

## **New World 311**

### Chapter 311: A Clever Bug

Helios nodded, opening a warp back to Svia. The calculating albony tilted his head, “Should we burrow down?”

I rolled my shoulders, “Let’s.”

Taking a stroll back onto Svia, we walked into Reason’s colony right where we left off. Once again, the colony’s drones communicated our presence, the blue bodyguards returning. Reason arrived with them. The elegant and deadly razor queen spread two tendrils of slime out as if they were arms,

“What have you decided on?”

I raised a hand, “We’re going to burrow down and see about the insects. Afterward, we’ll trace the bugs back to Plazia.”

Reason shivered, “That will never work. He will evade you.”

I raised a hand, “It didn’t work for you, but it might for us. Let us try it out.”

“If you must, then do so. Be ready for war when you arrive at Svia’s depths.”

“I am.” Turning towards the others, my armor grinned with its eerie glare, “Are we all?”

Florence winced under his mask, “Oh...most definitely.”

I pointed down, “Is this a good place to dig down?”

Reason pointed a diamond-like claw at a tunnel leading down, “My children lie below. Some places are underdeveloped. You may carve into Svia there.”

She slithered, her form elongating into a serpentine shape. Once faster, Reason pumped her body at the edges of this slithering motion. This created a jumping gait, one that involved sideways leaping. It was like a ninja in some anime, honestly. We didn't follow suit, each of us running to keep pace.

We passed a menagerie of tunnels and creatures. These sights displayed the slimes' tenacity. In one tunnel, lines of eggs formed into dark pods. These blots squirmed in their sacks before a pod burst outward from within. A caviar mash oozed out before bursting into a swarm of tiny, see-through bubbles. These translucent orbs infested an eldritch corpse before the slimes within began germinating.

Eh, it was disgusting yet fascinating. Another burrow stacked itself from top to bottom with pillars of yellow slimes. The green drones rolled up to these masses, regurgitating bits of ores, each different in color. These metals fused into the yellow pillars, which then bubbled within. Those gases flowed up towards lichens on the roof, the fungi growing fleshy plumes towards these vents.

Fragments from that process floated down these yellow stacks, shifting their coloration to a mellow bisque. These processed steels then funneled into dark piles like coal, which the drones carried off. The lichens above then dripped sweet nectar into various pools, each one reeking like rubbing alcohol and sugar.

The blue bruisers drank from those pits, and they explained why the Ahcorus wouldn't mind facing the Hybrids. Killing Elysium's foot soldiers would give the slimes an enormous supply of food to generate more troops. Those resources supplanted their dying with newly rendered forces.

At the same time, the bruisers themselves made for formidable enemies in their own right. Searching my memories, one of my minds sent over a status for my viewing pleasure while we reached the colony's depths.

Ahcorus Bruiser(lvl 4,902 | Guild: Reason's Brood | Home: Svia | Species: Ahcorus | Variant: Spiker) – The Ahcorus bruisers are a guardsmen variant of the slimes. They are composed of alcoholic substructures, creating an utterly different biology than most conventional, carbon-based life forms. This results in high levels of flammability and a fermentation-oriented life cycle.

They evolved this capacity through a symbiotic relationship with various bacteria within their gelatinous centers. Surrounding this cytoplasmic stratum, a thickened

membrane protects the soft organelles within. These cell-like creatures move via hydraulic locomotion of this exterior membrane, which generates pressure they use to move.

This softened inner form gives the Ahcorus immense freedom in whatever shape they choose to take. Given the bruiser's penchant for battle, they often take on multi-limbed forms. This particular variant of the bruise specializes in generating keratinous spikes coated in a specialized enamel. Once formed within, these spikes puncture the outer membrane, locking in on threats.

By shifting their form, they generate torrential forces to fire these spikes at enemies. This gives the spikers a long-ranged utility compared to their more mauling-oriented brethren. Be careful of their prowess, or else you'll end up skewered by them.

That would be the case for most, but not you. They fear you.

The status update contained so much info that it reminded me of a Wikipedia page, discharging enough detail to make me grimace. Any status update acted like that, and taking a glance at all those updates made my head spin, figuratively of course. Not having the time to read hundreds of pages, I only gazed at the written abstract instead of the complete documentation for that reason.

Despite my misgivings, the statuses were interesting, and they let me finish the trip to the colony's recesses. There, the enamel coating on the walls turned thick enough that movement proved difficult for my team. The slimes put a haphazard structure of pillars throughout any tunnel, like a spider's nest of threads. They didn't need a wide-open space, so they flowed through the small gaps they left behind.

Being over fifteen feet tall and quite solid, I couldn't do that.

So, having a great idea, I ran right through these enamel pillars, the dust smelling like a dentist's office when my teeth got drilled. Gross as they were, the posts offered reinforcement the colony needed. I generated stone in place of these shattered struts so the settlement wouldn't collapse. Not pleased with my casual destruction of her tunnel system, Reason stopped flowing through her tunnel network,

"This is deep enough. The damage you're doing far exceeds what's necessary for burrowing below. Here, you may choose to face Plazia as you wish."

I gave her a thumbs-up, “Thank you. You’re good to go.”

Several of the cerulean bruises flowed up behind us, weaving between my freshly crafted struts. Reason shivered, “You wish to face Plazia’s masses alone?”

Remembering the sheer fallout from my other battles, I grimaced, “Absolutely. If it gets ugly, you’re all going to die.”

Reason generated crystalline plates over her slimy body, making herself into the image of a flowing emerald coated in diamonds. She spread spiked limbs, “I am strong. I will help you.”

I took a step forward and reached out. I tapped her crystal armor. As I did, I generated a telekinetic pulse that shattered the front plate. The rigid structure fell down like glass as she pulled away. Lifting my other hand, I constructed a steel pillar from the tunnel’s flooring.

She leaped back, but I suspended her in a gravity well. The pillar stopped growing just shy of her exposed center. From that jagged shard, I expanded a dozen serrated spines of steel. Reason spoke through her telepathic pathway, “What is this? Are you an assassin from Gluttony? Perhaps Greed?”

I frowned, “Naw.” I flicked my wrist, the metal barb crumbling back down like aluminum foil. “I’m an example of what could happen to you, and in only a few seconds.” I released her while lifting my fist up, “And I’m not trying here.”

Reason jiggled in anger, “Are you mocking me?”

I shook my head, sending over my confidence telepathically, “No, I’m reminding you why you hired me for the job.”

Reason’s spread-out body condensed into a more spherical blob. The razor queen calmed down, “Must you have used these methods to explain that?”

I shook my head, “I didn’t want to waste time arguing. I have an eldritch to kill, and I’m on a schedule.”

Reason paused, a tense silence passing over us. She shivered, “Is that so?”

I nodded, “Yup.”

She jumped back and forth, “Then, then this is a joyous day. You are what we wished for, a bringer of death. This is worthy of celebration. Face our ancient enemy on your terms, and we will discuss the first of your battles once you return.”

I waved a hand, “We’ll let you know how it turns out.”

Reason oozed away, funneling through her reinforced tunnels. Once they left, Helios muttered, “Thank you for avoiding that overlong explanation for why she needed to leave. I didn’t want to sit through it.”

Amara tensed, “I as well.”

Florence frowned, “I think you could’ve spoken your way out of that concisely, if you so chose. Actions do speak louder than words, but it’s good to remember that not every situation calls for yelling.”

I crossed my arms, “Hm, yeah, point taken.” I pointed at Helios, “Do you mind creating a panel of void ice between us and the ground?”

Skepticism traced Helios’s face, “Why, exactly?”

“I’m melting us down. I can survive that, but you guys might not.”

Helios leaned back, “How is this going to even work?”

I leaned my head against two of my fingers, “Alright, never mind. Don’t worry about it.”

Lifting a hand, I generated steel from mana, making a bubble of metal around us. On the top, a quintessence crystal lit our surroundings in white light. At the same time, another mind melted the stone below us and pulled us down with gravity. Yet another psyche cooled our inner sanctum while reinforcing it with an antigravity well, so it didn't crumble under the weight of Svia.

Florence marveled as we fell down this makeshift elevator shaft, "Now this is something special." Florence put his hand on the smoothed bubble around us, "This is what magic is all about, isn't it?"

Florence grinned at me, "Hah, you remind me of Obolis at times."

I raised my eyebrows, "Let's hope so. We'll need something absurd for Plazia."

Around us, the plating rumbled as we descended. Ringing taps rained down in an instant once we passed a certain depth. It reminded me of being under a tin roof while it rained bullets outside. Dents began forming over the steel covering us, and Amara slumped her shoulders,

"Are...are we going to be alright?"

I nodded, "For sure. We're going to be fine."

Event Horizon spread outwards in all directions, the shifting aura evading my allies but smothering the area around us. The denting sounds evaporated before I pulled an arm back. Pushing it forward, I pulled my fingers together before stabbing through the steel. Feeling around outside, magma pooled around my fingers, verifying my suspicions. I winced,

"Ok, so Reason might not be quite as ridiculous as I thought. We're in magma country right now, yet bugs are swarming outside. How? I have no idea."

My team members gawked at me, each of them stunned. Even Helios blinked his blind eyes a few times, his relaxed demeanor cracking a bit,

"We...we're surrounded by magma?"

I scoffed, “What? Of course. We’re like...at least a few miles deep by now.”

Cold sweat dripped from Florence and Amara’s brows before our friendly eldritch mumbled, “Miles...Of magma?”

I waved the fingers of my free hand, “Oh, most certainly. Now that I have you trapped here, all of you, prepare for your doom.”

Florence and Amara took my joke like I stabbed them through the chest. Each of them pushed their backs against the steel covering around them. Florence gulped, “It was all for this moment then...To think I trusted you.”

I burst into laughter, “Hah, what? You’re going to be fine. Damn guys, it’s a joke.”

Helios peered at his nails, still casual, “You may find yourself more humorous while in a more casual atmosphere. Death is looming around them at all angles while you laugh about it. That is creating a cognitive dissonance that’s ruining their immediate judgments.”

Helios lifted his hand, the albony bored, “I’d recommend making them feel safer if you’re willing.”

Leaning back, he was right. I shook my head before sighing, “Huh. Sorry guys, I just forgot this was, I don’t know, unusual, I guess? I’ve been swimming through magma for a long time now. Years maybe?”

Florence raised a hand as if he had a lot to say,

“I...yes.”

Yup, they needed a break. I spun my finger in a tiny circle before stabbing my other hand into the steel sphere around us. As I pulled it aside before Florence and Amara cringed away from the rupture. Helios remained unperturbed. Beyond the steel, igneous rock surrounded us. Florence stared at it,

“You chilled the magma?”

I stared at a hand, “I did. It’s something I’ve meant to do more of. I can control temperatures, but I’ve never really abused the cooling part of that. I’ve always stuck to heating objects more.”

Stretching out a hand, I materialized steel outwards while jerking stone away. This let me walk forward into a smooth tunnel supported by saturated gravity wells. I took a few steps before turning to the others, “You guys coming?”

Even Helios took a sharp breath at that. The ice mage leaned back in disgust, “How are you even doing this?”

I gave him a thumbs-up, “Cascading magics. Come on, let’s go.”

We took a few steps out before the rain of insects returned. Event Horizon destroyed them once more before I turned to the others, “Guys, I’m going to go outside for a second. Can you keep this structure safe, Helios?”

He nodded, “Void ice is extremely dense and hard. It may support us for a time, but we’ll warp away if you’re gone for more than a few minutes. I’m not dying out here because you’re forgetful.”

I lowered myself into a molten pit of the steel, “I wouldn’t expect you to. Keep them safe.”

I prevented the lava from erupting into the steel tunnel with gravity, and I cooled my helmet while I kept reading. Like that, I fell into the endless sea below, and I marveled at its size. I hardened the melted steel above before swimming through this vast, heated ocean. The immense pressure weighed on me like a blanket. The thick, liquid rock flowed over me like a summer breeze. Even the heat only seeped through like I dipped into a warm bath.

The ambient white noise of rushing magma also rung out in all directions. It was like I surrounded myself in a waterfall, the pour so loud it silenced everything else. I enjoyed the peace of the place. I might even spend more time under the mantle on Earth after this, but now wasn’t the time for thinking up leisure activities. Pulling myself back into



the moment, I retracted Event Horizon. From this lava, living blots crashed into me from all angles.

I formed pictures with my gravitational sense, making out the shape of these insects. They composed entirely of the surrounding lava, with no actual shells or blood making them up. From another perspective, I reached out with my sense for mana, finding they weren't truly alive, though they held a physical form.

It was the same technique that Obolis used for his living magic, but simply far more developed. Plazia had embedded mana under Svias crust, bringing these magma insects to life here, and these magical constructs prevented others from diving this deep. Considering the amount of mana required for this planetary enchantment, I smiled.

Plazia was strong. Very strong.

They darted in from all angles, their tiny minds fueled by their creator's commands. I tried grasping one, but it squeezed between my fingers before returning to its previous form. Several even fused together, rushing me like a world worm, battering at me like a raging bull. This enchantment would be challenging to handle for many people.

But not me. I silenced the massive worm with Event Horizon, its life ending in an instant. For the other insects, I telepathically linked with many of them, discovering more about the magic. These weren't purely magical constructs; Plazia implanted the minds of his insects into the magma. That's how they retained permanence so well.

This also meant Plazia still controlled them, and I found an enormous consciousness interacting with them from a distance. That subtle tethering reminded me of Lehesion's vast link. That wasn't because of this tether's strength but due to its toughness. Even if I jerked on these seemingly subtle connection points, they didn't snap.

Considering how minuscule these bug's minds were and how large mine was, that was absolutely incredible. Testing a theory, I let loose on those anchoring points. No matter how I pulled, they stayed taut. They were unbreakable. Getting Plazia-Ruhl's attention, I jerked on those connections like a child yanking on pigtails.

Seconds passed as the magma insects bit at me from all angles. They shattered claws, snapped teeth, and broke wings on my skin, unable to even scratch me. I found it

fascinating how large the magic enchantment was, and it sparked my curiosity. I wasn't the only one curious, however.

The enormous psyche from afar closed the gap, sending over a small fragment of itself here. This piece of Plazia's mind acted as an initial scout. Considering it ruled this underground domain, it must have found my presence baffling.

Once it landed, I seized the mind's fragment around my own conscious, smothering it. It reached out with an insidious curiosity,

"You who crawls beneath the mantle...Who are you, and how have you not perished amidst my inner sanctum?"

I grinned, "Me? I'm Daniel Hillside." I spread my arms,

"And I'm alive because I'm hard to kill."

Chapter 312: A Piece of Plazia

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"You who crawls beneath the mantle...Who are you, and how have you not perished amidst my inner sanctum?"

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"And I'm alive because I'm hard to kill."

Plazia's piece spoke out, "You are difficult to kill, but only now. You've lived by the mercy of those around you."

Plazia didn't threaten me like I expected. I leaned back, "How so?"

It reached out with malevolence, “The first of your mercies came from the son of that lich you walk with – Alfred Worm. He fell to darkness near his end, but he lived a dignified life. His life’s work lives on within you.”

My forehead wrinkled as my eyes widened, “Wait a minute, how do you-“

“The second of your mercies came from Schema, who hears all but listens little. He chose to let you live, as anyone like you is deserving of death in his unchanging eyes.”

I narrowed my eyes, and it smiled in my mind, “Your third mercy came from the undead mage, Torix Worm, father of Alfred and bringer of death. He could’ve stripped you bare. He thought to do so many times. You are a surrogate son to him, and so he did not.”

Plazia’s words carried an evil that crawled under my skin. It spoke out like liquid darkness,

“The fourth mercy you own came from Yawm of Flesh. He chose to embed his legacy within yours, and now you will enact his will or die. Your fifth and final mercy came from my own fangs – I did not sink them into your neck. You may be no sheep, but know you live by the will of those around you, as all beings do.”

He was right about that, but how he knew so much about me was eerie, especially the bits from BloodHollow. Plazia seeped out,

“Yet, you understand your weakness well. I found my own weakness in my forgotten memories. I’ve chosen to live by that weakness instead of dying by my strength.”

I parsed his riddle-bound words. Plazia let me live at some point when he didn’t have to. Knowing about BloodHollow gave that some validity. He talked about living by weakness instead of dying by strength. If I guesstimated his meaning, he referenced letting the ahcorus take over Svvia instead of being glassed by Schema...Probably.

Plazia continued, “That weakness was embedded in my faded memories. They linger as raw emotion, and now, only silence remains.”

Plazia bled out, “But I remember what those memories gave me. Warmth. Refuge. Purpose. In their lingering silence, I found peace. In that gloom, I found the quiet quite welcoming.”

As a hostage, he spoke in confidence, “Tell me this, Harbinger, are you so welcoming as that silence, or have you forgone me already, as all others have?”

He talked with more eloquence than Obolis, and even just this fractured fragment understood so much about me. As he spoke, one of my minds dissected Plazia’s words, and they unnerved me. He researched my background already, but more than that, he was connected to Baldag-Ruhl Somehow. There’s no way he could reference my time in BloodHollow otherwise.

Either way, I gave him a nod out of respect, “Huh, you know me, but I know you too. You’re using the ahcorus, and you chose to let them overrun the surface.” More of my animas went into action, thinking of different ideas, “You sent Wrath to find me as well. If you did, you wanted me here. Now, why you want me hunting you down, I can’t say.”

I crossed my arms, “How about you explain yourself?”

Plazia laughed, a haunting cackle ebbing out. It spoke with joy, “Do you read poetry?”

I blinked, “Eh, not really. You sound like you might.”

“You predict correctly, as I partake of it often. I relish in poems, and I listen closely to the words of the dead. They wrote with the wisdom of the living. From them, I have learned much. I learned that the enemy of my enemy is a friend.”

I frowned, unnerved by Plazia’s voice, “I’m picking up what you’re putting down. Sort of. So, who’s the enemy we both share?”

Plazia’s fragment oozed, “Schema.”

I shrugged, “I’m not against Schema.”

“But you are. You see the faults of his governance, and you have made your stance clear – you ally with the eldrich. You may ally with even me, should I convince you too. Your history has told me this.”

My hands tightened on my arms, “If working with you involves getting my skin getting peeled off and worn like a puppet, I’ll pass.”

“Listen closely and dwell on the words I’ve spoken. They carry many meanings, but one is singular; I understand what you are, who you are, and what you will be. I speak of the mercies given to you as an example. You were but a monster in the eyes of all, yet you rise above your origins.”

I tapped my arm, growing impatient, “What’s your point?”

The fragment gnarled out like the roots of an ancient oak, “I want your forgiveness for what I am, and in turn, I will give to you purpose and knowledge. That is a priceless offer, as I know of much. I know of Earth and Blegara and Gypsum. I know of the cipher and its secrets and of Schema’s lies. You glimpse at a shade of me, but trust in its confidence. My full being carries a light that will expose the dark, even though I dwell within its twilight.”

It muttered, “And I will tear you from those shadows if you would allow me to do so.”

His last words carried a lingering, ominous pain. I gestured around, “How about we call off the insects then? That would be a good start.”

In a flash, the insects retreated. Plazia’s fragment stayed in its mental restraints, comfortable as could be. I sighed,

“Ok...If I understand this right, you don’t actually want to fight me. You brought me here using Wrath, and now you want to explain something to me. I can’t understand why you’d do that. It doesn’t make any sense.”

It lounged about, sensing my other minds, “You are the Harbinger of Cataclysm. You are of many. You reek of forces surrounding space and time. Gravitation. Kinetics. Heat. All forces you’ve mastered. Your mind is honed as well, yet it is not stagnant. I know that it will change if given knowledge. From these observations, I believe you carry the potential to evoke a great change.”

Plazia radiated his words as if speaking a legend, “You carry that potential. Others have seen it. I as well. I aim to direct it, but not through manipulation. I wish to give you the truth, and you will direct the ensuing change on your own terms.”

My narrowed eyes turned to slits, “So you got some secrets you want to tell me...Cool. The thing is, why should I trust you at all, to begin with?”

“I did not speak to Elysium of what and who you are. My silence speaks for me, as your home remains unscarred.” Plazia’s fragment trembled, “Even when I may have scarred it with but an utterance.”

I tsked. Plazia was right. He talked about my time in BloodHollow, so he knew where my home planet was. He could’ve told Elysium before my ceasefire if he was so inclined. Earth would’ve been devastated, and I couldn’t have done anything about it. In fact, based on what Plazia said, he didn’t act on many of my past events. My curiosity peaked, and I tilted my head, “Point taken. You want to just talk then?”

It reached out towards one of my minds. It seethed inner darkness and primordial hunger, but something else effused from its psyche – a sort of enlightenment. Plazia held some secret or truth that changed him, and he wanted to share it with me. The mind laid bare that raw emotion, and it convinced me more than any words he could’ve spoken.

But it also terrified me. He was too convincing. My instincts flared as I jerked myself back, and I growled, “A Ruhl nearly wore my soul for its shell. A feeling isn’t going to be enough to convince me.”

Plazia rumbled, “And you killed my brethren, but I wish not for your blood. I wish to tell you what my full being knows. Meet me beneath the lair of Wrath, and I shall untangle the riddles I’ve spoken. Your web of ignorance will unweave with my words, and we shall be of one notion.”

The piece of Plazia condensed into a small, minute point as it said, “If we disagree, then you will kill me. I shall put my life on that edge, as I endure for more than just survival. I wish to one day live as I did before I became an eldritch.”

That was a loaded statement. Fractures popped into the edges of the mind, “Before this was done to me.”

I tried holding the splinter of Plazia together, but it ripped itself apart before I could even react. The hollowed memories within turned into a garbled mess. Staying amongst the calming lava flows, I submerged in the mantle of Svia for a few minutes, thinking Plazia’s words over. Getting my thoughts in order, I pulled myself back to the void ice.

Knocking on it like a door, Helios let me in while I cooled the magma around it. As I stepped into the steel shell, Amara, Florence, and Helios stared at me. Helios tilted his head, “What did you uncover about our oh so mighty foe?”

I let my arms down to my sides, “Plazia knows about me. He knows everything.”

Florence stepped forward, his curiosity peaked, “Ah, so he knows the history of killing Yawm and the like. Did you not expect him to do research or something?”

I waved, “No, I mean, he knows more about me than almost anyone else. And, he’s hard to understand. He talks in riddles... Well, sort of. I mean, they’re kind of like riddles, but maybe he’s just metaphorical all the time.”

Helios waved a hand, “A standard hivemind then? Did he also wish to fight you to the death over many decades?”

I blinked, “No. Plazia wants to explain something to me. Apparently, he remembers a time before becoming an eldritch.”

Helios’s inner brow wrinkled, “Huh. Really? That’s... odd.”

Amara hissed, “I know my own kind. It is a beast, and it cannot be trusted. It will attack when you are vulnerable. It throws us from our hunt to save itself. Do not listen.”

My face wrinkled in confusion, “I don’t know. Plazia seemed pretty genuine about us not killing each other.”

Florence spread out his arms, “Guys, when an ancient, revered hivemind wishes to not kill us, who are we to argue?”

Amara simmered, “You are a coward.”

Florence swung an arm, “And proud of it. Now, any details on the peace treaty? I’ll get the pen and ink out if you need them. I’m sure Plazia wants the treaty signed in blood, so I’ll make the donation if that’s necessary. Now, if the parchment needs to be skin, you’ll have to find someone else for that.”

I leaned back against the steel bubble, “You know what, I really don’t know what he wants. If anything, he might be pulling me in with curiosity instead of threats. If I come wanting to learn, my guard would be down. Maybe that’s his aim.”

Helios’s eyes narrowed, “Has the great Harbinger’s confidence been shattered?”

“What confidence I had at least.”

Helios rolled his shoulders, “Then we move forward with more caution. It is as simple as that.” Helios walked over and gave my chest a hard tap with his gauntlet, “Where must we go, and what must we do to prepare for Plazia-Ruhl?”

I shook off my jitters, getting *déjà vu* from my time in BloodHollow. My helplessness then gave me some severe whiplash now, but I got myself together, smashing it apart. I wasn’t the same person trapped in that cave, and I wouldn’t be manipulated again.

Plazia wouldn’t end up wearing my skin either.

I stood back up, “We need to head to Wrath’s colony. That’s where Plazia told me to meet him. He’s probably under them.”

Florence’s jovial demeanor deflated at that, “Oh...Do we know for sure that Wrath is Plazia’s tool now?”

Remembering how Plazia knew my past, I nodded, “We were right. Plazia directed me here even before the rebellion with Giess began.”



Helios snapped the fingers of his gauntlet, the void ice dispersing from around our steel bubble. Helios said, “He may not have known of your rise to prominence. It is an easy error to make, as I would know.”

Helios’s upper lip twitched. I turned a palm to him, “Look, your first impression with me was about as terrible as it could get. That being said, you haven’t run out in the middle of a fight, not even against Lehesion. You’re gaining ground, albeit slowly.”

I tapped his shoulder, “So chin up, ice mage. Someone has to be the cynical jackass of the bunch, and you’re just the man for the job.”

Florence smirked, “He does have an icy demeanor, doesn’t he?”

I laughed, but no one else did. Amara winced, “I hate you all.”

I lifted an arm, pulling our steel bubble up from Svía’s mantle, “Well, that’s enough talking for now. Let’s warp to Wrath’s colony and meet him. I’m tired of waiting.”

Helios opened his status, “Do you know her colony’s coordinates?”

I sent Reason a message about it as I spoke, “No, but I will in a few minutes.”

Without warning, our make-shift vessel collided with the solid crust of Svía. Everyone lost their footing before I winced back, “Hah, sorry, guys.”

I mentally cringed at the simple mistake. Using this many minds for so many tasks overwhelmed me at times, and it led to tiny errors like that. Getting all the different animas working together without gaps took more effort than I’d have thought. It needed abundant organization and keen foresight.

So much foresight that I planned on brainstorming some kind of solution for it. Before doing that, I got us out of Svía’s crust, pulling the steel sphere into Reason’s colony. Among the toothy tunnels and pressured depths, we rested inside that metal orb for a moment.

Florence made notes in his status about Svia, the Ahcorus, and Plazia. Amara opened up her red status, fiddling with it. Helios waited, meditating for a bit. After Reason sent me Wrath's coordinates, I relayed them to the ice mage, and Helios got to work. He pulled out a dozen apps, each helping him handle the logistics involved with warping.

Helios even constructed 3-D, visual spaces from 2-D maps of Svia. He actually made the areas well enough they mirrored reality quite well. Helios kept at it more than necessary, however. He etched in details, finalized the colors, and added depth to rocks.

Turns out, Helios was an artist.

I quit watching, letting him get everything ready. In the meantime, I sat down and brainstormed a way of organizing my many minds. I had thirteen made right now. Eight dedicated themselves to the furnaces. One read the book in front of my face while another practiced the cipher. The other three helped me cast magic, speak, and visualize my surroundings.

Despite my profusion of multi-tasking, I ended up sharper than average, though nothing too crazy. Just as well, I hadn't actually had any free time since uncovering the mana into mental processing power phenomenon. Pushing those limits, finding its use cases, and discovering those inner workings would take me to the next level, mentally, that is.

Aiming for that, I sat down cross-legged in our spacious metal globule, and I pushed a bit more energy into mental processing power. My mind responded in turn, becoming faster. Even tiny, minuscule amounts of mana made a tangible difference, so I put in a bit more. Once again, positive effects manifested, and the many tasks my minds handled became easier.

I gave it even more juice, and suddenly, my thoughts turned in different directions. Focusing became a burden, and it was as if I was on some kind of stimulant. Considering how little mana I injected, the speeding up process carried no limit. My ability to control it was the deciding factor, and like runaway trains, my psyches ended up running off the rails.

I dwelled on many aspects of my life, my mistakes, and my hardships. Emotions ran rampant, overwhelming me in a surging tide. Anger, rage, hatred, sadness, and even happiness all hit me in a sort of mania.

I grabbed the sides of my head, pulling mana back into the cipheric runes. I bit through my lip, my silver blood gushing out before reconstituting in an instant. I let out a small gasp before settling myself down. Florence peered up from his status work, “So, uh, you ok?”

The sociable albony was as perceptive as ever, though it wasn’t hard to notice. I nodded, “I’m fine.”

Florence tuned back to his screen, but he kept an eye on me. I waited a bit before doing anything else, scared of what may happen. Before I paralyzed in that fear, my insight mind fed me a, well, insight about what just happened – I just experienced mana devolution. However, that was only the early stages of it.

My insight psyche explained that mana devolution involved a mind running rampant, no longer under the user’s control. It was similar to getting too lost in your own thoughts but amplified many times over. If a person couldn’t pull their mind back, then the person fell into an insane mania. My eyes widened as a few realizations popped in my head at that fact.

First, I would’ve 100% have devolved into an animal if not for my blood magic. After all, my mana output vastly exceeded my capacity to control it. By taking a more physical approach to my magic, I avoided being possessed by my own volatile mana flows.

My second realization came from an article I read about mana devolution; ascendant mana carried the highest chance of it occurring. Interestingly enough, quintessence had the least, and that made intuitive sense to me. I mean, quintessence just motivated you to build yourself and others up. Even if you ‘devolved’ with that mana type, your manifested personality wouldn’t be all that bad. It would be like an ambitious CEO or something.

On the other hand, ascendant mana was the energy of consumption. Of the advanced mana types, I gained it first from my exposure to inter-dimensional miasma. If I fell into ascendant mana’s influence, I’d be a raging monster hell-bent on eating everything in my path. I’d be like the worst incarnation of an eldritch, one that evolved rapidly and couldn’t be killed.

That’s probably why Schema considered me such a risk factor. It’s also why Spear considered letting me live to be such a huge blessing. I represented a real chance at

becoming something abominable. Despite the gloom cast by those realizations, I also gained some confidence from these facts.

Not discovering this processing facet of my mana probably saved me a lot of headaches. Considering how difficult it was to control, I'd never have managed this early on. It would've consumed me like a hungry shark mauling an injured fish. This also explained why Baldag-Ruhl made this armor like this.

Baldag-Ruhl intended on this metal to bolster his mental capabilities, and that's why it generated so much mana. Torix and my experiment with the rip in space-time ended up shifting the carapace's evolutionary path, making it more a dimension than just a mana shell. Feeding it eldritch helped me generate ascendant mana too.

Peering at my own skin, the dark gray metal sheened from the quintessence overhead. It could've blessed me with my talent for runes and gravity even. At this point, it spiraled out of control, a forbidden relic further bolstered by Schema's system. With my cipher runes enhancing it even further beyond, this armor left me awash in limitless possibility.

It was an amazing, utterly unique artifact.

Tapping into that unending potential meant mastering this aspect of it. Even if it would be a challenge, I'd faced plenty of those before. It was time for another, so I prepped my mind for a flood of emotions, disciplining myself to prevent the ensuing chaos they'd cause. I closed my eyes, and I oriented several personas to that end. Dribbling mana into each anima, I ramped up my mental processing.

It expanded, and the five free minds began wobbling. They struggled with controlling the overflow of thoughts, each preventing my descent into madness. I put one furnace burning psyche to the job of managing those minds. This psyche acted as a manager of the other Daniels, setting them straight and helping them stay on task.

I put more of the furnace psyches to this new task, and my thoughts flourished from it. I found the upper limit of productivity for this manager Daniel to be right at seven minds. Any more, and it no longer assisted them all. Any less, and it had gaps in its schedule, causing it to micromanage. Finding this balance, I managed a careful equilibrium of augmented minds.

I kept at this process, entering a deep state of meditation. Taking slow, shallow breaths, the different consciousnesses acclimated to the mana flows. I wasn't about to suddenly master this ability, but I gained a much more defined idea of what I could and couldn't do. Knowing my limits, I kept this manager Daniel over the 'free' minds. I also put fewer minds on Matter Conversion in general.

Even over just a few hours, I gained quite a few skill levels in that mythical skill. Seven times more than usual, in fact. Combine that with the processing power, and I could put four furnaces to three minds now. These adjustments gave me two more psyches to work with. One of those psyches became manager Daniel. He put mana into the free minds and helped keep them from spiraling out of control.

For the other freed consciousness, I put it on insights and magic duty. Once it was all said and done, everything flowed smoother compared to before. Manager Daniel stopped me from messing up the simple stuff while getting more processing power out of each mind. Having dual psyches put on insight patrol also meant I'd respond faster and better to situations.

Eh, most of the time.

My speaking and thinking self stayed at the forefront of all those minds. After an hour of practice, it turned from a wonky attempt into a solid structure. Gaining a method for A Manifold Mind gave me a lot of breathing room. Everything clicking into place, I peered around. Helios kept reaching out, envisioning various warp summons. Florence and Amara kept at their relevant studies. I turned a palm to Helios,

“Are you ready to head out?”

Helios took a breath, calming himself before he snapped his fingers. A picture-perfect warp spawned, one leading to another colony like this one. Helios cracked his neck and stood, “Of course I am. I'm a Novas, after all.”

He walked through the portal before we all followed, the veil snapping shut behind us. Once within Wrath's domain, we found more green drone slimes rolling about. Enamel lined the tunnels as reinforcement, and the same sterile, burning scent effused this place as well. Bruiser slimes came up to us over the next minute, each of the fighters deep blue in coloration, just like Reason's guards.

Unlike Reason's troops, these slimes charged us with unquenchable ferocity. I stood between the blobs and my team, holding each of them in my fingers. They snapped several toothy shards and spears against my skin, snapping their chosen weapons against me. They recreated those tools over and over, their biomass shrinking over time.

When Wrath showed up, the guardians wrestled against me while surrounded by piles of shattered teeth. Wrath rolled up before spreading her form thin. She swallowed the expanse of debris before forming blades of her own. With needle tendrils, she sliced into each of the slime guards. From within, she expanded bushes' worth of spikes from their insides. Those slimes gurgled before she pulled them into her steel blue membrane, assimilating each of them.

Florence shivered, "Sheesh. It looks like Wrath also lives up to her namesake."

Wrath trembled, "I do. You've visited me, Harbinger. Finally. We may kill my species' ultimate enemy...together."

Unlike with Reason, Wrath lacked the same nonchalance before battle. She stayed aware of her surroundings, several thin feeler tendrils inspecting around her at all times. Wrath's spikes and teeth also carried a different composition, being more than simple crystals. One of the claws tapped me, and it mirrored some organic fusion of graphene and adhesives based on the hardness.

How she got graphene, I didn't know. As for the adhesives, they turned dull carbon to shimmering gold. When ready for battle, Wrath exuded danger, both majestic and deadly. I smiled at her, spreading my arms, "It's good to see you too. We'll be focusing on scouting for now, but we'll be spilling blood soon."

I sent over a telepathic burst of bloodlust, and Wrath quivered in joy. I grinned, "I can promise you that much."

Wrath receded, "Then killer of wolves, what have you visited my colony for? Plazia rests beneath every colony, and mine is no closer than the others. We have spread my domain far and wide, but not deeply. Reason or Awe would serve you better if burrowing deeply was your goal."

Her feelers groped Amara and I. Wrath shivered, "But you have visited Reason already. And you, little one-" Wrath pooled up near Amara.

Avoiding the same aggressive conversation again, I cut in, “She’s with me. She’s my technician.”

Wrath’s tendrils touched Amara’s hair. Wrath uttered, “Of course she is. She holds bloodshed in her skin and blood on her hair. I love its taste, little one. You also carry the skin and flesh and bone of your leader. You serve him well for the Harbinger to indulge such gifts.”

Amara leaned back, turning her palms away from Wrath, “I...I have done what I may.”

Wrath shuddered, “We may one day taste each other, should you desire.”

I turned to Florence, who turned to me. We both gawked at each other, each of us having a conversation with that glance. Helios rested his face on his hands, “A razor queen who wishes to mate with our eldritch technician. Ah yes, how charming.”

An awkward silence passed before I spread my hands, “Alright guys, do whatever the hell you want to on your off time. We’re on a mission right now, so stop all this.”

Amara pushed away Wrath, who showed no signs of doing the same. Unlike Reason, Wrath stood by herself, the drones around here giving plenty of space to their queen. Even the guards kept their distance, no slime wanting to be devoured without warning.

There may be multiple kinds of devouring going on if I had to guess.

Either way, that was none of my business as I pointed down, “Take us to the bottom of the colony, and we’ll take it from there. Don’t worry about the burrowing.”

Wrath balled herself up before firing herself away. I pulled everyone along, keeping pace with Wrath. We wended through the tunnels fast as an echo, the twists and turns passing by my eyes like a roller coaster ride. Seconds later, we rested at a much higher depth than Reason’s colony depths. Enamel struts remained a rarity here, and the supporting tunnels still let us move around.

Before leaving, Wrath let one last tendril feel over Amara as the razor queen left here. Once Wrath departed, Amara mumbled under her breath, “Perhaps...perhaps not all razor queens are bad.”

Florence covered his mouth under his black mask, “Ooooooh.”

Helios sighed before shaking his head in disgust, “I would’ve never have imagined, not in a thousand lifetimes, that I’d prefer going to a different world with Hod instead of you, Amara.”

Helios lost tension in his arms, and they flopped on his sides, “And yet, here I am, wishing he were here instead. Their bulbous eating contests were far less disgusting than...whatever this is.”

Amara cackled before hissing, “Is that jealousy I hear?”

Florence and I bust out laughing at Helios. The ice mage simmered, “Wrath’s disposition may explain why she’s allied with Plazia, hm? Regardless, may we please fight the world-ending horror instead of experiencing this grotesque coupling? I would much prefer the former to the latter.”

I got my chuckles out before wiping away a tear with a branch of armor. Damn, I hadn’t laughed that hard in forever. I sighed, “Ok, ok. Let’s go get him.”

Before I could use my newfound, fancy elevator technique, insects composed of magma crawled out of the ground. These insects assimilated together, forming a blob of lava. This lava then spoke out in a familiar and ominous voice,

“You have come and with others of use. They bring a wealth of talents, ones we may turn to our own uses, soon enough.”

Amara lifted her palms to the living magma, “So this is Plazia? He is less than he first appeared to be. I’m disappointed.”

The magma tilted its head, “Amara, it is good to meet you. I studied you when Yawm first stole you from the prison your rulers commanded. It is from my research of your



origins that I uncovered the inner machinations of Schema's system. Your research into cipheric energy flows was groundbreaking in that regard."

The magma smiled with igneous teeth of blackened stone, "So while you may be disappointed in me, know that the feeling is far from mutual."

Amara shivered before grabbing her elbow and pulling it against her side. She snapped, "How do you know so much about me? Are you so shameless in your spying?"

Plazia chided, "Spying is merely gathering information others wish to hide. My curiosity is never-ending, and so I engage in all methods of obtaining information. That pursuit sustains me, and from it, I know much of everything, spawn of the Builders. Remember that the next time you judge my surface, for I am like a book; my cover only shows but one of my many pages."

Florence spread his hands, "So, I've heard from Daniel that you're not trying to kill us. I just, you know, wanted to verify that."

Plazia opened dark, umbral eyes of igneous rock, and they bent into a raised brow,

"I aim for far more than your deaths, silver tongue. Your demise would mean little but the loss of your powers, for it is in living that your value is manifested. In life, you may help me rise above my corruption. You may offer us salvation."

He referenced all eldritch there at the end. Amara took a step back and snarled, "Salvation? You speak as Yawm did, and he tormented many. You'll find we are no fools, and if you wish to bend us to your will, we will retaliate in kind."

I listened as Plazia cackled. He reverberated from the stone all around us, "No. I manipulate only when I must. You each carry your own ideas and virtues. I will aim those virtues at a new goal, a far greater one than any of you may imagine. Follow my children, and I will offer each of you my truest form."

A piece of the ground glowed before more of his glowing insects walked out of this spot. Where rock once stood, a tunnel formed. Some of Plazia's vessels stayed behind, holding the tunnel upright. Helios found nothing wrong with the mana, and Amara couldn't sense any cipher shenanigans either. All of our senses showed nothing as well, but we prepared for the worst.

I charged dozens of singularities into my blood. Amara's hair grazed all of our surroundings where it could. Florence prepared several messages in his status for help, and Helios generated a portal. Unlike other warps, Helios dragged this one behind us. I'd never seen someone do something similar, yet he did.

I created a shell of Event Horizon around my teammates, and I generated an antigravity well ready to stop a tunnel's sudden collapse. After we set everything up, we paced down the tunnel for about a hundred yards. We reached an excavated cave. It stood twenty feet tall and forty wide, kind of a tight squeeze for all of us at that point.

Plazia-Ruhl spoke from the bowels of Svia, "I invite you forth."

On the wall farthest from us, a spearhead cleaved through dimensional space. I blinked, recognizing the dimensional slicer to be one of the Sentinels' weapons. Reaching out my hand, I readied a swarm of singularities at the entrance point. No violence came our way, so I stayed my assault for now.

He could've reached us at any point, so I noted that. He brought us here for some other reason.

The violet, cackling blade sheared space-time before a Sentinel's hands grabbed the dimensional tear. These sharpened gauntlets colored dark azure instead of the bright turquoise of most Sentinels. Many black tubes lined the hand's palms, but the fingers ended in sharpened claws, gripping into the sliced fabric.

Once pulled open, a complete, azure Sentinel walked out of this warp. Cipheric runes coated the outer plating, and primordial mana oozed from every iota of it. That dark blue energy spawned lightning which clashed into the Sentinel's surroundings at random. The sparks dissipated against the shield of Event Horizon I made earlier.

Once past the veil, the Sentinel's primordial lightning died down. In its wake, the mana warped the space around us, bending it to the twisted Sentinel's will. This hollowed guardian sheathed its dimensional slicer onto its back, the air around it popping with volatility. It held the dimensional tear open with comfort, as I often did.

We gawked at the being, and from under its plates, a discordant thrum of cracking ebbed out. At first, I believed it was insects under its skin. Listening closer and finding

absurd sums of mana, the Sentinel used furnaces underneath its armor at all times. Quite a few of them, actually. Helios gasped while stepping back, “You...how many furnaces are you using? Four? Five?”

Plazia-Ruhl raised a hand, one that showed the convoluted tubing of an Overseer’s gauntlet. He grasped the large fingers into a fist,

“I am wielding several hundred, but not here. They lay throughout Svia, and they establish my domain upon this world.”

Sensing the mana around him, I verified his claims. The energy coursing through the Sentinel’s armor paled compared to my own, being about one-fifth of mine. He struggled with that much while his body both incinerated and healed in tandem.

For him, this was likely the limit of his mana potential. Anymore, and he’d burn away to ash. At this apex of his potential, Plazia spread out his hands, his polished Sentinel armor glistening in the magma’s light behind his warp,

“I am Plazia-Ruhl, of Many Faces, and I have much to show you, Harbinger.”

### Chapter 313: Ancient and Venerable

I took a step back, and the others did with me. I reached up a hand, and I slid Amara into the portal in a quick swipe. Disappearing into my pocket dimension, Amara didn’t have time to react. At the same time, I reached out a hand that grappled Plazia in an intense gravity well. Plazia hovered off the ground, his body inert yet oozing mana still.

Plazia mouthed out, “You’re cautious of me. That’s excellent. Only a fool would trust an eldritch abomination, especially one so close.”

I grimaced, “So you could’ve shown up whenever you wanted. Why here and why now?”

Plazia tilted the Sentinel’s helm sideways, insects creaking within,

“I exposed myself here so that I may show Wrath respect. Her colony is her domain, a sacred and venerable concept to the Ahcorus. To enter as you have is an invasion, both of her privacy and her dignity. It serves your goals well to remember that.”

We turned to Helios, and the ice mage chided, “I’ll reiterate; I never said warping was a good idea. I was merely able to do so at the time.”

Plazia leaned towards Helios, “You are a master of portals, Helios, but masteries are often blinding. They mask our fragility, so our weaknesses are unseen and unknown by us. This promotes stagnation. Your blindness acts as an opposite to that concept – overcoming that blindness has given you strength.”

Around us, tiny mana spots swarmed, each of them unmanifested insects of magma. Plazia moved them, making them dance. The hivemind hissed, “From an endless gloom, you pulled yourself into a different world of motion. In many ways, the world you see outdoes the visible one in both beauty and function. Should you wield your other weaknesses as such, they shall grant you further reason to grow.”

I marveled at the dancing swarm while Helios crossed his arms. The albony royal sneered, “Enough preaching. What are you here for, and what do you want?”

Plazia cackled out laughter before hissing, “For he who lives in darkness, you detest being seen. That fits you, who lives in an ever-moving umbra. Perhaps you never wish to leave it?”

Helios leaned back while Plazia-Ruhl turned his head to me, “I’ve shown no aggression. Perhaps you’re willing to release me now?”

I narrowed my eyes, but I let him down. Plazia finished stepping through his warp, the dimensional tear snapping shut behind him. He turned towards the rock wall, and the stone sprung to life. Dozens of magma insects crawled from his presence, a larger space forming for us. Around him, cipheric markings formed over the molten rock.

Those sigils solidified, and with a flash of primordial mana, Plazia poured energy into the incantations to enchant the lettering. My HUD disappeared, along with my notifications and status. Plazia sat onto a writhing throne of undulating lava. As he made contact, it condensed into basalt throne before he lifted a hand to us,

“Find comfort where you may, as my words will grate your ears and slither under your skin...Should you heed them.”

While I wondered if Plazia planned on attacking us, Florence walked forward before I could access the situation. A stony pillar formed beneath the albony, and Florence sat on it. Turning back, Florence smiled at us, “He’s not lying. Let’s hear him out.”

Helios listened to his brother, and the ice mage stepped up. As Helios plopped down onto a forming basalt pillar, the ice mage leaned his masked face onto one hand. Helios mouthed, “Gah...I hope this isn’t a waste of time.”

While they sat, I stood. The rock had no chance of holding my heft up, magical insects or not. I turned a hand to Plazia-Ruhl, “So, what is it you’re after, exactly?”

Plazia steepled his fingers while resting his elbows on his knees. On his twisted throne, he watched us,

“I know of you all, as I know of many things. Florence, you’ve found new life in a foreign place where your talents are cherished. Helios, by being thrown into a fire, you’ve shaken yourself from your quiescence. The hidden Amara arrested under the tutelage of builders, and she found sanctum under the wing of that which she fears.”

The air grew heavy as Plazia locked in on me, “And you, Daniel...You’ve been forced to grow beyond your means, and now that growth terrifies you. That dread manifests from a lack of knowledge and experience but, most of all, a lack of direction. You are aimless. I am here to offer you direction.”

I raised my brow, “You sound a lot like Spear.”

Plazia stayed leaning forward, “His plea grounded itself in dogma. Mine is grounded in change, something that only you may enact.”

I crossed my arms, “Alright then, what’s the change?”

Plazia hummed his words, “I remember a time before my alteration into an eldritch. Only shadowy lapses still linger, but those memories are enough. They seep in from between the cracks of my mind. They are all I need as proof of what’s occurring.”

Plazia spread his hands, "Schema would have you believe that the eldritch spawn from the clashing of dimensions. This is a hollow truth. The interdimensional energies do not create sentient species; they warp them. The eldritch arrive from another dimension that's dying, and that dimension's death results in us transferring across dimensions."

Plazia tapped the side of his Sentinel's helmet, "And that is what leads to our full deformities. We are the minds of those lost in that ether, but our forms are disfigured into the eldritch abominations you now fight. If anyone understands the corrupt influence of interdimensional energies, it's you, Daniel."

I winced, remembering when I put my hand in a dimensional tear in BloodHollow. That ended up changing the evolutionary path of my armor from then on, so it worked in my favor. Not everyone had an eldritch's carapace over their body, however. I almost succumbed to the energy at the time despite my advantages even.

I frowned, "Even if what you're saying is true, does it really matter? Even if you're innocent before arriving here, the eldritch aren't exactly talkative after arrival. I'll help who I can, but for the most part, the eldritch are monsters that need to be wiped out." I turned to the albonies in the room,

"Don't tell Amara I said that."

Florence gave me a thumbs up while Helios murmured, "I wouldn't care enough too."

Plazia sighed, "That is...An unfortunate reality, and it's worthy of note. Our kind is a darkness, one that cannot be purified only removed. By the time we've landed here, we've turned into nothing more than a shell of our old selves. Nothing remains of our lineage, and so, we've only made a new one here. It's a horrid picture we painted so far."

Plazia shook a fist, "But that is where you may change our grim reality. You're the only creature outside of the Old Ones that can cross these transdimensional energies without corruption. Within you lies the only means of crossing those dimensions. You may be our beacon to crossing the veil, a lighthouse amidst dark, stormy seas."

Plazia's voice rose, "Think of it. We may turn monsters to men and wolves to women. They'd carry a different dimension's knowledge, one we may establish without cause

for concern. The secrets of the cipher would unveil to us. We could step into a life where there was no more need for the constant slaughter. We only need a shepherd, one that may guide us wolves back into sheep.”

Helios cracked his neck, “And Daniel is supposed to be this shepherd, hm?”

Plazia nodded. Helios raised a brow, “If that is the case, do you have any comprehension of how many trillions of people Daniel would need to send over? What about the sheer scale and the enormity of the time commitment? Do you think Daniel has the available resources to worry about other people when his guild has just experienced a galactic war before it has even stepped off its home planet?”

I couldn’t have said it better myself. I pointed at Helios, “What he said.”

Plazia steepled his hands once more, “And that is where the crux of my offerings reside – I am willing to offer you my servitude in exchange for establishing a bridge between these two dimensions. Once you’ve left a mark there, we can sheer space-time as Baldag-Ruhl did upon both these planes. A warp will be possible thereafter.”

I leaned back, considering the proposal. I believed I’d be shuttling group after group of survivors, which sounded like a waste of time. I could save a few thousand per trip at most, maybe ten thousand tops. If I stayed here, helping normal planets and fringe worlds far exceeded the net benefit of something like that.

On the other hand, a bridge? That changed the entire proposal. If that bridge landed on Earth, it gave us a way of avoiding many negative outcomes. In fact, if we gained a different dimension to escape to, we could avoid Schema and Elysium alike. That set us up in a much less precarious position. Of all the points in this equation, that one tempted me most.

I wouldn’t have to protect people all the time. I could run wild, and that sounded like a burden off my shoulders.

And considering Schema’s radio silence, I enjoyed the idea of having a bailout option. Of course, this all hinged on whether or not Plazia could even be believed at all. Killing Plazia also fulfilled my agreement with Obolis, something I wanted out of the way. I rubbed my temples before reaching out a hand, “Ok, Plazia. I think we can come to an agreement here.”

Florence clapped his hands while whistling, “Hah, wow. You’re insane, Daniel. I love it.”

Helios stood, and he tilted his head at me, “Are you...Casually betraying Schema?”

I waved a hand, “Helios, don’t pull a Spear on me and be all close-minded about this. Give me a second to figure this all out.” I pointed at Plazia, “First off, what are you going to do about Schema’s retaliation? He’ll figure out we’re working with you, and I’ll be exiled. My guild may be destroyed for it too.”

Plazia gestured around himself, “I’ve spoken with numerous Builders like Amara. Most of them have perished, but a few of them still owe me favors. They can construct bonuses and hack into Schema’s system as Amara may. I can have my death, and the ensuing experience siphoned your way. My true form can hide in your pocket dimension until I can be secured across the dimensional lines. In that interim, Schema carries no influence, and our deception shall be complete.”

Florence cupped his chin, his legs crossed, “So you’re willing to put it all on the line for this, huh? Because Daniel’s pocket dimension is impossible to escape from, and he can hold you there as long as he likes. That could be forever, which is basically death.”

Plazia peered through Florence, and the hivemind stated, “Unlike my brethren, I live for more than hunger. I live for the hope of a future. It gives my tomorrow meaning beyond mere hunger. I cherish that gift, as few of my kind can ever hope to feel it.”

Florence leaned closer, “Oh? Really now? Ok, how about you let Daniel put you in his pocket dimension right now? That’ll put some actual weight behind what you’re saying.”

Plazia tapped his fingertips together, the Sentinel’s graphene coating ebbing out a dull thud. Plazia stood, “You may throw me into the void or have me unleashed in the center of a star. Dying before I can even begin my goal is foolish. I’ll be slotted into that void when the circumstances are well suited for it.”

Florence shrugged, “I’m just trying to let you show what you’re made of.”



Plazia peered down at Florence, “Show me that you’re committed, and I’ll do the same.”

I waved a hand, “How is this whole dimensional transference going to even work anyway? How would you construct a bridge?”

Plazia pointed at me, “You are the answer. Your armor is immune to transdimensional energy. By simply holding a thread of your fabric, we can create a tether between our dimensions. Once we tore the two gashes into space-time, we will construct a tunnel from your skin to shield others who traverse across the veil.”

I scoffed, “Are they just going to walk that infinity’s distance?”

Plazia shook his head, “No. We’ll connect it via wormholes after establishing this tunnel between dimensions. It requires your fabric for this to have a hope of succeeding, however. You’re a dimension, so you may allow for dimensional properties to manifest within your domain.”

Plazia sat back down onto his basalt throne, “We’ll use those dimensional qualities to create the wormhole.”

I raised my brow, “You honestly think this will work, huh?”

Plazia spread his hands, “Would I put my existence on the line if I wasn’t absolutely certain?”

I grimaced, “It sounds insane, like a theoretical concept you’re using me as a guinea pig to test out.”

Plazia waved his hand, “That’s a misunderstanding. You will not be testing hypotheticals. There are procedures we may follow to ensure your safety. We may test each step of my hypothesis until it is, without a doubt, proven. Only then, after the risks have been altogether muted, will we risk anything.”

Florence stood up, “That sounds all right to me, but we’re here to finish a mission, one where you have to die. Are you willing to help us complete it? It requires you pulling your influence over Svía out of the equation.”

Plazia peered up, staring at the colonies lingering above, “I am willing. While it may only be a temporary measure, I may establish a zone like this where Schema carries no influence or reach. These spots are cleared out by Overseers in time, but currently, they busy themselves battling Elysium. That grants us several weeks for work. That is more than enough time to begin these processes in earnest.”

I tapped the ceiling for a moment before opening my pocket dimension. I slid Amara out of it, and she fell out of stasis. I set her down with a gravity well. She remained unaware that I even captured her. I raised a hand to her, “Could you have a death message sent to Schema confirming Plazia’s death?”

Amara peered around, whiplashed by the sudden shift in time. She hissed, “What happened?”

I snapped my fingers, “We’re trying to arrange a deal with Plazia.”

She snarled, “Why should we help him?”

Plazia gazed at her, “I know of your intentions. More worthy of note, I know of your motivations. Each of you desires some kind of outcome, and my offer may grant you all you wish and more. It is centered on an exchange.”

He turned a palm to Amara, “If Daniel acts as a shepherd between our dimensions and ferries untainted people from the new domain into our own, I will give you my undying services.” Plazia leaned back into his throne while oozing confidence, “Of which, I may offer many.”

I rested my chin on my right fist, “He’s saying that I’ll need to go towards the collapsing dimension while creating a bridge and take unchanged people back. If I do that, I’ll get Plazia as an underling.”

Plazia rested his hands on the armrests of his throne, “Yes...Though perhaps you may call me something else besides an underling?”

I tapped my teeth together, “Eh...Maybe.”

A war waged in my head. Different minds threw out all kinds of thoughts on the issue, weighing pros and cons. Before I voiced my questions, Amara gawked at Plazia. She raised her palms to the hivemind,

“You... You say that we’re tainted? All of us?”

Plazia peered off, unable to meet her gaze, “Yes. We are. We are like shadows, the dark manifestations of what we once were. Our passage from one realm to the next has molded us too deeply, and we may never return to our former selves. However, we may help those that have yet to turn.”

Amara stared down at her palms, or in her case, up at her face. She snarled out, “What proof do you have that the eldritch are changed people? Nothing about them says that. We’re made of energy.”

Plazia pointed a clawed finger at his temple, “My memories of my past life verify it.”

Amara swooshed her hands, shouting out, “Like what kind of memories?”

Plazia remained cool and collected, “They are vague impressions of a scholarly lordship. I remember my hunger for knowledge matching my current ravenous disposition. I did not desire flesh and biomass as I do now, however. This desire for an absolute centralization of all organic resources, it is our most crippling of curses. It weighs us down to a place where we exist as nothing more than mindless monsters.”

Plazia threw his hand to the side, “I may be a deformity...An abomination...A ruined mind. I know this, and I know I cannot be changed any longer. I’ll live with my hunger as you do. Unlike most of us, I won’t succumb to it.” Plazia pointed to Amara, “Just as you’ve resisted, I shall too, little one.”

Amara snarled, “And look around us. You’ve conquered a world. Is there any reason as to why we should believe you weren’t aiming for endless consumption from the beginning?”

Plazia scoffed, “You speak quickly in anger but are slow to thought. Dwell on what I’ve done. Tell me if anything of my deeds are remotely malignant. You’ll find nothing of the sort.”

I raised my palms, “Ok guys, that’s enough. I’m willing to test this out. We’ll work together for a bit and see if this has any validity to it. If it doesn’t, we’ll fight it out.”

Plazia reached out, “You’re sure?”

I gave him a decisive nod, and the hivemind spread his hands wide, soaking in that moment. He resonated out, “We have happened upon a time of burgeoning change. You’ve decided on the cataclysm you’ll usher forth, Harbinger. I cannot wait to see it come to its fruition.”

I raised a finger, “Now wait one minute. We’ll be needing a few resources from you first. It’ll be a goodwill present.”

Plazia’s hands lowered, “Hm...Then what is it you desire?”

I gave him a greedy smile, “Oh, it isn’t that much...Just a few things, really. Maybe a few elemental furnaces, perhaps?”

#### Chapter 314: Thinking Ahead

Plazia thrummed his fingers against his throne, “That can be arranged, and quite easily so. I have a few furnaces on hand, and I can distribute them out as we make progress towards my goal.”

Helios sighed at me. The void ice bearer shook his head, “Elemental furnaces aren’t worth this, Daniel. This is an insane proposition, and you’re running into it without giving it any thought. You will regret this.”

The minds in my head swarmed out with a plethora of thoughts. They considered dozens of ideas, filtered them through my head, and those ideas trickled out into my speaking mind. They gave me a lot of clarity over the situation, one I wouldn’t handle well otherwise.

The minds explained a lot, and they gave me a better understanding of myself. For starters, I was at a crossroads. In many ways, siding with Plazia here showed a near rebellious intent against Schema. Considering our situation, that didn’t seem all that appalling. Schema had demonstrated his intentions so far.

Schema couldn't take out Elysium, something my guild accomplished. He wouldn't offer extra experience, and he provided no additional support. Even though he kept pretty barebones against Yawm, he offered doubled experience and points for killing enemies. Maybe we didn't get footsoldiers, but we could make our own.

We received complete silence from Schema since getting tangled up with Elysium, however. That put me in a testy situation. I couldn't help my home planet for a long time because of that inaction from the big AI. If anything, that lack of help impeded my guild's growth by leaps and bounds. By putting us in the warpath of Elysium and giving us no way out, my legion couldn't expand in any direction.

I was trapped in an endless war where I sacrificed my guild's future to help uphold's Schema's system. And he said and gave nothing. If anything, it was like Schema was against me. My eyes widened. That was it. Schema gave no awards and bonuses, no extra trees for stopping Lehesion or Elysium, not even a bit of additional experience because Schema didn't want me to progress. He kept his interactions at a bare minimum, only refusing to pull the plug on my system access.

And whether Schema even could pull the plug on me was a point of contention. Amara already hacked me back into the system after I was exiled from Yawm's domain. She could do that again. If anything, Schema hinged his bets here. By not banishing me and my guild, he put on the image of helping us out. After that, he gave us no extra incentives despite how much we put on the line. Schema undermined us like that, and I was tired of it.

Even more so than that, many of the problems in Schema's realm festered in an unfixable way. The more I tried working to change anything inside Schema's domain, the more difficult it became. For instance, getting rid of my unknown status. That required establishing relations with Giess. We just so happened to end up entangled in a galactic war. Sure, that could've just been circumstances, but Schema was, bare minimum, somewhat aware.

He had his fingers ingrained into every inch of space everywhere. How couldn't he know something?

In fact, that was likely supposed to happen again here with Plazia. This monster spanned multiple planets. Plazia controlled hundreds of furnaces, and exterminating him might've taken years. It would derail me from helping Earth for that long again. If

a different guild took over Earth, I might have to work for them and fight another world-ending horror to get Earth back.

Oh yeah, and surely another one would show up then. Hell, if I just had a few months to actually get myself and my guild grounded, I could make a lot happen. So far, world-ending terrors like Plazia just kept getting in my way. I always assumed that was my poor luck. It might not be.

Schema could be pulling my strings. I could be a hamster on a wheel, running in circles and always fighting. I could never get out of the trap for some reason or the other, whether it be circumstance, expectations, or Schema's rules. If I detached from those standards, all kinds of options popped up.

If anything, I could just make a new system of my own. Elysium did it, and I managed to beat up the guy that let them make their own system. In time, I'd have the mana to make it happen just as he did. If I could get a beachhead into a different dimension, I could establish my own system or society without Schema blowing us up with a planet swallowing abomination. Ah man, what a relief that'd be.

Those thoughts swarmed through my mind in a few seconds. Coming to a decision, I peered down at Helios, "I'll regret this? Really now? Let's break this down. For starters, I want to start establishing a presence on Earth. Killing Plazia, even from just seeing this Sentinel's shell, tells me that he's spread out over many planets. He mentioned hundreds of furnaces for a reason."

Helios rubbed his temples, "Indeed. That's why you were conscripted for this so that the ahcorus could help us over many planets. It was a simple exchange of enemies for you, so to speak."

I waved a hand, "It was, but that's because we thought Plazia was some mindless monster. We were wrong, and the situation changed. At worst, striking a deal buys me some time to establish a firmer presence on Earth. After all, a few months is all it will take to establish governance over a huge region, one large enough for the gialgathens, Eltari, and the skeptiles alike."

Helios waved a hand, "But you're postponing handling Plazia once more. How long--"

I cut him off, "I'll have Plazia leave this planet as part of my request. After doing that, the ahcorus will help the Empire. That can happen as soon as tomorrow, can't it?"

Plazia nodded, "It may. I rest on many worlds. Any of them will do, should my goals shift."

I smiled at Plazia, "I'm going to need you to get rid of the Elysium camp on Earth too."

Florence tilted his head at me, "You're going to have him kill off an encampment that's helping out humanity? Seems cold-hearted."

I ran my hand through my hair, "Here's the thing – you can make literally anything sound dumb if you really want. Yes, I will destroy the encampment. No, I won't murder everybody. Plazia is vastly stronger than this camp is. When decimating it, he only needs to show some restraint. Let them have a harrowing escape or something. It's not that hard, and I'll let him handle the details."

I spread my hands to Plazia, "Right? You can do that, surely?"

Plazia scoffed, "Yes. I can."

Florence leaned back, "Oh...Well, why destroy the camp in the first place?"

I raised a fist, "I'm taking over Earth, and Elysium will know about my presence. Even if we have a treaty, I don't trust them. By dismantling their presence on my homeworld, I can avoid them figuring out where I'm collecting all my resources. After that, I'll get a firm grip on Earth with my golems and allies. Defending won't be too difficult after I've established a solid framework."

I rolled my shoulders, "And after that's been done, I'll do the same to Blegara. I'll be able to use the water on Blegara to terraform other planets, maybe even some in my own solar system like Mars. Who knows? The point is, I'm about to start making a lot of moves. Having someone like Plazia as an ally, someone outside of Schema's system and who lets me work without Schema knowing, that's invaluable."

Helios's voice lowered, "Are you certain this sudden confidence isn't arrogance?"

I let out a sigh before peering up, “It’s less confidence and more just recognizing that Schema isn’t about to do anything

to help us. We’re on our own, and I’m about to act like it. The system’s nice and all, but most of humanity died after the tutorial and the rush of eldrich. We were going to be eradicated by Yawm if not for us pulling off a miracle. Schema served us up on a platter then. He did it again with Elysium, pulling us into a galactic war. We should’ve all died.”

Defiance spread over my face, “So yeah, I’m done working by Schema’s rules. I’m going to make my own. Hell, if Elysium and Lehesion can make a system, why can’t I? I’ve got the goods. My mana production will only go up from here. I can channel it through this body, as it’s damn near invincible. If anything, me working with a Ruhl is the tip of an iceberg.”

Florence’s jaw slackened. Helios spread out his arms, “And you believe you can do this all on your own?”

I shrugged, “I beat a dungeon with enemies fifty times my level and without any previous experience. I beat Yawm while starting out over ten thousand levels below him without the Old Ones’ help. After that, I held my own against a galactic armada, and I defeated their champion in combat. I held a line I had no business holding.”

I stood over Helios, my shadow looming, “I’m thinking of questioning myself less and considering what I can do more. People keep wanting to think I can’t do anything. They’re wrong. I can do plenty. I will do plenty.”

Florence stood up and walked over, “Wow, Daniel, you’ve really had an upswing. This is great to see. You’ve been down in the dumps lately. Any reason for it?”

I grinned, “I’m just tired of spending all my time doubting myself. Instead, I’ll just move forward and see what I can do. I’ll make the mark that I can make. I’ll put it all on the line, and whether it works out or not, well...Time will tell. Until then, I’ll do everything in my power to help humanity, my friends, and myself.”

I spread my hands out to Plazia, “Speaking of which, I need at least twenty furnaces upfront. I need you to dismantle the Elysium camp with minimal casualties if any, and for you to get off of this planet. If you do all of that, I’ll see through helping you out. If anything goes awry, I’m not going to throw myself between dimensions so that you can test theories, alright?”



I reached a hand, and Plazia grasped it. The hivemind hissed out, “That can all be arranged. It’s good seeing you work with such decisiveness. It’s far more fitting than wallowing in incessant doubt.”

Plazia simmered at Helios, “Like some would prefer. Doubt is the gullet of despair, and it leads to a belly of agony.”

Helios let his hands flop against his sides, “Going insane, are we? I don’t need to play out any consequences. If you think I’m betraying Schema and getting exiled-“

I gave Plazia’s a hand a firm shake before spreading my hands to Helios. I chimed, “You know, you could be a ruler of worlds again, right?”

Helios tilted his head, “My position in the Empire is absolute. That won’t happen for decades. Now-“

I pointed at my chest, “But your position in my guild is fluid. You work with me, and I’ll work with you. Armor, artifacts, even positions over planets can all happen. I’ll get you the proper obelisks to automate everything and give you a department of helpers if needed. It can all be arranged.”

Helios’s eyes widened despite being blinded. Helios took a step back, “You...You would do that for me? I’m not even a member of your guild.”

I raised a hand to Plazia, “I’m working with a Ruhl. Amara’s wearing my skin. I have saved three different aliens species, all of them hostile when I first met them. Yeah, I would do that for you.”

Helios peered off, possibilities running through his mind, “I...That...When-“

I took a breath, “Yeah, it all depends on you. I mean, if you don’t show the appropriate loyalty, I don’t know if I can-“

Florence raised a hand to me, “Oh, come on, Daniel. Helios was merely voicing concerns. It was a sign of respect that he believed you could handle that dissent. He

merely gave you the platform to dismantle obvious doubts. You did so, and now your position is all the stronger for it.” Florence raised a fist,

“If anything, he proved his loyalty by saying all that. Isn’t that right, Helios?”

Helios stammered, “I...It...Yes.”

I held down a laugh, but Amara didn’t. Our eldritch hacker cackled out, “Hah. A ruler of worlds? You seem quite smitten by the idea of returning to your position, don’t you?”

Helios steamed, “Yes, as I’ve ruled over many. It’s a position of responsibility and status I defer to. You may never understand my reasoning, but you never need to.” Helios peered at me, “But you’re serious about this?”

I gave him a firm nod. Helios peered back and forth, whiplashed by his new reality. Florence kept up with the flow and cadence, enjoying the ride. Plazia interjected with his own thoughts,

“Where would you like to have me establish my our place of concordance? Blegara may be difficult, as I prefer non-water-laden planets if possible.”

Helios whirlwinded, the albony overwhelmed. He gasped, “Your home base? Are you trying to get us exiled?”

I waved a hand, “We’ll need him close to reduce the number of warps. He and Torix need to meet up too. I think they’ll be a dynamic duo.”

Helios stammered, “B-But what about the Overseers? What if they uncover Plazia being there?”

I waved a hand, “Oh no, we won’t have to worry about that.” I pointed at Plazia, “You created this spot in seconds, right? You also mentioned the Overseers clearing the space out. How about this; make as many of the places as you can across Svía. Put them in hard-to-reach places, spread them out, and make them a pain in the ass to deal with.”

Florence snapped his fingers, “You’ll waste the Overseers time with tedious, busy work. That’s just like ruling a planet...I would know. It’s more boring than you’d think.”

Plazia cackled, “I never considered being so petty before. I like it.”

I put a hand over Plazia’s shoulder, “Oh, if you like that, just wait. We got a lot we’ll be managing soon. Don’t even worry about it. I’ll make sure you’re busy, along with your vast number of insect magma things.”

I spread out my hands, “We’ll all be busy. Speaking of which, let’s get going, guys.” My runes charged, and the air howled out at the overwhelming flow of mana, “We’ve got work to do.”

I created a panel of antigravity above us, channeling a mass of the ground up. As gravity inversed, I turned to Plazia, “How long will it take you to pull out of Svia?”

The hollowed Sentinel mouthed, “Three days.”

I gave him a two-finger salute, “Make it happen. Where’re the furnaces?”

The Sentinel’s shell grabbed a ring from within his body. He pulled out a dozen different ancient gemstones from underneath the carapace. After funneling the artifacts into the bag, he tossed it over. I snatched it out of the air with a grin, “Thank you kindly.”

We hovered up out of the ground and back into Wrath’s colony. An enormous explosion radiated from outside her colony, and the worker drones swarmed away while the bruisers returned. As they hobbled up, a telepathic link to Wrath snapped over to us. The razor queen shouted,

“What is happening? Is Plazia invading?”

I raised my fists, “Nope. We got rid of him. Your ancestral enemy is no more after like, I don’t know, two hours? His remnants will be gone in a few days.”

The bruiser drones collapsed, and Wrath's voice turned into a squeal,

"What?"

### Chapter 315: A Rapid Reversal

Wrath's rumbling forewarned her crushing into our cavern, her flowing mass crossing a vast field of distance in moments. Her dark blue form coalesced into a large amalgam, golden plates of enamel flowing across her shifting body. She gasped out through a telepathic tether,

"You already killed Plazia?"

I gave her a thumbs-up, "We did. He's dealt with, and your planet will return to normal after a few days."

Wrath peered down, "But Plazia rests in every corner and piece of the planet. H-how would you even begin to remove his remains-"

I raised a palm, "There's no point in worrying about how we did it. That's my business, not yours. The point is simple; Plazia's gone. He'll be out of here in a few days as his mana fades."

Wrath writhed around with alien gestures, "You...What proof do you have of this otherworldly deed? There were no shattering rumbles or distant quakes from your battle. No mana ebbed across the desolate horizons, and no craters formed across Svía's surface." She closed in, "Is Plazia truly dead, or are you simply playing me and my entire species as fools?"

I shrugged, "My 'deed' will manifest over the next few days. Now, after the magma insects are gone, you guys need to help out the Empire. That was our deal. Remember that."

Wrath shrunk down, "W-What? It took you two hours to do this. We'll be taking your place in a galactic war for that?"

Florence walked up, having listened in the entire time. He linked up with her telepathically. Florence smiled and thought, “It’s simple, really. Sometimes, different people can accomplish different tasks at different rates. It isn’t that Daniel was able to outdo your race and its centuries of effort in seconds. It’s that he approached the situation from a fresh angle, and sometimes, that’s all it takes to solve a problem.”

Florence turned a palm to Wrath, “In fact, you guys killing the Hybrids could be a lot like that. Svia isn’t rich in resources, and you might get some plundering rights for taking out these enemies of the Empire. Think about it: you’ll gorge on those enemies while amassing immense wealth.”

Florence raised his hands as if framing a picture, “For us in the Harbinger’s Legion, it was a complete and utter slog. We sacrificed ourselves, throwing our people into the fire, but we had no choice. It was the only way to win. You all? Pshhh, this will be a cakewalk by comparison. That’s the beauty of deals and exchanges.”

Florence pressed his fingertips together, “It’s that both sides truly do win when a deal is done well. I’m a firm believer in this. You, having gained your home back in hours and a new battlefield to rage across, well, it should be obvious to you too.”

I suppressed a smile from encroaching on my face. Florence flipped and turned a situation over and over until it fit his means. I called him out for that in our talk with Plazia, but Wrath might not be as aware. As the razor queen spoke, that became apparent.

“I-That is not...We have been taken advantage of...I think.”

Florence put a hand over his chest, his eyes widening, “Now wait one minute. You’re telling me that the razor queens, the illustrious rulers of this world, the renowned Fringe Walkers, the destroyers of metal and sentients alike...You’re perjurers? Liars? Cheats?”

Wrath seethed, “We are pure. We never lie. Those words carry more weight on tongues like yours.”

Florence grinned, “Perfect. Then after Plazia’s remnants dissipate, the Emperor will see you guys across our realms.”

Wrath's entire body bristled with golden horns and spikes, "If Plazia is dead, then it shall be so. Otherwise, we will not allow you to escape."

She approached Florence before I loomed over her. I frowned down at her, "Then it's been good doing business with you. I hope you have luck on the battlefield. You'll find plenty of blood there or here if you keep pushing your luck. Don't forget who I am and what I can do."

Wrath backed away from Florence, "Of course, Harbinger."

I turned to Helios, "Perfect. Let's go back to home base."

Helios shook his head while mouthing, "It would seem the both of you have lost your minds now."

A warp towards Earth popped up, air whistling towards Svia from our rich world. Wrath drooled at the sight of grass and trees, but I stepped in front of the portal. I gave her a knowing look and a telepathic message,

"Please, kill plenty of the Hybrids for me, will you?"

Wrath trembled, "We shall, eater of monsters."

The three of us hopped over towards Mt. Verner. The grass sheened under the sun, and the cool wind welcomed us in its unseen arms. I spread out my hands, relishing in my own home planet's grace. Earth amazed me at times. Wanting to ensure its future, I turned to the others,

"Florence, tell Torix and the others about my decision for Plazia. Make sure to present it as a sound decision and mention the benefits and my reasoning. That beachhead in a different dimension. Make sure Torix knows about that. He's a strategic thinker, and he'll definitely appreciate that opportunity."

Florence gave me a wave, walking off, "I will see to it. No doubt about that."

As Florence paced away, I appreciated his presence. Most diplomats required exact instructions or maybe even a prewritten speech. Florence broke off from that norm, the guy able to take a simple instruction and work with it. Even better, I could tell him not only what to say but even how

to say it. Given his silver tongue, he'd get it done. That saved me a lot of time trying to smooth the situation over.

I turned towards the others. Helios's left eye twitched, his nerves shot. Amara stayed in an almost comatose state, the eldritch likely even more whiplashed than Helios since I shoved her into stasis. I pointed at Amara, "Could you have me put back into Schema's system if I was exiled again?"

Amara shook her head, snapping herself back to the moment at hand. She hissed out, "What? Yes, I could. It would be simple."

I nodded, "Just making sure. Could you make a system like Schema's too? Hypothetically speaking, of course."

Amara tilted her head, her palms peering off to the side, "I...I could, in theory. It would require eternal life unless I amassed an enormous team of those like me. Vast legions of Builders...Cipheric knowledge before the age of time...Infinite mana and resources. All that and more, I would need all of it. The prospect is daunting."

I raised a brow, "Just asking. Anyways, you're free to go. Helios, when will you have those warping lessons ready?"

Helios put himself back into the moment, "I've yet to finish the later courses. The earlier ones are finished, however."

I pointed at the top of Mt. Verner, "You'll be giving me a two-hour lesson daily from here on out. Anyone interested in warping will be joining in, so get ready to give lectures and answer questions."

Helios rubbed his temples, the guy getting a massive headache. I sent a message to Florence, letting him know to handle the marketing for the lesson. The chatty albony replied in an instant, letting me know it would be done. I took a breath, "Ok. It's time to move everybody. Let's go."

Everyone paced off, and I headed towards my golem production facility. We needed thousands and thousands of super golems to help stabilize Earth, especially long term. It was only a matter of time before Elysium figured out it was my home planet. To stop threats before they began, I wanted Elysium staring at a loaded gun when they uncovered Earth's significance to me.

Amassing that kind of army required me to build up and out, even keeping some golems in reserve. I paced into the glass-paneled area where I made golems. As I strode in, I raised my brow at a workshop area. The humming of machines and cascade of sparks gave life to a fresh, thriving industry here. They moved in while I was away.

Several people worked diligently, many of them emboldened by my legacy and the rings I gave to each guildmate. If I had my way, many would join our ranks soon along with them. I walked off past the engineers, my form a colossus beside them. One of the engineers scrambled up, his gaze high,

“We’re...We’re sorry, sir. We didn’t know you’d return so soon. We wanted to take advantage of this space while you were gone, and-“

I gave him an approving nod, “Keep up the great work. I’ll be handling my golem creation over here. Keep some distance, or you’ll ignite. I meant that seriously – you’re blood will turn to vapor, and you’ll explode.”

The engineer gave me a salute, “Sir, yes, sir. We’ll stay cautious.”

I headed over towards the edge of my factory floor before taking myself back through the motions of skin tearing. Well, arm and leg ripping at this point, but you get the picture. Violent ripping ensued, creating loud, booming echoes that quaked the nearby ground. I built heat over my skin, making it easier to rip off, the glowing, white-hot material sturdier than steel.

The entire building rumbled as I pooled a mass of my dimensional fabric. I spread out a portion of it, taking a moment to shield my allies from the rest of my industrial process. The blood in their bodies would evaporate otherwise, and their deaths would be on my hands. Once insulated, I continued without restrictions, putting my entire mind to work.

I channeled bits of mana into mental processing, speeding up each of my minds. I set the many psyche's to individual tasks, parsing myself apart as a team of skilled



workers. Each piece of the golem's creations shifted and moved like a clockwork puzzle, ticking to the sound of seconds or the beat of drums.

As I had many times before, I lost myself in the crafting process. I imbued energy into my grimoire, constructing panel after panel and chunk after chunk of the golems. I kept a one to twenty ratios between assault golems and constructor golems. The reason I made so few fighters stemmed from the need for them.

There was none.

A single assault golem rivaled the power of a Breaker in Schema's system. It lacked the sheer explosivity of that class, but a fighter golem could outpace a Breaker's clear rate over time. In the truest sense of the word, an assault golem mirrored a mini Fringe Walker. Very few of them were needed for holding a territory down, especially on a fresher planet like Earth.

By comparison, the constructor golems required more time and effort to handle their responsibilities. They crafted buildings, roads, and swaths of territory over time, but they couldn't make a city overnight. One of them couldn't, at least. Many could. That kind of logic drove me forward as I worked through the night, the stars bathing Mt. Verner in their gentle light.

The sun rose over a distant horizon. As it changed, I remained constant, a single-minded drive. I toiled and worked and wrought. Over the next few days, I continued my relentless pursuit in a perpetual rush. I sent messages across all of my higher-ranking members to leave me undisturbed for a few days.

After all, it was about damn time I had a moment to myself to handle this. In many ways, creating hundreds of golems was a long time coming. I intended on crafting thousands, however. And I did. I unleashed my full, devastating potential, and that didn't mean preparing a dozen or even a few dozen golems. I made hundreds, and they'd darken the sky if they flew overhead.

I set aside a whole week to get the job done, and I generated as many as I physically could. I integrated new furnaces into the process, fueling the mana creation process. Each one acted as a bump in my mana production, a kind of leap forward for me. In those moments, my mana's sheer volume overwhelmed me.

Billions and billions of mana rippled out of my fingertips. The aura spread out thicker than water, like a congealed wave of pure energy. It boomed and writhed out an unquenchable, unshakeable presence. Its tangibility was undeniable. The sheer veracity consumed anything that dared come near it. The all-encompassing wave shivered the dimensional space around me, warping the space.

And yet, I contained it with my many minds.

I wielded many skills in a fluid construction. I kept them rolling forward, using Force of Nature, Apotheosis, and A Manifold Mind with clarity and precision. At times, I forgot that I made progress from a raw power perspective. As I created enough heat to mirror the surface of a star, my abilities sang out in a symphony of violence and heat.

It was a reminder of my potential. It would be a reminder to those around me as well.

By the time I finished the entire week, I had generated several hundred golems. I amassed a sort of velocity with my crafting, becoming a creature of creation. As I fell into my own world, a city of stone and rock unfolded around me. It wasn't as if I had the constructor golems standing there watching me toil. Oh no, they worked with engineers, ones I had Torix and Krog manage.

They oversaw the building of roads, a sort of planned layout sprawling out over the entire horizon while I kept my head down. I hustled day in and day out, but my guild did the same. We kept at it, taking no breaks and showcasing what high willpower and endurance could do.

People talked about moving mountains. When it came to my legion, we preferred actually moving them.

As I finished the task at hand, I wiped my brow, more out of habit than from actual sweat. Water long left my body. Letting my shoulders relax, I sighed with relief, glad to be finished with the work. I allowed myself to recuperate over the next ten minutes before hovering myself out of my golem factory. I carried bits of dirt and stone with me, the debris going unnoticed.

Peering down at my surroundings, I marveled at the enormous change one week of development wrought. A city formed over the side of Mt. Verner. The crowded population in the mountain dispersed, everyone happy to feel the sun and taste the wind

once more. I smiled down at roads constructed from concrete. The engineers weaved ribbons of dark stone through the masses, giving them the appearance of rough marble.

Beyond the roads, a new infrastructure formed. Several constructor golems spaced out, providing the means to a power grid. They generated tiny, stable mana crystals within street lamps, giving an ambient light. That light ebbed from within buildings, civilization returning to Earth. Finally. Keeping a bright quintessence during the day, the lanterns radiated in a multifaceted fractal across the landscape, and I admired the geometric sheens.

The lighting framed a moving populace that bounded across the landscape. Guildmates ran across the streets, though no one really used cars. Instead, people jumped onto and over housing. No traffic existed in this post-system world, the systemization inspiring a different way of life. My legacy and rings delivered raw stats in spades as well, accentuating the difference.

It wasn't as if thousands moved out here already, but about a thousand had. They probably clung to the new housing in a desperate rush, eager to escape our subterranean lair. The rugged populace contrasted the architecture. Being brand new, no one stylized any of the buildings just yet, so it all carried an almost dystopian feel from how 'samey' it all was. Or maybe it was utopian? It was hard to say.

I hovered higher into the air, peering out towards the ruins of Springfield. The buildings carried scars from Yawm's landing and ensuing infestation. I winced at memories of the deformed mutants running through the streets there. My old hometown whistled with a quiet dread I almost despised, so I tackled that unease. I floated over. I found traces of my old school, my old boxing gym, even the apartment I used to call home. Taking a minute, I soaked in the corpse of my old home.

And I acted on a whim.

Springfield would be a corpse no longer.

## Chapter 316: Closure and Lessons

Landing amidst the peaceful chaos, I walked by buildings and cars. I hadn't looked through my past and old streets in a long time, and the differences staggered me. Vines, weeds, and trees grew out of every nook and cranny of my old hometown. The windows dirtied or decayed, turning into shining shambles. Even the sky overhead

cleared up since all the cars left, and it contrasted my memories of this place like night and day.

I changed as well. I stood over twice as tall as cars, my feet having expanded until they left tire-sized indentations in the ground. I tried squeezing my way into a store, but I couldn't. My entire body dwarfed the entrance. I stood beside street lamps, and they stared back at eye level, the lights busted. Even the signs that used to advertise sat at eye level, my shoulders knocking one down when I zoned out for a second.

Pacing past the decay, one piece of it stood out to me. I walked up onto some old traffic lights, the wind and rain doing a number on the poor things. Somehow, somehow, the artifact from my era still worked. Most of the lights buzzed out, years having passed since Schema's systemization. This particular set of stoplights buzzed along, its lights blipping in and out of existence at regular intervals.

Most of the lights shined all the time, which burned them out within a year of Schema's arrival. This traffic stop owned some type of faulty wiring that kept it from burning through its battery. I walked up to the traffic light, holding it in my hand. I never looked at one of them from this angle, my head actually a ways above it. I channeled a teeny bit of electricity into the apparatus, and it gleamed to life.

And so did the rest of the city.

The electrical network began flaring other lights to life. A series of lamps revitalized before everything sparked out of existence, the wires frying as my mana burned old fuses out. I laughed before reaching my hand above the stoplight. I pinched apart the metal, the cold steel squealing in my hand. I tossed it into my dimensional storage as a memento of its endurance, something I enjoyed seeing.

I flicked a wrist, and an old building's walls collapsed. No one still lived here after the Yawm invasion, so I wasn't afraid of killing anyone. I hovered the stone fragments into the air before pulping it to powder. With a quick bit of magic, the shifting sand created a tornado of dust that consumed the rest of the building, grinding it down to nothing.

As it settled, I jumped. I dispersed the force across a vast telekinetic pad, reaching well over a block's width in size. Wherever the panel touched, the ground caved in. It fell down into the dirt, a portion of the city forming a pit. Above the town, I got a good overview of the old sights. The residential district overgrew, the nearby forest taking it over. The industrial sector, already aged before the fall of Springfield, spotted green

with the remnants of grass and plains everywhere. As for the main town with all the shops, it carried scars from Yawm's arrival.

I peered down at the melted slag left behind by one of Yawm's attacks. Torix saved our troops before they died in the atomic fire, but the ground lacked such luck. It molded into a radioactive mass, becoming a mushy blot of dirt and earth. I hovered over, feeling the warmth of radiation. Reaching out a hand, I closed my eyes.

Sensing the energy and where it manifested from, I wielded Event Horizon over the expanse. I drained it despite no life being there, and it bent to my will. The radiation seeped out, becoming a typical rock once more. I went about clearing out the rest of Springfield over the next few minutes. Wherever Event Horizon touched, the entire area cleansed until nothing alive remained.

It sterilized the air like salting the earth. Unlike the latter, I set up Springfield for a future instead of destroying any prospects the place carried moving forward. Quite a few eldritch struggled as I passed over, but they lacked the fortitude or levels to survive Event Horizon. A quick, skull-crushing gravity well handled the bulkier variants if they happened to live while I passed over.

After clearing out the native fauna, I created a gravity well over a block of the city. I crushed the old homes into a giant ball, stripping the city's surface. I moved this mass over the city, tearing the top of it off. It reminded me of pulling up a carpet, just a city instead. I rolled it into a giant pile of dirt before lifting it up.

A quick flash of mana later, and I stared at a big mound of molten slag. Wielding the molten mush, I created a slate over where the city once stood. Flashing more mana around, I traced in steel bars as supports, both sideways and deep into the dirt. A glassy, igneous stone formed over everything, tough as nails and reminding me of my armor.

Well, not that tough, but you get what I mean.

Flying off from the mammoth platform, I flew and compressed panels of it both up and down. This gave rise to staggered step ways, and I kept them in a hexagonal print, the landscape mirroring an old-timey gameboard. I plated the dirt with the same slag, running out of it after the last platform solidified.

I finished Springfield off with a column at its center, similar to the one I made for our capital in Blegara. I crafted and molded a monolith covered in cipheric runes with some

of Schema's watered-down variations interspersed between them. After channeling mana for a while, a massive aura surrounded the place. It lacked the near invincibility of a blue core, but it served us well enough.

In place of a Schema defense, I set aside enough time to craft four super golems here. They remained the protectors of the new town, along with several chunks of quintessence as a power source for pioneers. Smiling at the settlement, I hovered off towards Mt. Verner, feeling good about the setup.

Springfield changed into something else, but it would carry on the name and legacy my hometown left behind. We'd remember the sacrifices people made against Yawm, and we'd live on. Getting a bit of closure out of the simple remodeling, I hovered over towards Mt. Verner, a swarm of activity permeating the place.

Golems leaped up and around, many constructors crafting buildings using a cold, pragmatic aesthetic. It clashed with the dark sheen of Springfield's remains, but that could work to my favor. I sent a message towards Torix, telling him to set up a stipend for anyone who moved where Springfield once was.

The staggered sections would be split up by engineers and architects, and the golems and barrier protected anyone deciding to live there. Settling the affair, I prepped myself for Helios's next lesson. Meeting a few hours past midday, Helios stayed at Chrona's mountain home.

The silver-shaded gialgathen carved out a section of the mountain's rock, keeping herself situated in a constant chill that permeated. It reminded her of Rivaria, her old home. Helios set himself up here, where the mountain's breathtaking view exposed itself to our side.

Helios attracted plenty of attention on his own, however. Several void ice constructs lingered about, the albony waiting with boredom for everyone to arrive. I floated down, finding two dozens disciples of Torix, the lich himself, and Chrona waiting for Helios's lesson. I paced over, sitting beside Torix on an antigravity panel. I leaned over towards him and said,

“Hey, what do you think about the Plazia deal?”

Torix scoffed, “It's insane, so there's nothing unusual about it. In fact, I'd be far more worried if you'd done something more normal.” Torix turned to me, his eyes flaring

bright, “It’s interesting, as I’ve seen your development over the years. You’ve been plagued with doubts and fear lately. It would seem that era has come to pass, and a new one has replaced it.”

I raised a brow, “Really? It’s that noticeable?”

Torix gave me a slight nod, “Indeed it is. I, for one, am happy to see it. I’ve also made contact with this Plazia-Ruhl several times now, and I must say, he’s a cunning fellow. He’s been spying on us for a while now, and I never noticed. While appalled, that evasion also spiked my curiosity.”

Torix peered off, “He gave me a few pointers on surveillance, so I’ll be using a few of my summons to assist him with dismantling the Elysium camp...He’ll be a powerful ally should he prove trustworthy. Considering I trust your judgment, we shall most likely be fine.”

Torix steepled his hands, “And of course, I’m taking the necessary precautions to ensure our and the guild’s safety. You can rest easy knowing that.”

I smiled down, “Thanks. I know I can relax if you’re keeping people there safe.” I peered up, “Hm. Probably at least.”

Torix’s eyes flickered, “What? I’m not that evil-” Torix leaned forward, “He’s beginning.”

Helios began tracing outlines onto the void ice panel. White streaks flashed out from the violet ice, a pleasant contrast in both texture and color. Torix scribbled notes down using a magical pen construct. Torix gestured to Helios, and the lich whispered,

“Technically speaking, Mt. Verner is my university, and its lecturers must be approved by me as the dean. Considering it took Helios several eons to finish his lectures, I’ve come to assess whether the quality therein is approvable.”

I gawked at the detailed notes Helios sketched down onto his void ice board. I mouthed, “I’ll be honest, it looks like you both have the same style of teaching.”

Torix leaned over a series of semitranslucent sheets dispersed beneath him. The hovering, magical sheets carried dozens of different headings, each judging the minutia of Helios's lesson. Categories from vocal pitch to overall posture lined the paper, and Helios had already received half a dozen marks.

Torix simmered, "Good enough for my university? We shall see, disciple. We shall see."

I held down a laugh before Helios began his lecture. The albony royal dragged his hand down his face, "I am here now, as are all of you."

Before we begin, know that most of you will be incapable of true warping magic. You're unrefined, uneducated, and but most of all, untalented. I'm blind, but even I can see that. So, you can try, but finding a different path is perhaps better than wasting your time on this one."

Helios gestured to the lower half of Mt. Verner, "It's far better to move towards greener pastures if you're not feeling particularly keen on the subject. Feeling disheartened? Good. You already know you're not cut out for this, then. Leave if you feel inclined to do so. And please, at least be decisive at judging your mediocrity. Being suboptimal at even admitting your average ability will only serve to cause each of you pain in the very near future."

No one stood and walked off. Several students of Torix narrowed their eyes, each of them set on proving the albony wrong. Helios spread out his hands, "Ah, am I sensing some defiance? Hostility? Maybe even hatred? Perfect. Wield it as your weapon during these lessons. Lean onto it and use it for fuel, or you'll be cast into a dark void where no light or air has ever touched. Or perhaps you'll end up half molded with dirt, your brain replaced by gravel."

Helios tilted his head down at us, "But that would be an upgrade for many of you."

I crossed my arms, "When are we learning about warping?"

Helios cracked his neck, "They need to know this, but yes, let's begin."

Torix leaned over towards me, and the lich mouthed, "That was an excellent introduction. Perhaps I was wrong about him, hmm."



My brow furrowed. They both had a different definition of excellent from me. Continuing on, Helios elaborated on dozens of various descriptions, meta terms, and warping variables we'd use in the class. He taught with utter concision, offering no further explanations, stories, or visualizations. It was like listening to the audio form of a textbook.

Several students fumbled to scramble down notes in time. I had two minds dedicated to the task of the lecture. One memorized while the other digested the information. Those psyches would talk to me about it later after finishing the day off. As those minds pondered the intricacies of warping, I contemplated my skill sheet.

I wanted my Sovereign skill, and so far, the best way of getting it involved taking Matter Conversion, A Manifold Mind, and an unmade mythical skill as my next legendary skill. After seeing my golems in action, putting them into my sovereign skill only made sense. They accomplished so much without me there, automating many of the difficulties involved with leadership.

I thrummed my hands on my knee, my minds racing about and brainstorming. After a few minutes, an idea popped into my head. I'd take my unique skill, Artisan of Destruction, and crank it up until it defied convention. In a way, it already did. My cipheric knowledge, ridiculous materials, and endless mana let me construct the golems to their current quality.

But this wasn't their total limit. While fighting beside the golems, I commanded them as a part of my own body and will. We synced into a single entity, similar to a hivemind. Mastering that may put me in a great position. In fact, I knew a hivemind that I could contact and get some ideas from. He'd be here soon to raid the Elysium camp.

Thrumming with ideas, I stood the moment Helios's lecture ended. Torix did the same, walking up to Helios. The lich raised a hand, "Now, I must say Helios, that may have been the finest lecture I've yet heard given by anyone outside of myself. Just truly, you're prodigal at relaying information."

I frowned. They were like two peas in a pod, but I had business to take care of. I walked up, butting into the conversation, "Hey, Helios."

The albony royal peered up at me, "I taught quickly, as I wished not to waste either of our times. Did it go over your head, perhaps?"

I waved my hands, “I put two minds on it, and they’re handling it. Now, I need to meet with you-know-who and hash some details out.”

Helios’s pale eyes widened, “You want to meet him, hm? It never gave us a method of contacting the creature.”

Torix raised a hand to interject, but I shook my head, pulling out the spacial ring Plazaia gave me. I twirled the silvery mass over a finger,

“Oh, he left us plenty.”

#### Chapter 317: Heresy Unveiled

Mana sparked into my palm, and I reached into the dimensional space of the ring. Helios crossed his arms, “It could be dangerous for you to extend into that domain.”

I suppressed a grin while murmuring, “I’m a multiverse. This space can’t do anything to me.”

Torix’s fire dimmed, “That...That does seem rather intuitive.”

Helios sneered, “Excuse me for advising caution then.”

Too busy to engage, I searched through the dimensional ring. This always reminded me of looking through an old memory. Anytime I tried recollecting something from my childhood, I pieced together the various parts of the haze until a picture came up that represented the whole.

The spatial rings worked the same, each pocket being a stockpile of memories I had to pull up.

Once it came across clearly, pulling the material across the veil was easy as pulling a book off a shelf. For this particular ring, I already raided the furnaces. Other bits within it also stuck out to me. One fragment within contained a piece of orichalcum covered in cipheric runes. Pulling it out, the tiny splinter fit into my palm. I tossed it onto the ground before Torix and Helios leaned over it.

Torix tilted his head, “This is a rather intricately crafted set of runes, isn’t it?”

Helios frowned under his black mask, “That being’s skill is undeniable. This piece is more finely crafted than my own gauntlet or most of the Emperor’s work.”

The orichalcum resonated with primordial mana, the dark blue seeping out. It poured into the gravel soil below, and the ground melted to magma. From it, the lava insects of Svia crawled out. A fragment of Plazia’s mind surfaced, and it hissed,

“I see my deeds haven’t gone unnoticed.” The hivemind’s energy suffused the area until a militia of his writhing magma insects smothered this side of Mt. Verner. They carved out another site that split us from Schema’s system, my HUD disappearing. The army remolded back to the fragment of orichalcum before hissing,

“Svia’s been cleared of my remnants, and the ahcorous understood nothing of our deal. The razor queens have yet to move, so you may be required to force them into action for your deal with Obolis. The razor queens doubt you. To kill me in moments...It is a difficult feat for them to believe. They are angry.”

I spread out my hands, “I’ll be honest, I called for something else.”

This piece of Plazia tilted its magma incarnation, “That isn’t what interests you?”

I shook my head, “I’ll get all that squared away. I actually wanted to have a more extended conversation with you. Would Svia work for that?”

Plazia’s form rippled, “I am fine speaking there. It calls little attention to itself, preventing us from being seen. In Schema’s domain, here, there is light. On Svia, there lies shadow. What do you wish to speak of once we meet?”

I spread out my hands, “It’ll be about magic mostly. I’ll be asking for a few tips as well.”

Plazia hissed out, “You’re curious of my eldritch ways? Strange, but fitting. We will be walking the same path quite soon. For each of us, to understand one another’s steps, learning is essential.”

I raised a brow, “Er, we will, though I might need you to help me develop one or two things first. It shouldn’t take long since you’re an expert.”

Plazia-Ruhl grumbled, “You’re quite greedy, aren’t you? Twenty furnaces and still unsated. You wish for more from me?”

I waved a hand, “It’s a discussion about a few sticking points for me. I need a fresh perspective, not more resources.”

Plazia’s magma form paused before solidifying, “Then I await your qualms.”

As it turned to stone, I raised a foot and stated, “Everyone. Jump.”

Torix, Helios, and Chrona jumped or flew into the air before I stomped down. A telepathic wave shot across the surface where Plazia carved sigils. A foot-thick layer of stone disintegrated in an instant, the sound ushering out like an avalanche. As the billowing dust plumed up, I raised a palm. I enforced gravity, turning the sudden sandstorm into a pile of powder.

Helios wiped powder off his shoulders, “So we must jump when you tell us to?”

I shrugged, “It’s just a simple request. Can you take me to Svia real quick?”

Instead of answering, he opened his status. He looked around it at me, “Wrath’s colony?”

I gave him a nod, and the portal flared into existence. I gave Torix and Chrona a wave, “We’ll see you guys later.”

Before stepping over the veil, Helios reached up a hand to eliminate the void ice he left here. Chrona stretched out her wings and telepathically shouted, “Wait. Stop.”

Helios reached his hand back, “What is it?”

Chrona peered at the cold fog oozing from the bottom of the void ice pillars and structures. Average snow pooled nearby, the entire area chilled by the mysterious material. Chrona stepped up to it, laying the tip of her tail on it. She hummed, “Leave this here. It...It reminds me of home.”

Helios pulled a hand back, the albony wincing. He fought Lehesion at Rivaria, and Helios almost died there. He faced the absolute carnage that collapsed the gialgathen’s old capitol. Those memories flashed through Helios before he coughed into a hand. The albony royal turned away and tilted a hand at Chrona,

“It would seem you’d prefer this place be a cold wasteland then.”

Chrona stayed serene, “If that is how you wish to word it, then yes.”

A strange silence passed over us before Helios stared down at his claws. He murmured, “I may craft more void ice for you if you need it...For completing that image you’re seeking. Perhaps you may even learn how to create it if you’re talented. That is.”

Chrona’s eyes lit up, and the silvery gialgathen stepped over, “What? You’d do so?”

Helios turned his hand, staring at it from a different angle, “If I find the time.”

Torix and I held down a laugh, Helios too prideful to just offer her help like a normal person. Chrona saw right through him, and she leaned her head over. She ‘hugged’ him with the crease of her neck, the gialgathen roused her words, “Thank you, one of snow. I appreciate the gesture, and I shall give you one in turn whenever I am able.”

Helios raised a brow, “Then I require you to let me go.” Chrona released him, and Helios brushed off more of the powdered rock. The ice mage hissed, “It’s mere void ice. Nothing special.”

Chrona’s tail whipped behind her, the gialgathen pleased. Helios stepped through his warp, stepping into a hollow patch of ground beneath Wrath’s colony. I followed,

heartened by their moment. After the warp closed, the droning silence replaced the whistling wind. A steady, stale warmth permeated the area.

Once more, green drone slimes toiled in the distance, maintaining the colony and its enamel structures. We walked over towards the thrumming before being found by bruisers once more. As before, Wrath arrived later. She took more time, making us wait for a few minutes. Coursing through a tunnel, her hulking mass congealed into a more solid form before spines and claws writhed over it.

She snapped through a telepathic connection, “Ah, the Harbinger...I see you’ve returned.”

I spread out my hands, “Plazia’s gone, just as I said he’d be.”

Her form trembled, “He is. Indeed, our ancestral enemy is no more. You not only killed him, his most disparate remnants dissipated within days of your arrival. He left no lingering traces of his existence here, almost as if he disappeared in an instant. It would make me question if he was ever genuine.”

I narrowed my eyes, “You sound skeptical...Almost like you think I didn’t get rid of him.”

Wrath pulsed, “My suspicions are evident as their reasoning is obvious. Did you and the Emperor craft a plan to fool us? It seems likely given the speed of Plazia’s dissipation. A pack of wolves is not killed so easily.”

I tilted my head, “Alright, you’re telling me that I made a pact with the Emperor and your ancestral enemy, a planet-wide terror, just to trick you into fighting the Hybrids?”

Wrath’s form shivered in anger, “And what if I am?”

I spread out my hands, “Doing all of that is far more challenging than simply getting rid of the Hybrids. It doesn’t make sense.”

Wicked teeth formed over Wrath’s skin, “But how else would you kill him? His form was disparate, spread across the entirety of Svia. He has never shown his true self, and he is a planner of the ages.”

I stepped up to her, “He’s strong, but I was stronger. I can swim through magma, so finding him wasn’t difficult. When he was in my grasp, I eliminated him. It’s really that simple.”

Wrath seethed, “It is simply too quick. No method exists for culling our ancient enemy as you have. We would’ve uncovered the secret long ago, otherwise. As you’re lying, we won’t need to honor the agreement any longer. We won’t honor that which was never ever accomplished, little lamb.”

I raised a brow, “But Plazia’s gone. What more did you want?”

Wrath trembled, “We... We wanted a war. A fight. A battle.”

I frowned, “You’re getting that with the Hybrids. As for Plazia, you wanted him gone.”

Wrath hissed, “Perhaps that is so, but I don’t believe you have ridden us of him. Until you prove it, we will remain on Svia.”

Mana oozed out of my frame, over twenty furnaces hidden under my armor. The aura caused quintessence crystallization nearby, and the surrounding rock shifted and trembled. I lifted a hand,

“He’s gone from every inch of the entire planet. A few days ago, his magma insects killed anyone that dug to a certain depth. Now that’s gone and from everywhere. What more tangible proof can I give you?”

Wrath quivered, “You could not have killed him so quickly. It simply cannot be believed. We will not move.”

I frowned, “Can’t or won’t?”

She snapped at me, brandishing her claws, “It doesn’t matter. Leave, or I’ll make you.”

Fed up with the entire conversation, I created a colossal gravity well. It swelled with a broad but weak tug. It suspended Wrath's hive. I snarled, "I can lift your colony out of Svia and launch it into space if you'd like. Maybe you'd believe me then?"

Wrath hissed, "Now you threaten us?"

I narrowed my eyes, "I retaliate against those that attack me. You're backing out of a deal after I've done as you've asked. Plazia's gone. What am I supposed to do, let you treat me like I'm some fool who can be double-crossed? If you'd prefer, I'll be the new ancestral enemy of your people."

Immense reservoirs of mana coursed through my body, my dimensional fabric glowing white. Helios stepped away, creating a panel of void ice between us. Wrath paced backward as I wrenched her colony out of the ground. We hovered in a weightless flux, rising above Svia. Wrath's form shrunk, and her blades receded. She withdrew her animosity as she said,

"Please...Stop. We shall do as you've asked."

I let her colony drop, and it plopped down onto Svia with a cataclysmic boom. Tunnels cracked. Enamel snapped. The colony's state flipped from perfect to worn in an instant. Wrath stared around herself before seething,

"Should Plazia return, we will not do as you command so easily. Know that we ahcorous are warriors, and we will not be beaten into submission."

I stated, "Good. Be glad I made you hold to your promise because otherwise, you wouldn't be warriors anymore. You'd be con artists instead." I turned, walking off, "Our business is done here."

Wrath peered off, flowing away. She rumbled, "Goodbye...Harbinger."

As we paced away towards the depths of her colony, Helios murmured,

"I'm surprised your relationship devolved like that. She seemed cheery with you before...As cheery as she an alien entity could be."



I frowned, “She didn’t want to believe I’d done something she couldn’t. It’s that simple.”

Helios peered off, “Many would do the same. Should you blame her?”

I sighed, “She tried taking advantage of me. I think she genuinely thought I didn’t have the strength to stop him. She wanted proof.” I peered around at the ruined colony, “Well, she got it.”

Helios shrugged, “Some might say your method of delivery lost you an ally today.”

I scoffed, “Yeah, an ally that won’t even hold up her side of a bargain unless I threaten her.” I stared forward, reaching out a hand, “I don’t need allies like that. There’s plenty of people out there, and I won’t have to strongarm each of them to act decently.”

I melted us a tunnel through the ground. As we stepped into the solidified ground, Helios smirked under his helmet, “That’s a refreshing opinion. You should trust that intuition more as it served you well just now...And so you know, I agree with the course of action. I’m merely offering a soundboard.”

I took a breath, “I figured as much...But thanks.”

Pacing deep beneath Svía’s surface, we reached one of the many patches of de-Schemafied terrain. Walking into it, I tossed a strip of orichalcum out. As the primordial mana suffused into the stone, another incarnation of Plazia oozed out. Its magma minions completed the edge of the sigils we walked through to get in this place. Once contained, the bug pile formed into a mouth that hissed,

“Then what is it you wish to speak of?”

I turned to Helios, “Do you mind leaving us for a moment?”

The ice mage paced away, stepping into another warp. I peered back at the piece of Plazia, “Ok, so I want to know how to bind my super golems together more. I’m thinking of creating something like a hivemind.”

Plazia's form trembled, "This...This requires my totality to discuss. One moment."

Several minutes passed before a tear in time appeared. Plazia stepped out within the body of a hollowed Sentinel. The hivemind closed the warp behind itself before spreading its hands, "You wish to evolve into a hivemind?"

I waved my hands, "Woah now, that's not what I was asking at all."

Plazia peered down where his incarnation was, "Then commanding my full self to this place was the use of foresight for that fragment. Tell me what you want, and fully."

I raised a hand, "I've been thinking of where to go with powers lately. You know, for long-term progress. I've tried using primordial mana, and it hasn't worked at all. It's like I'm hitting a brick wall no matter who I ask. I figure that molding it into my best skills will slow those core abilities down."

Plazia sat backward, a throne of basalt forming beneath him, "Perhaps, but perhaps not. Knowledge is not so finite, Daniel. It shifts and changes depending on perspective and the angle of approach. This is why judging one's knowledge through a singular lens is foolish and shortsighted."

Plazia peered towards the hard floor, "In your situation, your talents expanded greatly with that armor of yours. You've become an anomaly, and primordial mana should come easily for your augmented mind. As for binding the golems together, that is a crossroad I recommend against."

I sat onto a gravity well, "Why, exactly?"

"It destroys their greatest strength – their individuality. Unlike my pawns, your golems carry their own minds. This unlocks devastating potential since otherwise, they perpetually drain you for maintaining them. Your skin and flesh and bone is cause for that, as you carry endless mana within your body."

Plazia steepled his fingers, "For you, amassing power should be derived internally, as it's possible. The unity of one gives cause for decisive action, and you're not from a

species like the ahcorous or the ruhls. It is unnatural to disperse your mind like us. Primordial mana should be the perfect method for you, given your dimensional status.”

I grimaced, “I really don’t think it is. I don’t know if you understand how much of a roadblock I’ve had with it.”

Plazia leaned forward, “I am a master of that mana type, so allow me to decide. First, tell me what you know of Primordial mana...We’ll discuss it. Holistically.”

I started from my first experiences with the advanced mana type, moving up the rung of that memory ladder. I talked about the various perspectives I angled for it, the sheer number of tries at its manifestation, and the months of failure. Plazia soaked in the knowledge with an occasional nod. After I finished describing all of my pitfalls, Plazia leaned back on his throne. Plazia leaned against one of his hands,

“You already know primordial mana and how to use it.”

I threw up my hands, “I sure as hell don’t have a skill for it. I also can’t get the mana to pop up no matter what I try either.”

Plazia let out a laugh. The droning cackle continued for a while. In time, a bit of frustration leaked out of me, and I snapped, “What’s so funny?”

Plazia raised a palm, the graphene plating gleaming. The hivemind took a deep breath before spreading his hands, “Let us try this. Dwell on your methods for primordial mana. Sink deep into its depths, and call forth the raging energy, a writhing abyss of control and creation.”

I frowned, “Are you making fun of me?”

Plazia shook his head, “Verify if I am yourself.”

Keeping guarded, I took a moment, thinking off all my knowledge about primordial mana. I instigated memories of wanting to build and create. Simple memories resurfaced, ones about building sandcastles or wooden forts as a child. At the same time, I calmed my mind down to a state of serenity, as I did for origin mana.

Into the vast, cool ocean of my mind, I dove. I dwelled deep into the waters where the rays of light no longer reached. I remembered the dead planet I traveled to. I recalled the creatures feasting on sulphuric pits on the ocean's floor, the dim stars, and the thin wind. A tremble raced up my spine as my own immortality weighed on me.

I'd await the stars dying, all other life gone. Drifting through the void in loneliness, I channeled this primal dread. From deep in my chest, I willed out a solution, a method of creating something worth living in. A spark flared in my mind, connections forming. They stormed out without stopping, and a flood emerged.

I gawked as a condensed blot of primordial mana formed in my palm.

My eyes widened, and I raised it up high. I shouted, "Ah hell yeah. I can't believe it. How did that happen so damn fast? This... This is incredible. You're the best teacher I've ever seen, Plazia." I turned to my side, "Sorry, Torix." I peered back at the mana,

"Hah. Wow. That was easy. Really easy, actually."

Plazia scoffed, "I taught you nothing."

I furrowed my brow, and the primordial blot wisped out of existence. Panic surged in my chest before I returned to my previous state of mind. As I did, the mana reformed with ease.

Too easily. It was as if I achieved some mastery of it already. I blinked, "Wait a minute... What's going on here?"

Plazia spread out his hands, "What is different about this place than everywhere else you've ever resided?"

My mind jumped to a dozen different possibilities before I leaned over. My eyes opened wide, and my jaw slackened. Plazia nodded, "That's correct, little one."

My surprise turned into anger as I seethed,

“Schema isn’t here.”

### Chapter 318: Possibilities Unbounded

I split the primordial sphere into two parts, each of them writhing out. My anger turned into skepticism, and my eyes turned to slits. I raised an eyebrow at the orbs, “Huh... The timing for this is convenient for you, isn’t it?”

Plazia gestured to the edge of our Schema-less domain, “Try and call for the primordial mana outside of this place. That will verify everything you’ve seen for yourself.”

I paced over towards the edge of the wall, finding a spot without cipher sigils. I melted out a cylinder of rock and put my hand into the gap. Once on the other side, Schema’s presence siphoned back in with my HUD coming back up. It only extended to me, however. Channeling the primordial mindset, I called forth the mana in the exact same way, and it retaliated with an abysmal withering.

Nothing spawned. Nada. Zilch.

I tested my theory a few times, creating the mana inside and outside of this area. Primordial mana spawned and unspawned each time I did so, and it left me with a wave of growing anger. By the time the proof was undeniable, I had stepped away from the wall. I pulled my hands up, squeezing them while snapping,

“He’s holding me back. I fight back a galactic threat for him time and time again, reconquer a planet, and let him know what’s going on with the rebellion...And he stifles my progress in return? What?”

I threw a hand to my side, “Why would he even do that? It doesn’t make sense.”

Plazia tilted his head at me, “You’re quite surprised by this, but perhaps that’s a matter of perspective. You’re peering at a wolf. You know what it smells and sees. You know the softness of its fur and the ferocity in its eyes. You believe you know its nature, but you simply know of its form. Predicting it requires more than its mere body. You must know its mind.”

Plazia tapped the side of his helmet, “To predict a being’s actions, you must first dissect what it desires. Everything else falls into place thereafter. Schema, that all-knowing AI,

doesn't want his populace to be strong. He wishes for them to be controlled, surely, but most of all, he wants sentients to be busy. There is a key difference in those intentions, and Schema's balanced everything to enable this control via distraction and rewards."

I closed my eyes, calming myself down. I let my hands flop on my sides,

"So we're like rabbits chasing after carrots?"

Plazia peered down, deep in thought. He raised his hand a second later, "Ah, yes... That analogy is fitting. You are on a track of false promises, a domain that appeals to surface-level senses but not the depths of your soul."

I raised a brow, "Huh... I agree with the first part. That second part is a bit of a stretch."

Plazia waved a hand, "It's a straightforward premise. Schema abuses your simple, primitive brain and its chemical responses to create an array of false positives. Numbers rise. Your brain signals a reward, and it manifests physically because of the system. This feeds the ego, ambition, and even engagement. It offers no true purpose, however."

Plazia pressed his fingertips together, "He masks these false positives within his system, nesting the reality behind false layers of information that he controls utterly. This prevents full awareness, and many within the track help create the diversions Schema wants. It sustains itself, a recursive cycle of mental enchainment."

I furrowed my brow, "That's... That's a lot to throw out there. I think this might apply to higher-level creatures, but for most people at a lower level, Schema's benevolent."

Plazia sighed, "We shall agree to disagree. The point stands for you regardless."

I mulled over the conversation and the primordial roadblock. A part of me felt like an idiot for not realizing Schema's obstruction sooner, but another part felt betrayed. Schema crossed a line here, using my proximity with the system to his own ends. The system once acted as rope I could climb to the top. At this point, it mirrored chains that held me down. When Schema had flipped the script on me, I couldn't tell.

I simmered, “You know, I thought Schema kept me in the system to feign allyship. It turns out he was keeping me connected to hold me down.” I furrowed my brow, “But why let me have a class? And the level cap increases? It’s so confusing.”

Plazia leaned his head onto a hand, “He wants your power to stem from him, not yourself.”

I rubbed my temples before turning to Plazia. My eyes widened, “Then...Then primordial mana is stronger than whatever the system can offer me now?”

Plazia stood up, raising an arm. A field passed over us, a gentle temporal dilation. It left no effect on me, but Plazia insect insides shivered and trembled inside of his carapace, “This is time manipulation. It is primordial magic.”

Plazia flicked his fingers at different spots in our room. He spawned portals on a whim, “This is warping. It is primordial magic.”

Plazia took a moment, the furnaces under his armor flaring to life. Primordial energy pooled into his entire body, his own skin glowing as mine did. Plazia growled out while snapping the power into a tiny space. Another warp appeared, this one leading into a starry portal. Plazia caught his breath before turning a hand to it,

“This...Is a pocket dimension I spawned...It...It is primordial magic as well.”

Plazia stumbled over towards his basalt throne. I watched as his body trembled after casting the magic, the hivemind needing time to recuperate. A few minutes passed, and he composed himself. Plazia stammered,

“Y-you are immune to these limitations...You are a dimension. None of this will phase you as it does we mortals...S-schema fears you for this, as you break the limits of the living. You are beyond us. You may one day be beyond him.”

I peered at the ground, ideas popping up for how to use the primordial magic. If I had temporal dilation, I could just create an intensely powerful aura over myself at all times. My lifespan rose without limit, assuming I could even die from something like old age at this point. Doubling the rate I experienced time doubled my mana regeneration, healing, speed, power, even my perception. That was just time magic alone.

If I hastened myself by a multiple of ten, I'd be unfathomable.

Warping carried lots of promise as well. It stopped someone from just throwing me into a vast void I could never escape from. It made me mobile, able to jump between worlds without needing any chauffeur. That let me extend my reach from the planetary to the galactic. I also wouldn't need Schema or Helios for warping anymore.

Creating a dimension may serve some future purposes, though focusing on ground-level abilities stuck out more to me. Time manipulation, in particular, seemed absurd. I looked up at Plazia, "You know, I've needed primordial mana to make entropy, I think. It's a mana type I haven't been given access to yet, and this is probably why."

Plazia leaned his head back onto his throne, "Entropy, the mana of disintegration...A terrifying energy, isn't it? All will fall to it in time. Wielding it allows for the destruction of anything and everything. All my own research indicates it requires the cipher to even touch on its hidden realities, however. It's too unstable to do anything with otherwise, requiring life force to cast."

I tapped my chin, "Huh...I'm guessing just being near the mana would cause damage to the user, right?"

"That's exactly why it drains the user. It enacts damage on the mind and the body. A complete sacrifice."

I rolled a hand, "I'd be robust enough to tolerate large amounts of exposure at least. Hmm...The more I think about it, staying in Schema's system isn't a problem anymore. It's actually the opposite. I'll have to consider how to split off from Schema's system. Hah, what a crazy problem to have."

Plazia tilted his head up, "Our untouched, eldritchian realm is an excellent prospect for somewhere such as that, wouldn't you say?"

I frowned, peering at the tiny dimension Plazia spawned. It spiraled with a stary entrance like the Milky Way spread flat over a 2-D space. I walked up to it, "Or I could hide in something like this...Assuming this is a dimension, like me."



Plazia scoffed, “If you could draw a comparison, then I suppose. It lacks any qualities or laws to abide by as I can’t maintain constants like that. It’s merely a blank space with nothing inside it. I mean the truest definition of nothing. It is a canvas with no frame, paint, or even a physical form. It’s the shadowy idea of such a thing, allowing for its creation.”

I popped open my own pocket dimension, the two openings parallel to each other, “It’s like this, isn’t it?”

Plazia leaned towards the dimensional opening, “In a manner of speaking...It could be compared. You own your dimension, however. You control what lies within it, and it can even hold entities outside of the natural laws of our current dimension. The stasis property it carries insinuates as much. It holds an absence of time.”

I nodded before turning towards Plazia, “Alright...Let me try something real quick.”

I closed my eyes, trying to change what was inside the portal. I manipulated the position of the many objects stored within, from pieces of Lehesion to old books to cipheric oddities. After a few minutes, an awareness stretched out in a slow, prolonged seep. Instead of moving objects, I pulled them along with gravity. When I stopped willing it to continue, the dimension continued applying gravity.

Another few minutes passed, and I created an ambient warmth inside the dimension. I gave the desolate space temperature. Hitting my stride, I granted the space fundamental aspects, like wind, rain, and lightning. None of those effects manifested, all of the forces frozen in permanent stasis. I couldn’t create time, the means that all those energies needed for them to pop out.

Plazia waited with patience, though he thrummed his fingertips across his throne every now and again. After a few minutes, I walked out to the gap leading to a Schema-owned space. I opened my pocket dimension, and my awareness over the warp snapped shut in an instant. However, the actual forces I planted within the area didn’t disintegrate. The space altered permanently.

I let out a sigh, “There’s no telling what Schema’s holding me back from. Damn.”

I pulled my hand back into the un-Schemafied territory. I wondered why these changes didn’t snap up while in a far-off rift. Going with Obolis on one of his distant adventure

spots should've done the same. Schema might have a tether pinned on me to hold me down even if I escaped his complete dominion.

Plazia could be manipulating my access to Schema as well. I didn't know enough to say.

If Plazia carried this much ability over Schema's universe, then allying with him was inevitable. He could limit me to an unknown extent, perhaps leaving me crippled if he wanted. Knowing all this, I gave the hivemind a firm nod, "We can go to the eldritch dimension as you asked, but I don't want to do it your way."

Plazia leaned back, "My method doesn't suit you? Are you offering an alternative?"

I tapped my chin, "Yeah. I'll just make a really long dimension that creates a genuine connection between the two places. I can reinforce the dimensional pathway with my own personal fabric, keeping it stable from all the...Hm, interdimensional energies, I guess you'd call them?"

Plazia peered off, "Hm...That may be a necessary adjustment for many reasons. Normal sentients could warp under the transdimensional pressure whether they're protected by your fabric or not. Having them isolated in an elongated pocket dimension ensures safety. It's a worthy adjustment."

My many minds revved into action, "You mentioned defining laws in a created dimension, right? I could make time nonexistent and have a gravitational force pull people between the dimensional spaces. They'd passively 'fall' to our space, and that would ensure they wouldn't die from old age during the journey between dimensions."

Plazia grabbed the edges of his throne, cracks spreading across the basalt, "That...That saves us many constraints from the voyage. Sharp, Daniel. Sharp."

I spread out my hands, "Hell, I'll make the tunnel into a living golem too. It'll be a bunch of minds made with the cipher, and they'll be like...Like transportation golems. They'll keep people safe and moving. I'll automate the whole process."

Plazia tilted his head in confusion, "That...I suppose that's possible."

I pointed a thumb at my chest, “For me, it is. I could even make multiple bridges between the dimensions, and if I learn about warping, I can make golems who warp people around. We can stage a dimensional evacuation on a scale of massive proportions.”

I gave my chest a bang with my fist, “I can have legions of my golems exploring planets near the dimensional collapse to save people.”

Plazia fell back onto his throne, “You could if you feel it’s necessary. It’s difficult maintaining a presence over many worlds, however.”

I gripped my hands into fists, “Not if I carry the keys to connect those worlds. I’ll have to figure out how Schema’s holding me down and stopping my abilities. At the same time, I’ll need to know how to use primordial magic, and well, you’ll be helping me, Plazia. You’ll be my tutor, and we’ll cross these limits Schema imposed on me.”

I raised a hand, primordial mana oozing out of my palm. The dense streaks crystallized on the floor like dark blue gems,

“And we’ll be doing it whether that AI likes it or not.”

#### Chapter 319: A Hivemind’s Potential

I gripped my hands into fists, “Not if I carry the keys to connect those worlds. I’ll have to figure out how Schema’s holding me down and stopping my abilities. At the same time, I’ll need to know how to use primordial magic and well. You’ll be helping me, Plazia. You’ll be my tutor, and we’ll cross these limits Schema imposed on me.”

I raised a hand, primordial mana oozing out of my palm. The dense streaks crystallized on the floor like dark blue gems,

“And we’ll be doing it whether that AI likes it or not.”

Plazia tapped his throne, “You’ll be testing and developing your magic via the dimensional connection we have planned, correct?”

I swirled the primordial mana, reveling in my control of it, “Yeah. That’s the idea. I’ll need time magic first. That takes priority over everything else.”

Plazia stood and snapped his fingers. The floating warps and dimensional construct withered while the temporal field dissipated. Plazia turned towards me, “Chrona Carsiary knows more of time manipulation than I do. As for warping, the same may be said of Helios. There are few authorities on dimensional creations, but we may find those dispersed across the galaxy.”

I pointed where his dimension was, “You just made one. You could give me the basics, right?”

He waved his hands, “I am versed in it but still no expert. You saw how exhausted I became after creating even a small domain. A larger one may overburden me and destroy my entire body.”

I peered at his Sentinel armor, “That’s what you’re using as your carapace, right? I’m guessing you killed a Sentinel for it?”

Plazia tilted his head, “I killed no one, but I created the circumstances leading to the guardian’s death.”

I deadpanned, “That’s the same thing.”

Plazia raised a palm, “What you’ve said is true, but it isn’t as if the Sentinel treated me with any fairness or equity. It attempted to eradicate me, so I enacted the same will unto it. In the end, we were enemies, and I, the victor. His death leaves history while I still live to create my own.”

I leaned back, “Speaking of plans, when are you taking out the Elysium camp? It’s been a week, but I figured getting out of Svia was the main priority for you.”

Plazia met my eye, “It will be finished later this day on Earth, moments from now, actually. I needed several days to establish the insinuating circumstances to derail Elysium’s investigatory attempts. They’d uncover your intentions otherwise, and so, I’ve established a suitable excuse for their outbreak.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Like what, exactly?”

Plazia raised a hand, generating a viewpoint maintained by magic. Plazia gestured to it, “I researched your planet’s previous infrastructure for nuclear power sources, finding many nearby along the great lakes. Within the cook and palisades plants, I commandeered the nuclear power sources. I planted them onto a dungeon near the Elysium camp.”

Varying viewpoints appeared in the portal. An overhead map of the Elysium hub popped up along with the surrounding area. Plazia gestured at several coordinates near the headquarters,

“Once made, I created a breeding ground for exceptionally powerful eldritch. After feeding and implanting them with my insects, I’m having the beasts raid the encampment using a variant of metal eaters. They’ll naturally be drawn to the Hybrids, and with my assistance, it shall be a slaughter. Casualties will be minimal as I’ve devised a specific countermeasure to ensure no deaths result.”

Plazia shrugged, “I targeted my assault around the circumstances, ensuring even a poor escape will be highly successful. In fact, the incompetence of our enemy will never come into question. It is a moot point.”

I furrowed my brow, “That’s...Impressive.”

Plazia waved his hand, “I’ve done something akin to this many times. Manipulating a system-based society is actually quite simple, should you pursue the viewpoint of those dwelling within it. The same may be said of the eldritch, but their needs are far more virulent. Controlling them is the true difficulty.”

I leaned towards the camp, “Are you actually going there?”

Plazia scoffed, “There’s no need.” He rumbled, “I’ve planted several eldritchian generals to lead the charge, each of them controlled by psionic constructs. You’ve seen those constructs interspersed throughout Svia, but they carry on more purposes than merely bringing magma to life.”

Plazia spread his arms, an image of the camp coming up, “If you wish to watch, you may. This is my design brought to life. It will be a demonstration of sorts.”

I peered at Plazia, an inkling of fear forming in my chest. Even if I outdid him in direct strength, which wasn't a certainty by any means, Plazia's wit outdid mine. In fact, Plazia seemed even better at tactics and strategy than Torix even. Torix's logistics probably matched Plazia's own, but the hivemind carried more options at his disposal. More importantly, Plazia read people like a book.

And I worried I was one of those books on his shelf.

Reading my mind, Plazia tilted his head down at me, "Intimidated?"

I frowned, "Of course. This is a lot to organize in a few days. It beats what I could do."

Plazia shook his head, "You constructed well over a hundred golems. They've dispersed across the Northwest region surrounding Springfield. You established the largest settlement for hundreds of miles. That was done in the same time frame, and That exceeds what I've done, to my estimations."

I peered at the visual of the Elysium camp, "We'll see about that."

We gazed at the viewpoint created by Plazia. The Elysium headquarters expanded since I last viewed it, though not by leaps and bounds like Mt. Verner. We signed ceasefire a few weeks ago, not months, so Elysium hadn't bolstered the encampment's defenses yet.

That being said, the Hybrid production area reached up and out. Matrices connected large pillars of steel. The disgusting monsters leaped within the contained field at an alarming density. They no longer moved as individuals, the various races devolving into swarms. Peering at the people within the camp, most of them had Hybrids.

Children rode on the back of the abominations, the kids kicking their feet on the Hybrid's shoulders. The abominations carried produce and goods in mass. They offered power, pulled cars, and constructed an entire way of life. People put enchanted flowers over their faces, many wearing wreaths over their necks.

They gentled into domestic oddities compared to the monstrosities lingering in my own memory. Plazia silenced at the sight of them, one of his hands squeezing into a fist. The insects within Plazia's armor writhed in torment as the hivemind seethed,

“And they call us cruel...To them, death is mercy, and life is pain. I will work towards their eradication after this ploy of ours plays out.”

I winced as memories of what Elysium did to eldritch and silver alike flashed in my mind. I grimaced, “Maybe I could’ve kept fighting them. It’s...It’s hard to look at.”

Plazia let out a hollow laugh before turning his head to me, “I never said anything about you, did I, Daniel? You carry guilt like a cloak, establishing responsibility for issues outside your control. It’s a quick, fierce method of self-hatred and agony. It also speaks to true arrogance.”

I furrowed my brow, “Huh. Maybe. I think I haven’t used my time and abilities perfectly. And no matter how you phrase it, I could’ve done better, and that much can’t be argued against. If that’s the case, I hold responsibility for that difference.”

I met Plazia’s eye, or at least the approximation of his eyes, “So when I feel bad about something I haven’t done, it’s not because I think I’m unbeatable. I know my potential, and I won’t cut it short so that I don’t feel bad.”

Plazia turned towards his viewpoint, “It’s an interesting perspective, even if I disagree with it. Regardless, let’s see what my psionic constructs devised.”

I pointed at some Hybrids, “How are you going to break their link to people? Severing them? Maybe overriding it with the psionic bugs?”

Plazia shrugged, “I’m using a simple method. Death.”

I nudged the hivemind, “Hah. We’re not so different after all.”

Plazia tilted his head at me, “At times.” He peered at his portal, “Now let the show begin.”

On the horizon of the camp, a plume formed above the forests. It evolved into a tornado of dust and dirt, a magical siphon. It sucked in trees and boulders, flinging them about. As it barreled towards the camp, guardsmen rang out alarms. People shouted

commands and orders. Magicians, remnants, and Hybrids mobilized into a lethal fighting force. They lined up outside of the encampment's outer border, making for an intimidating wall of soldiers.

The controllers of the Hybrids stayed far back, well outside any range of conflict. Remnants guarded them, but the primary defense force was composed of the monsters of metal. The sorcerers channeled mana in mass, splitting up the parts of the magic. They used rituals to help control the sheer volumes of mana, and mana 'producers' generated the majority of the energy for the ceremony itself.

This streamlined the enormous constraints involved, letting them create an opposite tornado to the incoming spiral. As their tornado built, Hybrids ran and held the line against the incoming maelstrom. They extended out fans of wires, using the orange pustules inside their bodies to fill in the gaps. These glowing, pulsing wings caught the wind, and the Hybrids entrenched themselves in the ground using wires.

As if catching the tornado, the units held it back before the new tornado clashed with Plazia's one. The forces collided with a thunderous boom. The sky over the battlefield darkened, turning into a gloomy shade. Lightning struck. Thunder radiated and boomed across the dim skyline. The forces of nature extended outwards in hectic, chaotic streaks.

Remnant guards caught incoming trees and debris, using discount dimensional slicers to cleave apart stone and wood. The sorcerers focused their efforts, sweat pouring from the magician's faces. They scrambled to organize and hold the line as the enormous plume of wind sliced into the defensive units.

A Blighted One flew from the encampment, out of a secret, underground area to my disgust. After flying over, it channeled the wind with its wings, a creature of the air despite its ruined form. The twisted gialgathen turned the tides. The warring forces overwhelmed the tornado, turning the unclean air into a distant memory. They celebrated, sweat sheening on their faces after doing an excellent job defending their city.

A ruined city.

Behind them and the blare of the wind, the metal eaters already swarmed the town. They ran through streets and devoured Hybrids in mass. Enormous, house-sized iron



swallowers gulped them down whole, acid spilling from their mouths. Even from a distance, several ahcorous looking entities swarmed between the metal eaters.

These eldritch caught and plopped humans into a large pile. My eyes narrowed at the collection before Plazia raised a hand, “Just watch.”

The defensive forces found their encampment being decimated, and they sprinted towards the base. As they ran across the wooden housing, giant eldritch insects poured out of the earth.

Plated beetles, flaming mantises, icy cicadas, lunar moths of enormous proportion and filled with magic, an entire ensemble of insectoid creatures rose from the ground. They culled the Hybrids and remnants, decimating the forces to dust. No humans died, however. Instead, the insects piled the entirety of them into a single accumulation.

Over it, a necromancer arose. Like a cheap, Torix knock-off, the robed skeleton floated over the armada of insects and metal eaters. It cackled out with a generic, evil laugh. That laugh, recognizable or not, radiated across the entire landscape. At that moment, the absolute terror of its grip pronounced itself to the heavens. This was no joke, and these people would die.

The necromancer spread its arms out, generating a ritual of flames around the piled humans. My face gnarled up as I simmered, “You know, I’m still watching.”

Plazia turned a palm to the magical vantage point, “Then think about the forces at play.”

The necromancer continued his ritual, channeling runes and attempting to create a blood sacrifice. Many minutes passed, and in that time, the necromancer decimated every inkling of the Hybridization, the silvers’ established environment, and the buildings. Nothing remained of Elysium’s camp outside of the humans.

An enormous eye popped up over them, and it gazed down in an umbral shade. It cast vast magic over the land, covering it in darkness. That shade siphoned into a singular point, and the magical eye closed itself. As it did, a light coursed from its eyelids onto the humans. I wanted to act and get over there right then and there, but I rested across the cosmos, far away.

Before the ritual was completed, a red aura passed over the horizon. Volatile energy warped reality, and a crimson portal appeared over the magical eye and the necromancer. From it, an enormous figure paced out. It mirrored the size of an Overseer, both in form and function. Its gauntlets radiated out with ascendant mana, its entire body oozing mana from every pore.

Its body bulged from the Hybridization within it. A puppet of meat, the once blue lines between its plates sheened crimson. A plume of living steel floated behind it, a thriving mass. Plazia gestured to the gray,

“They are nanomachines.”

They coated the twisted Overseer, cracks of red lightning booming from it. The necromancer lifted its hands and shouted, “I am beyond death-“

It disappeared.

The Overseer lifted its hand, and an antimatter wave obliterated the necromancer’s entire body. No trace of existence remained, the destructive entity evaporating into an awful memory. The insects below lost any semblance of orderliness, each of them peering around in confusion. The metal eaters followed suit.

Energy cackled. Furnaces hummed. The twisted Overseer moved its hand, generating wave after wave of silent disintegration. Patches of monsters disappeared with each motion of its hand. Portions of the Overseer’s gauntlet heated and glowed brightly before flesh dripped from its hand. Its arm musculature pulsed and exploded with violent eruptions. Blood oozed out from between its joints.

It continued attacking.

Its Hybrid half reconstituted flesh as it deconstructed. An incarnation of destruction, it decimated the entire camp’s invasion, and Plazia hissed,

“That...That is a new weapon I’ve seen reported by others. It’s fearsome...And useful.“

After having the entire landscape leveled, the twisted Overseer peered at the decimation. A spare ruin or two remained from the camp, each piece of marred stone or

uplifted rock a rarity among bare dirt and glowing craters. The Overseer turned, floating back into the portal it arrived from. It faded from existence, the crimson aura over the battlefield disappearing.

A silence crossed over the entire landscape. The humans remained piled up, dazed yet unharmed. All traces of Hybridization dissolved. The lich eradicated the remnants, and the silvers expired down to the last fragment. I gawked at the display, and Plazia spread out his hands,

“No casualties. No Hybrids. No infrastructure to build back upon. That is my design.”

Plazia turned to me.

“Ahh. Perfection.”

Chapter 320: Dimensional Wakes

I gave him a slow nod, “There’s one issue that’s still popping out to me.”

Plazia lowered his arms, “What would that be?”

I pointed at the pile of unconscious people, “Uhm, they can die at any point. Exposure, roaming eldritch, the sun drying them out. Honestly, there’s a lot of ways for them to meet the reaper right now.”

Before my words left my mouth, a group of metallic spiders crawled from the barren dirt. Their dark gray exoskeletons sheened red, and the eyes glowed a bright crimson. They put the humans into silken weaves, nesting them into cocoons. As the spiders finished rounding up the people, they crawled back into the ground.

I pointed at the giant metal spiders, “Like that. It looks like those civilians will be people smoothies before we know it.”

Plazia waved a hand, “Those spiders absorb thermal energy from their captives. They simply place their victims into their colonies, cast metabolic magic over them to make them sweat, and harvest the sterilized liquid and radiating heat. They are some of the most benign eldritch for this reason. It’s why I chose them as captors for the aftermath of the conflict.”

I frowned, "I'm guessing they keep their captives till death?"

"They will, but that isn't a matter of concern. I planted that eldrich's colony, and I know where it is. We can save the people therein whenever it's convenient for either of us."

I put my hands on my hips, "Alright. I gotta admit this was pretty perfect then."

Plazia gave me a bow that oozed confidence, "Why, thank you, Harbinger. I aim to please."

I pointed at him, "Speaking of which, I need a test subject."

"What for, precisely?"

"I'll be testing a new aura of mine."

Plazia peered at my shoulder pauldron, "Like that pale aura over you now? I've long wondered what that is."

I spread the Rise of Eden over Plazia, including him in the aura's effects. Plazia froze in place, unable to process the changes. I pulled the dimensional wake back, and the hivemind gasped,

"I...That was incredible. The clarity. The strength."

I shrugged, "The everything, really. It's called the Rise of Eden. It gives me stats, and those stats are potent. You can also experience Event Horizon if you want. It will be agonizing, unlike that last one. In your case, you're very vulnerable to that aura since it's more an AOE tool. It tears groups apart. You, being a cluster of bugs, kind of have those fighting mechanics about you."

Plazia grounded his feet, “Isn’t that your original aura? I’ve seen its impacts during your encounters, but my spies couldn’t parse its specifics. It seems to melt anything it touches. I...I’ll experience it, but only for a moment.”

The runic sigils spread over my skin flared a menacing red, oozing out with murderous intent. My armor grinned a jagged smile as I frowned, “You ready?”

Plazia stammered, “Y-yes.”

I reached out Event Horizon over him, and Plazia’s knees wobbled. He channeled mana from his furnaces, revving out some kind of healing magic. He shook his head, confusion spreading over him, “Ah...This is rather potent. It’s like swallowing a bowl full of nails...Made of glass...Through my nostrils.”

I laughed before Plazia peered up at me in defiance, “It’s a cluster of fun, isn’t it?”

I gazed down at him, “That’s half the effect.”

Plazia tilted his head, wondering what the other half entailed. I stated with my voice imbued by aura’s dominance,

“Kneel.”

Plazia fell onto one knee, and the hivemind gasped, “This...This is how you controlled the eldritch on Blegara. Hah. Madness. Truly this is madness.”

He enjoyed the challenge, pushing himself back up despite his legs wobbling. I smiled, “Damn. Impressive.”

He almost got up before I pointed down and seethed, “I said kneel.”

Plazia collapsed, falling onto his arms. He cackled, “That’s incredible. What a tool at your disposal. It’s wicked, I must say.”

I pulled Event Horizon back, and Plazia's Sentinel armor calmed, no longer jittering under the surface. The insect swarm maintained itself despite how powerful Event Horizon was, and Plazia remained able to speak and function. If anything, he appreciated the aura instead of fighting it.

I gave him a nod out of respect, "That was a good effort."

Plazia kept his healing magic going, siphoning it into himself, "I take pride in my control, whether it's of myself or others. To face a test of my control is a delight I rarely meet. The novelty alone is worth it."

I raised my brow, "Well, those are the two auras I've had up until now. My new energy type means I have one for my primordial mana now."

Plazia brushed the dirt off his sentinel armor, "And that's what dictates the aura's composition?"

"Yup."

Plazia spread his arms, "That was ascendant mana just now, and the previous one was quintessence then?"

I raised my brow, "Yeah. Exactly."

Plazia crossed his arms, "And now you're dissecting primordial mana. You need a subject, and you want me to be that individual?"

I waved my hands out, "Hell no. I have no idea what it's going to do. It could kill you-" I snapped my fingers, "And just like that. The last thing we need is you suffering death or permanent damage. Instead, just throw a patch of insects out, and let's see how they deal with it."

Plazia raised a hand, forming umbral insects out of the corner of the room. They glimmered in the crimson light oozing from my runic markings. I stepped up to them, and primordial mana funneled into my sigils. I turned to Plazia, "Take a step back. This could get messy."

Plazia did so before sitting on a basalt throne, his favorite resting place given his propensity for them. I stared down at a pile of beetles, and I funneled mana into my body. As I did, the sensation of primordial mana oozed into my mind. It assimilated with my flesh and blood, coursing into my veins like injecting an ichor.

It left a different sting than quintessence or ascendant mana. Primordial mana placed an aura of perfectionism and judgment over me. I was a judge over a courtroom, all under my grasp, and I decided anything and everything that occurred. In fact, my surroundings popped out with detail as if I viewed them through a magnifying glass.

In a sense, the confidence and precision of the energy struck out to me. I kept funneling the mana until I jittered under the energy's fluctuations. It spawned an almost demonic urge to destroy and recreate. I felt like a god given life, and everything appeared impure and weak to me. The desire to evaporate my surroundings and replace them with better, superior replacements surged in my chest.

They turned into whispering voices. They rose in volume, shouting in my mind to devastate and replace. A compulsion to reduce the insects rushed over me, along with the desire to create better beings in place of them. They deserved nothing better. Their deaths served my vision, a better vision. I soaked in this confidence, one grounded in knowledge and control instead of absolute power.

And I silenced it.

The mana storm quelled like a puppy struck by an iron chain. My mind wielded a brutal, engulfing wave of power over the mana and its undirected will. I gave it a smile as it relinquished any attempts at retaliation. This wasn't my first time tolerating mana with its own mind and output, and I also experienced the sensation from ascendant mana, which proved much more volatile.

That one combined with my armor's persona, turning into an almost demonic apparition. It arrested control of me at one point while fighting mutated people in Springfield. Compared to then, I rested on a massive pile of real-world experience and an even more giant pile of willpower. That granted me absolute control of my mana and its processing.

So I channeled primordial energy once more, keeping the mana tame. It floated off my body in congealed dollops, like a liquid, navy-blue fire rising off of me. Ascendant

mana crackled out like lightning, a thick, choking miasma, while quintessence arrived in a saturated wave, like air soaking into your skin. This mirrored flames and plasma, the assuredness of the mana coming across like a gentle warmth.

Plazia murmured, “And you’re certain this is your first time summoning primordial mana?”

I wallowed in the wake of the energy, “It is. It’s different, I gotta say.” I stepped forward, getting within inches of the beetles. My feet left marks on the stone. From me, the mana left geometric, straight lines crisscrossing the stone. They expanded into polygonic, orderly shapes behind me as if I reorganized the world in a mathematical design. I raised my brow at the beetles, “Sorry little guys. I hope you’ll be fine.”

I reached out with my new dimensional wake. It coursed in a wave, a strange, dulling of my emotions. My eyes sharpened as an unknown precision crossed over me. It washed over me like water, an incoming orderliness that gave me absolute stability. It soaked deeper than the skin, a stronger, more potent version of the primordial mana before it.

As the new dimensional wake washed over the beetles, they remained unaffected. I nodded, the sensation clear to me. I mouthed, “Yeah, this has nothing to do with anyone else. Compared to the other mana types, this one is purely internal.”

Plazia leaned over, peering at the beetles, “I would envision Primordial mana being the opposite. It’s mana about controlling your outer world and crafting it in your vision. How would that leave everything unaffected?”

I closed my eyes, saturated in the primordial mana’s ooze, “That’s just it. It’s in my vision. The world isn’t being recreated. I’m creating something new from my mind and it alone.” I reached out a hand. I generated ice, as I would with quintessence. This same ice spawned into existence, but it carried a particular shape.

I generated a sculpture, one mirroring Althea. With my photographic memory, I envisioned her midway through firing her rifle. The barrel coalesced from ice. The shape of her figure and the focus in her gaze all came together. Before I opened my eyes, I knew it would be lifelike. As I gazed upon my creation, it was a mirror image of my memory.



Precision. Accuracy. Those words described the sculpture. It carried no flaws, the ice oozing a cool fog from its lower base. Plazia stepped up to it, and I molded my aura away from the hivemind. He tapped an eyelash, the ice breaking off,

“I didn’t realize you dabbled in any kind of artwork. You enjoy sculpting?”

I shook my head, “Not really. The only thing comparable to art is my work with the cipher. As for actual artistry, I’ve never really been much of one.” I gazed at my palms, nodding at the energy, “But maybe I am now.”

Before I pulled the aura back, Plazia stepped to his beetles. Plazia moved his arms while inspecting himself within the dimensional wake, “What a strange sensation.”

I frowned, “Huh...What’s it like?”

Plazia reached out a hand, “I’m being peered at from every angle by all-seeing eyes. They pierce through my shell, and they see my form in disdain. I’m held by strings, an odd puppeteer granting me benevolence by allowing me to exist.” The hivemind shivered, “It’s quite uncomfortable, though nothing when compared to Event Horizon. That aura asserted absolute dominion as if I were worthless.”

I pulled the dimensional wake off of Plazia, “Well, that’s good. Based on what it’s shown so far, I’m thinking this primordial aura should be pretty useful for crafting, in particular the cipher. I’ll be able to make some very precise carvings. With this, I might even be able to push past some bottlenecks in my sigil slicing, actually.”

Plazia nodded, “It’s interesting. I believe that the primordial aura operates better under fine control. Perhaps you should use the Rise of Eden to generate the raw materials and energy for various inscriptions during your crafting. Think of it as outlining. Filling in the finer details thereafter, that can work under the might of this...This other aura.”

I said, “I’ll have to play around with it and see what I can do later. For now, I’ll call it my primordial aura.”

Plazia leaned back, “It’s provenance, an absolute assertion of your will.”

I frowned, “Huh, it’s hard to say. Not having a system lay out all the details means I could be missing something. It’s kind of fun, though, like exploring a dungeon I’ve never seen.”

Plazia crossed his arms, “That assumes a lack of danger. Your perspective is warped in that regard, as most risk death. You merely tread into the unknown to find gain.”

I put a hand over Plazia’s shoulders, “Man, you know what? You’re cool, Plazia.”

I shook him a bit, Plazia jerking around. He mouthed, “Your expression of joy is obnoxious.”

I gave him a grin, “And so is your vocabulary, but here we are.”

The hivemind actually let out a cackle before I gave him a light pat on the back. I stepped forward, stretching my arms, “Well, I have to head out.”

Plazia peered at the runic markings, “As do I. There are details I must refine before we begin our dimensional processing. Establishing those finer details shall consume me.”

I sent Helios a message, asking him to come back. A warp opened seconds after, and Helios stepped out with a drink in his hand. It left an aroma like a fruity version of coffee, quite delectable by the looks of it. The albony royal caught me staring.

Helios snapped, “What? I can’t enjoy Velauh?”

I leaned over it, “Velauh, huh? It looks pretty good.”

Helios pulled it close, “And it looks to be mine as well. You can’t have any.”

I rolled my eyes before Helios raised an arm, “Where are we going?”

I frowned at his Valauh drink, “To wherever you got that drink.”

Helios shook his head, "I'm no chauffeur."

Plazia stated, "You fooled me."

Helios's left eye twitched before I raised a hand, "We're going to Earth."

In silence, the warp specialist did his thing, popping out another dimensional leap for us. Before stepping through the veil, Plazia raised a hand. A psionic construct crawled out of the ground, and Plazia gestured to it,

"Use this to contact me. Hide it within your dimension, and simply seize control of it if you wish for a meeting. I will let you know if I am available to discuss details."

I gave him a thumbs-up, "Will do. Cya, Plazia."

I scooped the bug thing into my dimension, and Helios and I stepped through the portal, landing on the side of Mt. Verner. Chrona rested in the distance, many gialgathens roosting along the upper portion of the mountain. Eltari flew along the lower valleys as well, and a growing cityscape encroached on the forest. I smiled at it, our city thriving. Wanting to take things to the next level, I rose a palm to Helios,

"You're dismissed. I'm heading out."

He rose his brow under his dark mask, "Where exactly are you off to?"

Quintessence suffused my surroundings in an unbridled wave,

"I'm going to go do some hands-on expansion real quick."

I smiled, "We need some more cities."