival instinct, they acted as kamikazees. The exchange proved lethal for both parties involved. Unfortunately for them, we had more troops on our side.

The remains of the army approached a puddle beside me rippling as the silver's approached. The low rumble evolved into a deafening roar, their footsteps many. With the entire mountain ravaged, the horde descended into the caverns below.

Every exit swarmed with the beasts, leaving no escape for the Skyburners. The monsters scrambled over one another, squeezing themselves in. My skin crawled watching the tactic take place. Inside, the gialgathen's skin was broken and cracked as they fought this swarm.

They never stood a chance.

Torix laughed as he prepared icicle spears above his head, aiming to cut off a Skyburner's escape. Foolproof and methodical, Torix carried out his execution. His confidence evident, he turned to me with his fire eyes red,

“Is there anything more satisfying than watching a plan come together?”

“This is an execution.”

Torix shrugged, “Eh, both are equally fulfilling, aren't they?”

I looked up, thinking about it,

“Depends on who you're executing.”

Torix pointed at the gialgathen's base, “Then I've much too look forward to. Killing slavers is always exhilarating.”

I frowned, “How different is slavery and necromancy though?”

Torix waved off my concern, “Life isn't something to be stolen so easily. Once life is gone, however, there remains little to be taken. Instead, I'm using a resource left behind, nothing more and nothing less. It would be like leaving a freshly uprooted tree instead of harvesting it for lumber. It's wasteful.”

“Huh, kind of like how I eat the eldritch after they die. At least some good comes out of it instead of letting it rot.”

Torix waved his arms, “In a sense, but we must elaborate further. You see...”

After half an hour of philosophical discussion, the swarms lessened. The silvers trickled in instead of flooding. Torix raised a hand to the cavern in front of us,



“As much as I enjoyed the conversation, they should be ripe for the taking.”

I scoffed, “If they’re still alive.”

We paced into the cavern, finding little of anything. A few minutes of walking later and the edge of a room filled my senses. I raised a hand and turned to Torix, “Be ready. The room is close. It’s big too.”

He acknowledged me with a nod. As we came closer, I charged my mana, saturating my blood with energy. Torix coalesced two spells in his palm, the holy dark combo ready to fire. As we reached the end of the path, a steady, fluorescent light leaked into the tunnel.

I peaked into the room, finding a massive cavern. The size of a warehouse, it contained enough boxes and supplies to cover the gialgathen’s needs for months. Unlike the Skyburners, these gialgathens lacked any slaves as well. They preferred the company of books and archaic rituals.

All seven of the gialgathen mages licked their wounds, shivering at the center of their magical sanctuary. Mahogany robes draped over them instead of platemail like the Skyburners, reminding me of handwoven carpets from some middle eastern country.

Despite their different style, the gialgathens wheezed in a circle all the same. The luscious fabric contrasted their broken wills and broken skin. They looked like dry mud, wounds winding over their skins.

A mound of charred corpses surrounded them in a large, outer ring. A tighter, inner circle drenched the ground in silver blood, leaving a puddle of purple mush. Gialgathen blood, skin, and cloth mixed in with the blend, looking like an art project gone wrong.

As I inspected the beasts, one fact became clear – they survived by the skin of their teeth. Missing claws, chipped teeth, and innumerable gashes showed on the exhausted creatures. On the walls around them, charred banners carried the emblem for Lehesion. One statue laid along a wall in the back with a plaque on its front. It read:

“To our lord and champion, may Lehesion be praised.”

We skulked up to the pitiful group, the entire entourage shellshocked. I raised a hand, counting down with my fingers. Torix understood, readying a spell to launch at a Skyburner's throat. As I reached one finger in my countdown, one of the Skyburner's howled,

"Wait. We won't fight you."

I grimaced, ignoring their plea. As I bent over to leap towards them, Torix put a hand on my shoulder. He whispered, "We can worm some information from them."

I sighed, letting Torix do his thing. The lich puffed out his chest and raised his voice, "Then tell us what you're doing here before I send yet another wave of my minions here."

I suppressed laughter at Torix's impression of an evil overlord. He deepened his voice to intimidate these mages. To my surprise, it worked. The oldest one stepped in front of the group, murmuring,

"We...We are willing to make compromises."

Torix looked down on him, "You're in no position to demand compromise. Submit or face destruction."

The Skyburner lowered his head, bowing to Torix. The old bag of bones lived it up, enjoying his new role of commander. The lich waved a hand at the gialgathens, "Answer or die...What is your purpose here?"

The one in front mouthed, "We...we're here to serve Lehesion's bidding."

Torix leaned back and laughed, "He demands you live surrounded by vermin? To what end?"

The eldest of them shook his head, "It is not for us to question the bidding of a god. We are to obey him, for we are but mortals."

I bit my lip, already frustrated by their bullshit. These sorcerer's humility sure seemed convenient for the situation. Torix didn't take too kindly to their answer either,

"Then you're all useless. Minions, leave me the marrow in their bones. I've been meaning to test a new potion with it."

The few straggling silvers motioned towards them. The Gialgathen out front shouted out,

"Wait, there is much we can tell you still you."

Torix crossed his arms, his icicle spears floating above him, "Like what? It had better be of some utility as well. Otherwise, you'll be worm's meat soon enough."

One of the other gialgathens announced from the shivering pack in the back,

"What are you doing? You act like Emagrotha's filthy cult, caving under any pressure. We are better than them."

The oldest gialgathen turned around and snapped, "Silence. There's is nothing more painful than a sorcerer's spells. They can eat your guts while keeping you alive. He will play with our corpses. Don't you see there's no honor in a puppet's death?"

The younger gialgathen walked out, his red and white skin sticking out,

"And there's no honor in dying a dog's death either. He will show no mercy. More still, you make us out to be cowards. Lehesion will rain down on us his wrath should we continue this heresy."

The younger gialgathen turned to the pack, "Remember this. Emagrotha's entire army caved after her failure. They preached relentlessly about personal excellence and achievement. They spit in the face of those that dwelled in mediocrity, even from inferior races. We give in here, and we follow the path of those hypocrites. We become cowards."

Torix crossed his arms and tapped his foot, "My patience wears thin."

The older gialgathen stood in front of the younger mage,

“He knows not what he says.”

The younger one snapped his tail across the side of the older gialgathen’s head. The elder mage fumbled sideways as, the younger Skyburner shouted,

“I know exactly what I say, old coward. I’d rather die than be remembered as a betrayer.”

Torix let out a slow, evil laugh. The room went quiet as the necromancer murmured, “Then you may die as a martyr for the others.”

Torix clapped his hands, sending out a shockwave. As he pulled them apart, he generated an icy staff in his hands. The lich prepared a spell while I soaked in pure mana, already charged to the brim. Before Torix unleashed an onslaught, the youngest gialgathen’s head snapped back as if possessed.

Color bled out of his skin, a glowing amber covering the red and white. As it did, the other gialgathens stepped back and bowed their heads. One of them whispered,

“He has ascended.”

Sparks of amber lightning coursed from the young gialgathen’s skin. A radiant power coursed through him, rushing like a river. The beast lifted his head and roared, his echo shaking the mountain. He raised a claw, leaving a trail of condensed mana behind him. He stretched out his hands, swords of a golden glow stretching out from his claws.

Before he unloaded his no doubt devastating attack, I raised a hand. Discharging a vast well of mana, a singularity formed in the enhanced gialgathen’s chest. All the energy in the world couldn’t save him as the atoms that composed the beast collapsed inward. Feeding the implosion, a tiny black hole feasted on him, creating a growing ball of pitch black where his chest was.

The awakened mage caved in, sending out a shockwave of kinetic energy. The gialgathens burst out, landing on charred walls and crushing the silvers behind them. The eldest one flopped towards Torix, limp and unconscious. I stepped up to block the impact, but the lich was in full control.

He unloaded holy magic with one hand and swung his staff with the other. A pure light emanated from the gialgathen before a slicing shadow cleaved the beast apart. The sides of the monsters splayed against the insides of the mountain, blood spraying over us in a mist.

With only five weakened mages left, Torix pinched the bridge of his nose, letting the situation sink in.

They were fucked.

The gialgathens stared at the spot of the singularity, a blast zone encompassing most of the mountain base. One of them raised a hand and pointed at the once glowing gialgathen,

“Lehesion granted him ascension...but you killed him...just like that.”

I cracked the knuckles of my hand, each pop sounding like the snapping of metal cables. They laid like lead, stunned into submission. I analyzed them, trying to get something out of the situation while they were incapacitated.

Sonora Sun-Splitter(lvl 8,902) – Sonora Sun-Splitter was a member of Lehesion’s elite group of Eclipse Makers. The namesake came from their ability to create complex hallucinations, going as far as blocking out the sun to an entire army in the middle of the day.

Though the group was named for such an illusion, they created many other feats of renown. They fooled a naval force with the image of a tidal wave. They caused retreats from falsified astral bombings. They even sieged cities by fooling the local populace into believing their water was rank and the food spoiled.

Powerful as the force can be, proper setup and time are required since even a single Skyburner could rip a group of Eclipse Makers apart. At the same time, their talents are formidable when utilized correctly.

In the case of Sonora, very little is known outside of her name. Found on Mt. Ash, she's propagated the spread of silvers and researched unknown queries.

Her elimination is highly recommended.

The other gialgathens were higher leveled than Sonora, and I couldn't analyze them. Their perceptions were too high. I turned to Torix,

"They're a group of mages from Lehesion called the Eclipse Makers. They're pretty weak so we can capture them without risking our lives. Watch out for their fire though."

Torix nodded as I jumped down into the pit. I swung my arms out wide, my hands forming into tendrils of metal. My armor pierced the two pieces of the corpse, needles swarming the Eclipse Maker. Within seconds, nothing remained but the splash of blood and scent of meat.

With the mages terrified, I reformed my arms spikes back into hands. At the same time, I slammed my hands together, sending out an echo like shotgun rounds. I stepped up to them and growled,

"Who wants to be the next bloodstain?"

Chapter 189: A Close Call

Torix floated over towards me, his arms crossed. One of the blue mage-frog-dragons stammered, "I...we were sent here by Lehesion to spread the silvers."

I waved my hand in a circle, "Anything else?"

The mammoth beast squeaked out, "Lehesion told us that Giess had drifted from the olden ways and needed to be cleansed."

My shoulders drooped, "What the fuck?"

The blue mage nodded, “Lehesion understands that we gialgathens are superior to the espens. That is why he fought for their freedom. He understood that they would never be capable of freeing themselves as Emagrotha touted.”

The blue gialgathen stood up, his knees shaking, “Now that the espens are gaining power, Lehesion is restoring balance to Giess. We can live with the silvers around us. Espens cannot. They shall cleanse the espens, and then we will remain, victorious and overwhelming.”

Torix pinched the bridge of his nose while staring down, “And tell me, did Lehesion ever mention how you’d rid yourselves of the silvers once they covered Giess?”

The blue mage froze in place, a wrench thrown into his internal logic. He stammered out, “I...I am certain that Lehesion understands the implications and has a plan set out to fix them.”

I shook my head, “You have no idea how hard it is to get rid of them. You have to strip the metal from the ground and kill the saysha beetles. Otherwise, they just grow the metal right back. Now do all that bullshit while the silvers attack you from all sides. It’s nearly impossible.”

Torix sighed, “You’d need a talented Fringe Walker to make any progress. Even then, it would be slow and hard work.”

The Eclipse Maker shouted with a hoarse voice, “I am but an ignorant acolyte of Lehesion. Such intricacies are beyond me.”

One of the mages waved his tail in a circle. I kept my eye on him as Torix continued, “Your ignorance is his manipulation. Lehesion is using your talents to further his own agenda. You have a choice here. If you prove useful, we can use you all to further our needs.”

Torix gestured to all of them, “All of you will need to cast aside this...religion you have with Lehesion, however.”

Another gialgathen swung his tail in a circle as well, some mana welling above us. I whispered, “They’re trying to kill us...again.”

Torix whispered back, “Pin them down.”

The two beasts waving their tails heard us, each of them roaring out. Before they finished their spells, I reached out my hands. I clasped my fists, jettisoning out immense rivers of mana above the two gialgathen’s heads. Above them, the rock melted, splashing over them in scalding lava. I hardened the rock, forming rock around them.

Torix lifted his staff and swung it in a circle at the same time. A spiral, darkwave erupted from the icy cane. Before it crashed into the galvanized gialgathens, Torix tossed his staff up. He pointed his two palms at the calcified mages. A celestial light illuminated from the cracks in their stone prisons before the black mana blade severed them.

A head flopped onto the floor as Torix snatched his staff out of the air. The headless body stayed standing, held up by the igneous prison. The other mage’s entire chest split and slid apart, bisected like an anatomical cadaver. Red blood leaked out from the many open veins, covering the organs and bone. It turned into a mess in seconds.

I paced over, sapping the corpses of their vitality. As I did, I turned to Torix,

“You want to use some of the bodies for summons?”

The lich shook his head, “Without their minds, these gialgathens are rather useless. I’d much rather have a few Skyburners under my wing since their bodies hold together far better.”

The blue gialgathen with a loose tongue murmured, “Show us mercy...Please.”

Torix rolled his eyes, “You will be given mercy should you earn it. Now, as you were saying.”

The blue gialgathen nodded, “Of course. One of you dirtwalkers helped Lehesion. They...”



Several beeping sounds buzzed in the heads of the four remaining Eclipse Makers. They looked around, one of them mouthing, “That beeping sound is so loud. It’s like it’s inside my hea-“

All four of their skulls exploded, mush splattering onto the rest of the walls. A hunk of brain landed on Torix’s forehead, scalp and blood splashing over him. The lich reached up, wiping a thick layer of the gialgathen brain from his face. Without saying a word, he flung the gunk off his bony fingers.

He turned to me, “We tell no one.”

I raised both my palms to him, “Absolutely. Not a soul.”

I walked up to him, “Can you hold yourself back? I can pull that shit off with a gravity well.”

Torix leaned back, bracing himself. I took the cue and created a well in front of him. Torix’s clothes fell sideways, his robe drawn to the well. The lich kept himself strut by forming ice over his feet and staff while holding it. The muck pooled into a wobbly sphere over the next minute.

After getting a good portion of the guts off him, I said,

“About to cancel the well.”

Torix gave me the ok. As I did, the mage took a deep breath of relief, even though he didn’t need to breathe. Maybe the sound made him feel better. Once he collected himself, Torix looked around, “After a good washing, this should come off. Now, to find some evidence of what happened here.”

I pointed at the headless group of gialgathens, “What about them?”

Torix sighed, “It seems as though someone planted bombs in their heads for just such an occasion. I found the timing uncanny, as they could have done the same before we discovered those tidbits about Lehesion.”

I cupped my chin, “Sucks too. It seems like someone’s using Lehesion as the figurehead while they handle the operation.”

Torix looked around at the devastated cavern, “What I don’t understand is why they would do it here? These locations... they’re seemingly random and disparate. Why not infest a chokepoint and actually deal a blow to the infrastructure of Giess? As they are, their rather ineffective.”

I shrugged, “Maybe they don’t want to deal a blow to Giess’s infrastructure.”

Torix crossed his arms, walking back and forth, “Indeed, that seems to be the case...In fact...”

Torix paced up to a charred bookcase, “The goal of Lehesion might be to destroy Giess. At the same time, the true orchestrator of this might have a different goal altogether.”

I scratched the side of my head, “Huh, like making gialgathens look bad or some shit?”

Torix nodded, “I wonder who would want to do that exactly?”

I scoffed, “Yeah, do you know any prominent figures that hate gialgathens?”

“One does come to mind. That snake will be our primary suspect for now. We simply need to prove our hypothesis and find incriminating evidence. Perhaps there’s something here among this debris...”

Torix picked up a larger than life book. Along the edge of the book’s spine, a ribbon loop sprung up. It looked perfect for a gialgathen to lift the tome up with their tail. Torix opened the pages, many of them burned all the way through.

Realizing the conversation was over, I sprung into action. I consumed the carcasses, leaving nothing behind. After soaking up the blood from earlier, I walked around, trying to gather something valuable. To be honest, there wasn’t much left after the silver brigade and singularity.

Combined that with all the fire breath, and this place looked like a giant smashed it under its heel. Still, this was one of our best chances of finding some clue to take back with us. After about an hour of searching, we hit our lucky break.

A boulder from the cavern's roof fell onto a desk, smashing it beyond measure. I lifted the crag and tossed it aside before searching the chipped pieces of wood. Inside a crumpled steel safe, I discovered several shattered obelisks.

One survived, unharmed amongst the shattered, glass orbs. As I pulled it up, Torix turned to me, "It looks as though there isn't much to use here."

I dusted off the functioning obelisk, "Maybe not. This looks like it's still good."

The transparent sphere still had its metal ring of transistors attached to it. I pressed the edges of the transistor ring, allowing me to access the crystalized data. A message popped up,

Access denied. Encryption code necessary for data access. Seek administrator of original data logs for further information.

I sighed, shaking the damn thing, "Yup. It can never be too easy."

Torix paced up to me, reaching out a hand for the obelisk. I handed it over before sorting through the rest of the safe's contents. I found shattered bulbs and a few data drives that might work with my own obelisk. I plugged them in and checked out the info.

I found detailed data spreads about silvers and their biological functions. After storing a few of these, I opened an actually useful drive. It held information about how a hybrid could function between silver and eldritch. A few illustrations even showed how to incorporate the harvesters with the saysha beetles.

I pocketed the info in my storage before walking up to Torix. The lich dripped with frustration, his impatience obvious. He turned to me,

"This encryption code is absolutely superb. There's no one we know that could hack something of this magnitude. It's many orders above my own understanding."

I crossed my arms, “Maybe we could send it to the Overseer? He might know a guy who can help us.”

Torix shook his head, “Impossible. He’s far too busy working with Speakers to manage the affairs of many worlds. Calling him for this would be the same as Althea calling you to guard her on a trip to the candy store. Just as that task is beneath your notice, our problem is beneath him.”

I scratched the side of my head, “Well...fuck.”

Torix let his hands flop onto his sides, “Well fuck indeed.”

The both of us stared down, defeated by a tiny glass sphere. After a moment of sulking, I puffed out my chest and pat Torix on the back, “Come on. Let’s keep searching.”

“The obvious recourse.”

Before we began, however, a message from Althea popped up in the corner of my vision. I opened it.

Althea Tolstoy, the Shapeless Arbiter(lvl 6,221 | Class: Breaker | Giess: 2:41 A.M. 3/18/26) – Another bomb in room. Caprika hurt. Help.

My stomach sank as I read the message. I turned to Torix, who was reading her message as well. He closed it while snapping his grimoire shut,

“We need to leave. This will have to wait till later.”

I bent my knees, “I’m rushing there.”

With a titanic leap, I shot upwards and crashed through a wall of rock above me. As I erupted from the mountain’s surface, I created a powerful well in front of me. I shot into the ground again while charging my runes. As I detonated them, a burst of strength let me burst from the earth with speed.

In seconds, I picked up tremendous speed. My stomach knotted up as I imagined all kinds of scenarios. One of them involved our identities being discovered. With that in mind, I pulled a gray square out of my storage and pressed it onto my chest. The gray disguise covered me, preventing me from exposing us.

Panicked or not, there's no excuse to be an idiot.

Half an hour later, and Rivaria's mountain came into my view. Like a bullet, I sliced through the air hell-bent on killing whoever planted this bomb. As I rose through the cloud line, I pushed clouds aside from the wind off my ascent. I slid past several flying gialgathens, sending them spiraling away from me.

As I landed in front of the Hall of Heroes, a portion of the staircase collapsed under my feet. The two guards mashed into the walls beside the doorway, my landing knocking them off their feet. I stormed through the open hallway before finding Malakai surrounded by several gialgathens. They dwarfed the collapsed door leading to our room.

I came close, shoving two gialgathens aside. I found Malakai covered in burn marks along one half of his body. One of his wings was amputated, the crispy remnants of it laying on the ground a ways away. The old beast groaned on the ground beside a collapsed wall, unable to breathe without wheezing. He'd live though.

I glanced between him and our room, a cold sweat pouring down my head. Most of the wall was blown out, black scorch marks covering nearby. From what Althea sent, the majority of the damage came from a bomb, an incendiary one considering the scorch marks.

Nothing I looked at boded well for anyone inside. With panick welling in my chest, I entered the hallway leading to our personal rooms, a crowd of people congregated around a body. Most of them wore medical uniforms, potions and equipment in hand. They stuck tubes and medical instruments onto the red blotch on the ground. I stormed up to them, dwarfing everyone present.

Everyone besides Helios.

The massive albony turned towards me as I looked over the chaos. He kept a palm over the red blotch, healing it. As I looked closer, my jaw went slack. The bloody mess was Caprika, most of her luscious hair burned off. Portions of her bones were left exposed, the burns deep. A part of her mask singed off, some of her jawbone uncovered.

Most of the damage was on the surface, taking her skin away, however. Well, most of the damage I could see. Despite her severe wounds, she wasn't the woman I was worried about though.

I growled at the group, "Where's Althea?"

The entire room went silent, everyone staring up at me. Helios pointed towards where Althea and I slept,

"That monster is fine. I came here just as she reformed her arm into a mutated sack and cut the assassin apart. Caprika is the one knocking on death's door."

I stepped through everyone, knocking people over before I slammed open our entrance. Althea heaved for breath, a cleaved corpse laying beside her. Most of her jumpsuit singed, leaving her upper shoulders and side exposed.

She looked fine, but her clothes carried deep burn marks. If I guessed right, the bomb blew over half her body to mush before she reformed. To make sure I got in front of her, intent on asking a question. Instead, I gasped with relief,

"Thank god you're ok."

Althea nodded, one of her hands coated in congealing blood. I took a second glance at the corpse on the floor, finding two wounds. It looked like Althea forced her arm through the assassin's chest before slicing her in two. Our resident Breaker lived up to her name, tearing the would-be assassin apart.

I lunged down, grabbing Althea's shoulders. As I did, she looked up at me, and I hugged her. She squeezed me before I locked eyes with her, "You are ok...right?"

Althea nodded, her eyes glazed over, "Yeah...a bit shellshocked, but I'm ok."

I put a hand on her cheek, “What about Kessiah? Is she fine.”

Althea nodded again without changing her expression, “Yeah, she...she went out. Caprika and I were here.”

I pulled some water out from my dimensional storage, welling it in a circle. With technical prowess, I smothered the blood on Althea, cleaning her. As I moved it onto her face, I whispered,

“Close your eyes.”

She did as told, going through the motions. The blot of clear water blurred red before I tossed it aside. The liquid splattered onto the ground and reddened a nearby carpet. I could’ve given two fucks about a rug though.

I grabbed Althea’s hands, “Caprika needs my help. I can stay here if you need me to though.”

Althea raised both her hands, “Uh, I’m fine. Go help her out. I’ll stay here. You know... collect myself.”

I hugged her again before standing upright. I walked back over towards the crowd of doctors. As I did, Helios supported his head in a massive palm. His other hand cast some healing magic on Caprika, keeping her from dying. Helios sighed,

“To think she was this...unable to handle even a non-classer. It mars the Novas name.”

I stepped up beside him, leaning over towards her. Helios scoffed, “Ah, good to see her representative cares about her health. What tipped you off that she was injured? The fourth degree burns perhaps?”

I inspected Caprika, finding more wound than person,

“Priorities. I take care of my own.”

“Obviously.”

I ignored his jab, focusing on Caprika. The medical personnel struggled to whip out their medical supplies to suture the open veins shut. I grabbed several of the potions I stored, pouring them over the most grievous wounds. After getting her somewhat stabilized, I pinched several of the largest arteries shut with little gravity wells. It took next to no force. Her heart was weakening by the second.

As I inspected the rest of her wounds, Caprika stopped breathing. A few seconds later, and her heart stopped beating. Flashbacks of Delilath flared in my memories, spurring me on. I resolved myself to save Caprika. Failure wasn't an option this time.

With Hunter of Many, I got a rough model of what her insides were like. With an idea on what was going on inside, I raised a hand, opening her chest with an antigravity well. Air went into her lungs before I collapsed them with a gravity well. I alternated between the two, making a kind of CPR.

There wasn't enough mouth for more conventional means.

Once I stabilized her breathing, I formed another gravity well at the center of her heart. It compressed, pumping blood through her system. I held her other arteries shut, keeping the blood from pouring out of her body.

A bead of cold sweat poured down my head as I balanced dozens of gravity wells. The precise work challenged me, but it was either this or watch her die. Helios lifted his other hand, opening a portal in our room. From it, several more workers walked out, carrying supplies. Helios rolled his shoulders,

“This place is filthy. It doesn't matter if we save her from bleeding to death. She will die from infection.”

I wracked my brain for some kind of solution. After a few seconds, I activated Event Horizon and molded it over Caprika. I worked the aura like a surgeon, sterilizing the air and ground near her without actually touching Caprika. I did so among a flurry of steady hands, every practitioner here doing their best to heal her.



I held up the effort, stabilizing her breathing and heart rate, praying they restarted. A few minutes passed, the doctor's faces turning grim. Even Helios's heart rate accelerated and his breath shortened. He leaned over and reached out a hand towards Caprika.

As he touched her fingertips, he whispered,

"Please...come back."

Another minute passed like an eternity. One of the doctors dropped his tools, putting his hands over his face. He gave up. Helios wouldn't let him. The giant stood up and snapped at the doctor like thunder,

"I didn't say you could stop, now did I? Continue before I flay you alive."

The doctor stammered to pick up his tools and continue working. From behind us, Torix floated into our room. The magician stepped off his dark cloud, landing beside us. He glanced down,

"Is that...Caprika?"

Helios growled, "Of course it is. Help her."

Torix opened his grimoire, channeling several spells at once. After a few seconds, Torix raised a hand and shot a spark of lightning into Caprika's chest. She convulsed before taking her own sharp breath of air. Her heart started in her chest, moving on its own.

Helios dropped to his knees, his hands shaking. He looked around for a moment before squeezing his hands into fists. The giant stood up, his composure already back to full force. With pints of blood being pumped into Caprika's body, her health regen roared back up again, her health ticking back up.

With tools at their disposal, the doctors began suturing her open arteries shut. At the same time, they wiped antiseptic over her wounds. Some of them even placed a gel that hardened over some of her wounds. With all the support, Caprika's health ticked up at a slow, steady pace now.

She was going to make it.

Helios pointed at the doctors, “We’re taking her to a hospital. Now.”

The titan opened a portal and pointed at it. Without any hesitation, the medical team placed several metal spheres around Caprika. A stretcher formed underneath her, letting them pick her up. The albony doctors lifted her up and pulled her towards the portal.

As it closed, Helios turned towards us. He looked between Torix and I,

“It seems as though I’ve underestimated your...resourcefulness. Your assistance is noted. However-” He pointed a hand at Althea, “You both will explain to me why she is unknown and what you’re hiding. If you wish to deny me an explanation.”

The stone around Helios’s feet cracked as he glared at us, “I will use all of you as mana batteries. Is that understood?”

The way his voice came out was like icicle spears stabbing into my bones. It left me stunned by the absolute nature of it. There was no question of how or when. If we defied him at that moment, he’d destroy us with everything he had.

Torix placed a hand on my arm, worried I might say something stupid. I spoke aloud,

“Of course.”

Helios turned towards his portal, his cape flaring. Stepping through it, the behemoth was gone along with all the medical personnel. He left us in an awkward kind of silence.

Torix let his hands drop onto his sides, “Here I imagined you’d be cheeky with him like you were before. What changed your mind this time?”

I pointed out where Helios was before, “Seeing him use Yawm’s magic. That shit’s terrifying.”

Torix fell back into a chair of mana, letting his limbs drop to his sides,

“At least you know when to fear.” He leaned back his head, “And here I imagined the undead couldn’t be tired. Alas, I never lived a Harbinger’s lifestyle.”

I grinned, “Eh, you get used to it.”

## Chapter 190: Operations

As Torix rested, I walked over towards Althea, finding the room still in chaos. I leaned over, seeing the assassin’s face still intact. It was unusual since I killed the assassins most of the time. When I did, the face was usually the first thing to go. Most often because I punched it.

Anyways, I sat on the bed beside her, manipulating my mass, so I didn’t crush the thing beneath me. I laid a hand over her shoulder, and Althea leaned against me. She shook her head,

“Damn. The bomb was so close this time. My head got blown away, so I’m kind of woozy still. I was able to get in contact with Helios though.”

I squeezed her to me, “You did great. Can you answer a few questions though?”

Althea let out a breath full of air, “Uh, yeah. I can do that for sure.”

I pulled myself from her, letting her sort out her thoughts. I pointed at the assassin, “Do you know who she is?”

Althea shook her head while Torix walked into the room. The lich brushed himself off,

“I’m ready to continue our inquiry. How are you doing Althea?”

Althea stood up, “I’m fine. I got rid of the assassin. Don’t know who it was though.”

Torix nodded, opening his status, “Well, the humanoid body and three spikes protruding from her spine lead me to believe she was an Elektra. They’re a rather nomadic species with a knack for assassination. I’ll see if her face isn’t registered in some database somewhere...wait a minute.”

Torix’s fire eyes flared brighter, “She’s Jockovia Nitch. She’s a capper trying to unlock her class after graduating at an academy on Boracosta. She’s been a nomad for the last decade according to her social media. Hmm...”

Torix shook his head, “After reading her last few posts, it seems she’s been growing desperate to unlock her Breaker class. She must have chosen us as her victims due to our unknown status. Perhaps someone tipped her off...”

I opened a palm to Torix, “Wait, why would she kill us to unlock her class?”

Torix balanced a hand, “Most sentient unknowns are considered easier to handle than the equivalently leveled eldritch unknown. This makes unlocking a class simpler if you just find an unknown that’s relatively squishy. Jockovia likely thought a bomb ought to do it.”

Althea crossed her arms, “If you think about it, our disguises weren’t the best either. You’re being broadcasted on a galaxy-wide stream too. There’s bound to be some people who’ve discovered our identities already.”

I detected a bit of an accusation in her tone, so I rolled my eyes, “Your disguise is a thin sheet of cloth that’s almost see through.”

Torix shrugged, “And why did they do it? To look cute.”

Althea’s head dipped down. A pang of guilt ran up my chest, so I laid a hand on her shoulder, “I’m just saying that we can’t, er, point the finger at anyone. Besides, now’s not the time to be placing blame. Let’s, uh, move forward instead, alright?”

Torix dragged his hand down his face, “Right...My fault in judgment. To the task at hand...What is the task at hand?”

I cupped my chin, “So, what we need to do is get this disk decrypted, set-up a meeting with Helios to give him the lowdown and figure out where the final Skyburner base is at. And beat the tournament. And probably kill Thisbey and Lehesion. All that in about a month and a half.”

I leaned my face into my hand, “Fuck.”

Torix scoffed, “By Baldowah, you make it sound so easy when you say it like that. Kill a god while fixing a world in less than sixty days. It should be the title of a game show.”

Althea looked up, “Uh, I can get the talk with Helios done if you like.”

One of Torix’s eyes flared, and the other narrowed. It was as if he was raising an eyebrow,

“How did you get in contact with Helios?”

Althea shrugged, “Caprika gave me his contact info. That’s how I sent for him to help Caprika in the first place.”

Torix looked back to the scorched room we stayed in, “It’s rather apt of her to do so. That monster can create interplanetary wormholes. The furthest I can manage is a portal spanning several hundred meters at most.”

I grimaced, “Those medical personals where albony. I wonder how far away the portal was?”

Torix shook his head, “Many light-years no doubt.”

Althea let her hands’ flop on her sides, “How common are powers like that? Are there just world enders everywhere?”

Torix tsked, “Not everywhere, but that kind of potential is more common than I’d like to imagine, unfortunately. Now, I believe the first order of business is finding Kessiah

before we set up a base of operations elsewhere. Putting it lightly, our position has been compromised.”

I gestured a hand to the group, “How about I just burrow us out somewhere in the middle of the forest? We can hunt for food, and the lodging wouldn’t be much worse than here.”

Althea yawned, “Do we have to live under dirt again?”

Torix clapped his hands once, “In fact, we do. Daniel, go and find that new base location. I’ll collect Kessiah and rendezvous with the new coordinates. Althea, get that meeting set up and give us the times if you could.”

Althea let out a joyless laugh, “Just like old times. Living in a cave.”

I spread out my arms, “Oh come on. It’s not so bad. It’ll be nostalgic.”

Althea sighed, opening her status, “If you say so. I prefer having a bed though.”

I turned to Torix, “It’ll take me an hour to make the new base. I’ll send you the new coordinates then.”

Torix nodded, forming a portal beside himself, “Then we’ll meet in an hour. Good luck.” He towards the corpse of the assassin while flipping open his grimoire. After channeling some mana, the fleshy bits of the would be Breaker condensed into a jiggling circle.

“I’ll take care of the evidence as well. We can’t have any news outlets knowing who the assassin was. Otherwise they might connect the dots and realize we’re unknowns.”

Althea scratched the side of her head, “That’s kind of...gross.”

“Why waste these resources? I’m a necromancer after all.” Torix stepped towards his portal, “Hmmm, wormholes...perhaps I should learn the same skill.”

Torix walked through the portal, leaving Althea and me alone. I gave her a thumbs up, “You did damn good killing the assassin like that.”

Althea grimaced, “I’m just glad Kessiah wasn’t here. She’d have died instantly with her level being low as it is.”

A shiver ran up my spine hearing that. Kessiah was the only one among us that wasn’t level capped at this point. Hell, she and I were the only people in our group that lacked a class.

I shook my head, “Damn...That’s true.”

Althea raised her eyebrows, “You know, sometimes I’m glad Yawm used Etorhma’s Tears on me forever ago. It’s why I’m alive.”

I shrugged, “It’s why you’re hunted.”

She shook her head, “Yup, but after we get rid of our damn unknown statuses, it will be a good thing.”

I put my hands on my hips, “How did Helios find out about your unknown status?”

She pointed at the singe marks on her clothing, “Well, I didn’t have time to dress again before calling him. Caprika’s a good friend, so I was willing to risk it.”

“It’s kind of crazy you still have an unknown status after becoming a Breaker too, isn’t it? You’re like Schema’s police force. It’s weird that you’re still hunted.”

Althea shrugged, “I mean, if you cleared your bounties and unknown status after getting a class, anyone could commit any crime. If you think about it, you could murder thousands of people then have it just washed away just like-” Althea snapped her fingers, “that.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Hmmm, it would be a pretty potent loophole.”

Althea waved a hand, “Yeah when I researched it, it was like...a classer gets a quest to clear his bounty, but here’s the catch; the worse your crimes, the harder the quest becomes...or something like that.”

She waved her hands back and forth, “So it, uh, balances itself out or something. I didn’t research it a ton or anything. I’m just telling you off memory.”

I shook my head, “No, I think you got a good handle on the concept. That sounds about right. Makes a lot of sense too.” I turned towards the exit, “We should get out of here before something else happens.”

As I turned to walk out, Althea grabbed my arm, “Hey, I’ll send a message to Kiki Mosk about our change in living arrangements too.”

I glanced at her, “Why?”

“So you’re entering the quarterfinals in the next fight. They want to do a prefight interview with your opponent.”

My shoulders drooped, “Wait...an interview?”

Althea smiled, “Yup.”

I looked up at the sky and spread out my arms, “Noooo...my ultimate weakness.”

Althea giggled, “I figured you’d say that. Good luck, deary.”

I scoffed, “Oh thank you so much for your compliment love.”

She looked up at me with a cheeky grin, “Anytime.”

I pulled up my face mask to give her a kiss as we left. We split up after that, letting her hide for her messaging. I flew down the side of Rivaria’s mountain. After a few minutes, I passed the stadium where the Honoring of Lehesion was held. Once at the bottom of the slope, trees came back into view.



I found a dense cluster of them, finding a rooted hollow under a massive, fan-leaf tree. The leaves of it looked like elephant ears, giving it a substantial reach compared to most plants. Top that off with the premade entrance for a cave base, and it was a winner winner chicken dinner in my book.

Terrible phrases aside, I burrowed beneath the hollow of roots, creating a staircase. As I did, I melted rock, reshaping it into steps. Before going more in-depth, I removed my gray disguise. I tore strips of my skin off, melting and shaping the metal into arcs. I used these as structural supports. I also embedded tall pillars of my darkened armor, reinforcing the dirt.

New Skill Gained! Construction(lvl 1) – You choose to reform nature to do your bidding. Enhances constructional integrity by 1%.

I appreciated the extra skill but forged onward. After fixing up a spacious hallway, I created a glowing ball of metal above me like a torch. Using its light, I etched a diagram planning out the rest of the rooms. With a plan in motion, I stood up and got to work.

Engineering(lvl 1) – By using your knowledge, you craft innovation into your creations. +1% to planning speed of structures. -1% to structural faults while creating structures.

The skill creation tree was still paying dividends. I got back to the job at hand, putting my skills to use. Turns out, gravity magic and heating magic were a potent combo for construction work. Who'd have guessed?

Fifteen minutes in, I already cleared out a room with high ceilings. I coated the insides with a layer of molten rock found nearby. I even let the rock cool slowly, making it stronger than if I chilled it quickly. Every time I ended up snap freezing the lava I made, it turned the stone into obsidian. While sharp, obsidian didn't make for useful building material. It was brittle, like glass.

So I let it cool over a few minutes, forming it into a crystalline granite. Combining the coating with my metal supports, and the base was more like a bomb shelter than a forest base. Considering Althea's complaints, I sculpted portions of the walls using Star Forger.

With the majority of the job finished, I figured I might as well enjoy the rest of the project. I ran through the forest, finding several kinds of stone. I carried them back, melting them into giant blobs of glowing lava. With those as my resource, I created pillars of marble, floors of glass, and decoration of shale.

In an hour, I constructed a building with actual depth, much better than our old room. It was fun making it and seeing just how much I could get done in that hour. I ended up sending the message for everyone to come back, but I kept working as they were coming. I wanted everyone to be impressed.

After all, I had the reputation of a complete brute. Shattering their expectations seemed more than a little satisfying. With that in mind, I finished the doorway by marking it with a few runic enchantments.

I did so for every room, even going so far as creating a barrier around the entire underground base. I charged the rune with mana, overdoing it quite a bit. I wasn't about to let someone come here after the bombings. I'd know they were here, and I'd grind up their limbs and choke them on the mush before I let them hurt Althea again.

Dark thoughts aside, I placed a few charged ambers around the base from my dimensional storage. They gave off a lovely golden light, putting me at ease as I walked in. I finished that last part just as Althea showed up. As she did, she walked up to the doorway with her shoulders slumped,

"Yup. Another base in the dirt."

I shrugged, playing along, "What else did you expect? I'm a fighter, not a base maker."

She winced, "Oh man, there's going to be creepy crawlies and roots on the roof, aren't there?"

I weighed a hand back and forth, "Something like that."

As we walked down the steps, her jaw went slack. She gawked at the artistry I managed to cobble together, a looked of glee in her eyes. She ran around the place, finding the same fixtures in all five of the bedrooms. Althea ended up running up to me and punching my shoulder.

I rubbed it, pretending it hurt as she put her hands on her hips, “What the hell! Not a base maker, huh...”

I smirked, “Oh really? I didn’t think you’d be impressed with just this. I whipped this up real quick after all...And I heard someone was dreading a cave base again. I figured I could put some effort into it.”

She laughed, hugging me to her, “I love you so much. Thank you.”

I hugged her back, “You’re welcome, and I love you too.”

My runic enchantments flared, warning me that someone was here. I skulked up the steps, looking around. Torix hovered over the base with Kessiah landing beside him. They found me at the entrance, Torix floating over,

“Ah, this location will suit us nicely. Hidden and relatively close to the tournament grounds.”

Kessiah walked up, her eyes glassy. I turned a palm to her,

“Hey, Kessiah...You alright?”

She sighed, “Yeah. I couldn’t believe another bomb went off though. Kind of...took me by surprise.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Why? Seems pretty normal to me.”

She shivered, “I’d have died if it almost killed Caprika.”

I tapped my teeth, tsking under my helmet. Kessiah wasn’t the most practical person, but she was grounded when it counts. She realized how close to death she came. I waved my hands, “Eh, you’d have been fine I’m sure. I wouldn’t stress about it too much.”

Kessiah rolled her eyes, “Yeah, coming from Mr. Immortal, that’s easy to say.”

I frowned, “Yeah, you’re going to be just fine.”

Kessiah nodded, “Yeah, I’ll be alright. I just need to...rethink a few things. I mean for Schema’s sake, Torix got a fucking class. I got to start moving before I’m left behind.”

Torix leaned to her, “Left further behind.”

Kessiah rolled her eyes while Torix pointed at the entrance,

“Banter aside, would you mind showing us the inside? Time is of the essence.”

I turned and shuffled down the steps while waving them over, “Come on in.”

They both walked down, Kessiah mumbling, “Woah, I haven’t even found a family of roaches yet. Yay.”

I waved a finger, “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

They walked down into the expanse, Kessiah whistling, “Woah, you really outdid yourself with this one. This is almost as nice as the hotel room.”

I shook my head, “No plumbing or electricity here though.”

Torix shrugged, “It matters little. Basic investment into endurance and constitution makes us nigh immune to discomfort from the environment. Water will be the only issue, and I can solve that with a bit of origin magic.”

I pointed at the rooms, “Cool. That’s where you guys will be staying. The rooms are all the same besides Althea and mine. It’s bigger since there’s two of us.”

Kessiah propped her weight onto her hip, “Is there anything to do out here?”

Torix patted her shoulder, "I'm certain a cave-woman like you can entertain yourself with sticks, stones, and probably the mud as well."

Kessiah crossed her arms, "Hah, hah. Funny."

Althea raised a hand, "Hey, everybody."

We turned to her. Althea pointed at the center of the room, "So uh, Helios is going to be here soon."

Torix raised an eyebrow, "Could you contextualize soon for us. A day, a wee--"

A portal appeared at the center of the room. Helios walked out of it, his head almost scraping the ceiling. The amber glow brandished off his cape, his fur jutting out from around his neck. It gave his clothes a comfortable vibe, making them look hella comfy.

Helios glanced around, inspecting my handiwork. He nodded his head up and down slowly, "Well... This isn't the shanty shack I expected. It far exceeds the provisions offered by the gialgathens here in fact. Did you make it, sorcerer?"

Torix shook his head and pointed at me. Helios scoffed, "Multi-talented aren't you?"

I crossed my arms, "You wanted to know about us, right?"

Helios raised a hand, a crackling sound spreading around us. As the air turned blue, he coalesced the atomic energy and snapped his fingers. From beneath him, azure spines of ice rose up and created a throne for him. He sat down on it, leaning onto a hand like he was a king,

"Tell me everything."

I pressed the gray square over my armor, lying not an option here. As the disguise came off, Helios rose up off of his icy throne and laughed,

“Well, well, well...Do my eyes deceive me here? The killer of Yawm was right here under my nose all along...”

I spread out my arms, the gray square for cloaking me in hand,

“It’s the Harbinger of Cataclysm in the flesh.”

Helios steepled his fingers and leaned forward,

“Interesting.”