

'Project Socius' immediately rang some bells. This was the fourth time Rob had heard of it. The first was long ago during an Attunement vision, where he saw two high-ranking Humans commiserating over the bloodshed caused by the Scouring, wondering if it was possible to avert the wholesale slaughter of their race.

"Only one option remains," a woman had stated. "You know this as well as I do, Reynold. It's high time we implemented Project Socius."

Reynold, a Human commander, had appeared hesitant. "Are we to commit sacrilege, then? Immerse ourselves in sin?"

"For our people," the woman answered, resolute. "So that they may yet live."

Slowly, Reynold nodded. "...For our people."

With a jolt of surprise, Rob recognized Ismaire as the woman from that vision. She'd been the one spurring on commander Reynold. The realization provided a bit more context to details that were still shrouded in fog, even to this day. Aside from his one Attunement flashback and its vague clues, Rob had spent months completely in the dark over what Project Socius might be.

His second instance of hearing about it came much later, in Dwarven territory. When Stonewarden Grant betrayed Riardin's Rangers, the prick justified his decision to nuke Fiend territory by claiming that its people had played a role in causing the Cataclysm.

"Project Socius was the Humans' final resort," the Stonewarden had explained. "One born out of pure desperation. They intended to contact the Fiends and request assistance in some manner. As far as I am aware, they succeeded."

Grant's expression hardened. "Weeks later, the Cataclysm tore Elatra asunder."

More information, and more dots connected. The 'sacrilege' that Reynold and Ismaire prepared themselves to commit was likely their attempt to reach out to the Fiends – and to make an honest, concerted effort to communicate. Even with that piece of the puzzle revealed, though, Stonewarden

Grant's explanation left a lot to be desired. The gaps in his knowledge were just too wide to make sense of everything.

Additional details came to light several weeks after the Stonewarden was dealt with. Thanks to the wonders of peer pressure, the Fiend's High Soulseer was persuaded to reveal what he knew as well, divulging secrets kept long hidden outside of a select few.

His reticence turned out to be well-deserved. Broken clocks are right twice a day, and similarly, Grant's suspicions had been correct. The Fiends *did* cause the Cataclysm...in a roundabout fashion.

The Cataclysm's origins could be traced back to Project Socius, when the Humans successfully made contact with their lifsworn enemies. Truly desperate, and fully aware that the end was nigh, they cast aside their preconceptions of the Fiends as implacable, soul-eating monsters. Humanity instead entreated the Fiends with heartfelt sincerity, begging for some way – ANY way – to save their people.

That sincerity was rewarded. Moved by Humanity's plight, the High Soulseer and a small group of Fiends gifted them the secrets behind dimension magic. According to the Soulseer, he'd thought Human territory would use it to evacuate themselves to a different world.

Unfortunately, no good deed goes unpunished.

"The Humans we met seemed like reasonable creatures," the High Soulseer had recounted. "It was evident that they wanted their brethren to survive. Yet when it came time for them to cast dimension magic, they twisted its usage in ways we'd never envisioned. Instead of shaping the barrier between worlds, the Humans siphoned it, taking its mana for their own. That combined with using Soul Burn on their entire race was enough to fuel the Cataclysm."

His lips twisted into a rictus of hatred. "We gave them an escape. We gave them salvation. And they repaid our kindness with ruination. Countless people are dead because the Humans let vengeance take hold of their hearts."

Rob believed the High Soulseer's tale. The Fiend had no reason to lie, and he would've needed to be an Oscar-worthy actor to fake the profound, rage-filled sorrow carved on his face. His account was the closest that anyone in Elatra could get to the truth.

But it wasn't the *whole* truth. Rob believed that as well. There were too many assumptions that didn't sit right with him. In fairness to the High Soulseer, his belief that Humanity unleashed the Cataclysm out of vengeance was a natural conclusion to make. Everyone else in Elatra thought the same. Some even accepted it as their penance for pushing Human territory to the absolute brink of despair.

Except...Rob had seen Reynold's heartache when the commander discussed their rising casualties. How it flipped to resolve when Ismaire mentioned *saving their people*. Those weren't the expressions of people planning one final Fuck You to the world – not by a long shot. Regardless of the end result, they'd started Project Socius with good, noble intentions....and along the way, something had gone catastrophically wrong.

A pit settled in Rob's gut as he realized he was about to find out why.

"I shall state this clearly," Ismaire continued, in a matter-of-fact tone, addressing the eight others around her. "When I say that the fate of all Humanity lies in our hands – no part of that is exaggeration. We stand now at a crossroads. Paths surround us, each of them dark and uncertain. Choose poorly, and everyone we have sworn to protect will perish with blood on their lips and regrets in their hearts."

"So you've given up?" A reedy-looking man glared at her with obvious discontent. "This war is not yet finished. Just one advantageous strike is all we need to—"

"Pull your head out of the clouds, Felandril." Ismaire shook her head. "We have lost. With the entire world turned against us, how could the outcome be any different? Fending off five territories at once was already untenable *before* the Dragon Queen's Class Awakening. Now..."

She nonchalantly waved her hand. A detailed, illusory map of Elatra appeared in front of her, superimposed over the conference table.

Rob marveled at the sight. "Mages can do that?" he asked, facing Elder Duran. *Don't know why I'm so surprised, considering other spells can bring down thunder and open dimensional freaking portals, but it's rare that I see them create something so mundanely useful.*

"Ismaire likely invented that spell herself." Duran sounded distant as he spoke, his voice wavering. None of the color had returned to his complexion. "From what I know, she was a pioneer of magecraft."

The Archmage in question lifted her index finger. Miniature figures popped up onto her map, representing the various factions embroiled in Elatra's biggest and bloodiest war.

It didn't paint a reassuring picture. More than half of Human territory had fallen under the control of various other nations. Dragonkin territory's red icons were pushing especially far in, like the tip of a spear for the rest to follow.

"Queen Ragnavi wins any engagement she enters," Ismaire explained. "That is guaranteed. Perhaps if she were *completely* mad with grief, we could lure her into an ambush and overwhelm her with sheer numbers, but unfortunately she's retained enough of her faculties to exercise caution. And as her presence on the battlefield is an assured victory, the other nations are afforded significant leeway in where and how they deploy their Combat Class users."

She lowered her tone. "The results are evident. So many have...Belroth above, so many."

Rob studied the map further. A disquieted chill gripped his chest as he fully comprehended what its marked-off areas implied. They represented more than just *territory* lost. This conflict may have started out as war, but by now, it was a Scouring. Aside from scattered pockets of resistance where enemy soldiers dared to defy Ragnavi's edict, that meant no prisoners of war.

Nearly all the Humans who'd lived in those areas were dead.

"Delaying the inevitable would require allying with another nation," Ismaire stated, her voice regaining its steel, "yet our overtures of diplomacy have failed. Dwarven territory seems appalled by what is transpiring, but not enough to risk the Dragon Queen's wrath. I'm sure they'll dry their tears on our corpses once the slaughter is done with. As for the Merfolk, Harpies, and Elves – they care even less. If

anything, it gives some of them an outlet for their anguish. This war has taken loved ones from everyone, and as it stands, Humanity makes for a convenient scapegoat."

Duran lowered his eyes and turned away. Rob caught a glimpse of shame before the Elder's expression was hidden from sight.

"You need only look around to see how our armies are faring." Ismaire gestured at the empty seats surrounding the table. "Many of our highest-Level soldiers are so preoccupied with holding the line that they couldn't attend a meeting of vital importance. Even more of them are just...gone. Fallen on the field of battle, their dreams and aspirations snuffed out by senseless brutality."

She inclined her head towards the empty seat beside her. "One of them was my dearest friend. Reynold spearheaded Project Socius. He delivered salvation unto us – a salvation he will never personally know."

The Archmage sharpened her gaze and looked at each of the eight attendees in turn. "His efforts shall not be wasted."

None of the others could find the nerve to respond. After a few seconds, Ismaire nodded, satisfied that she'd gotten her point across. "Several of you are already aware of what Project Socius entails. For those who've only heard of it by name, listen well, for it could decide the course of all Humanity. To start: when Reynold made contact with the Fiends, he convinced them to gift us the methods behind teleportation and dimension magic."

"But how?" Felandril interrupted, fidgeting in his chair. "What would motivate them to share secrets with their hated enemies?"

Ismaire shrugged. "Pity, I think."

Felandril barked out a bitter laugh. "Elatra butchers us, and the Fiends come to our aid." He nervously drummed his fingers on the table. "Madness reigns. The world has been turned on its head."

"Indeed – which is why we should leave it."

The other attendees sat up straighter. Six of them were staring at Ismaire with dumbfounded looks on their faces. Felandril was one of the two who seemed unsurprised; him and a third mage that Rob didn't recognize.

"Before you assail her with questions," the unknown mage began, "Ismaire's plan is exactly as described." His tone was unenthused, bordering on cold. "The final step of Project Socius is to utilize dimension magic and escape Elatra. This world has forsaken us, so she intends to flee from it."

There was an undercurrent of opposition in his words. Ismaire glared at him, made note of it, then pressed on. "Harken speaks true. When enemy soldiers overrun a city, you evacuate the people within. This is no different."

"No different?" another mage sputtered. Actually, based on their attire, everyone in attendance seemed to be a mage. "This is hardly a matter of marching civilians to safety! How would we even begin to accomplish such a task? And where could we possibly go?"

With a casual wave of her hand, Ismaire opened a viewing window to Earth.

Rob's jaw dropped. It took numerous Fiend mages days of preparation to summon a viewing window. Either Ismaire had modified the spell to be more mana-efficient, or she was just *that* adept at magecraft in general.

"This world was discovered recently," she continued, gesturing towards an Earth city with streets in plain sight. "As you can see, its inhabitants are—"

"Humans!" One of the mages bolted to her feet, jabbing a quivering finger at the viewing window. "Belroth's grace – *Humans!*"

Ismaire kept her face neutral. "An accurate observation. From what we can surmise, this world is populated wholly by Humans. Not that we've surveyed every inch of its surface, but...at the very least, no signs of other races have been detected."

A hint of longing crept into her voice. "Imagine it. A world where we aren't outcasts. Where we aren't threats to be feared. There would be no territorial disputes, no pointless wars of aggression – just one world, united under a single race."

Rob couldn't help but wince at that. If Ismaire's plan *had* succeeded, she probably would've been disappointed by what she found waiting for her on Earth.

"Something's odd about them," a mage suddenly commented. He was staring at the viewing window with an analytical gaze. "The people of that world are moving strangely. They appear...uncoordinated. Like low-Level children."

"You aren't far off," Harken interjected, with that same unenthused tone. "Extended observation has shown that this world's inhabitants are weak. Startlingly so."

The corners of his lips twitched. "Perhaps they don't have Levels at all."

Ismaire spoke quickly to preempt the shocked mutterings that Harken's statement provoked. "A baseless supposition. They–"

"It is no more baseless than any theory you've put forth today, Ismaire. We can't be certain that the Humans of that world would accept us. We can't even be certain they're the same *species*. Don't you think it's peculiar that Human-like creatures developed in a world separate from ours?"

"Yes," Ismaire admitted. "And my misgivings are irrelevant. That there exists a world with beings even *slightly* like ourselves is a miracle we'd be fools to disregard."

Except it wasn't a miracle. Harken was right to be wary. The gods had based Elatran Humans off of Earth humans.

Frowning, Rob examined the viewing window more closely, looking at the streets of an urban city. His eyes were drawn to an advertisement displayed above the entrance of a small movie theater. '*The Defenders 4: Reckoning*' – hadn't that one come out just last year? He remembered seeing its midnight

release with Jason. Didn't the events of this Attunement vision take place eight years ago, before the Cataclysm happened?

His thoughts were interrupted by Ismaire continuing her spiel. "Dimension magic has broad applications," the Archmage explained. "Creating portals is but one aspect of its potential. My subordinates and I have developed a variant spell that, when cast, forms a simultaneous connection with the entire Human race. Used in tandem with portal magic, it would allow us to directly teleport our people to this new world. *All of us.*"

Enthusiasm built around her, the six uninformed mages lighting up with hope. Rob almost looked away as the pit in his stomach felt heavier by the second. He knew how this story ended. Witnessing it firsthand was like watching a plane crash in slow motion. If it wasn't for how the Skills had directly brought him here, obviously wanting him to learn something important, he would have already exited the vision to save himself needless heartache.

Before the six mages could get too excited, Felandril leveled an accusatory tone at Ismaire. "I see you've neglected to inform our colleagues of how you intend to empower this spell. Dimension magic costs an exorbitant amount of mana – even for someone such as yourself."

Hope turned to horror in an instant. The six mages stared at Ismaire, silently pleading for her to refute the suspicions brewing in their minds.

"Half."

One word that provoked a litany of strangled gasps. For the first time, Ismaire's posture sagged, as if an incalculable weight was threatening to crush her. "My spell will connect to all Humans. Half shall be transported to the new world. The other half shall be..."

"Subject to Soul Burn," Harken drawled, finishing what Ismaire wouldn't. "As kindling to fuel your magic."

For a long while, no one dared speak.

"Monstrous," a mage condemned, his voice replete with astonishment.

"I do not deny that." Ismaire drew herself up. Her resolve had returned, although it was tinged with self-loathing. "Yet it must be done. Either half of our people die, or all of them do. I will gladly take on the mantle of monster if it means averting our complete and total extinction. The survivors can judge me as they see fit – I won't oppose being executed for my crimes."

It was the most batshit insane thing Rob had ever heard. Ever since coming to Elatra, he'd agonized over every death he was unable to prevent. So many had perished that didn't deserve it. And whenever he imagined any of the people he *cared* for dying? God, he practically went to pieces. He couldn't begin to fathom what kind of mindset would lead someone to willingly sacrifice half their fucking nation.

Then his eyes drifted back to the map on the table, and how half of Human territory was *already* gone. Even being generous, and assuming that most of the Humans fled their cities before being Scoured, it was still an incomprehensible death toll.

For a brief moment, Rob understood Ismaire. Her plan wasn't born of callousness – but rather, of hopelessness. She saw the Human race as a cornered animal with zero possibility of escape. They were wounded, trapped, and bleeding out. And when faced with hungry predators closing in, ready to gleefully tear out her people's throats?

That would drive anyone to try anything.

"You are terrifying," Felandril bluntly stated. "It is of little wonder that Archmages are hunted down, if this is what you're capable of creating." He paused, fidgeting. "Instead of massacring what remains of Humanity, can't you connect this mass Soul Burn to the other races? That would solve all our problems in one fell swoop."

"I did not create this spell alone, and you know precisely why we've been forced to quell most Archmages," Ismaire snapped. "As for connecting my Soul Burn to other races – no. It won't work on them. It wouldn't work even if a member of their own race attempted it on themselves. The only reason I can connect to Humans in this manner is because of...our true nature."

Everyone grimaced. Ismaire was referring to Humanity's #1 skeleton in the closet; the fact that they were biologically identical to monsters, same as the Fiends. As such, their bodies were comprised entirely of mana. It was a dirty secret kept hidden from the vast majority of the Human and Fiend populaces.

Which, incidentally, was also why Archmages tended to be silenced. Due to their affinity with Sense Mana, they possessed a much higher chance of figuring out that Humans and mana-born monsters seemed just a bit *too* similar. Everyone in this room was likely part of the cabal keeping things under wraps.

"Regardless," Felandril began, ending the awkward silence. "You appear to have your mind set on this...course of action. Why bother calling us to a meeting if you're so assured of your path?"

"My spell cannot be performed without a Mage Circle."

"Ah – so that's why you didn't invite any of the brutes today." He raised an eyebrow. "Yet that fails to answer my question. You have your lackeys, yes? The ones who helped you forge this atrocity of a spell? They would've sufficed to form a Mage Circle. Consulting our opinion was never necessary."

Ismaire let out a hollow laugh. "Do you truly think so poorly of me, Felandril? I am not so arrogant that I would presume to be the sole arbiter of Humanity's fate."

She swept her gaze across the room. "A majority vote. If I can achieve that among my trusted peers, then that will serve as proof that my path is correct. Otherwise..."

Her mouth widened into an equally hollow smile. "We face the end together."

Rob threw his hands up in the air. "There are nine goddamn people in this room!" he shouted, well-aware that none of the specters could hear him. "A single-digit number of mages is deciding for literally everyone else! IN SECRET! Don't you think all the other Humans deserve a say in whether they get *Soul Burnt?!'*"

Elder Duran shuffled uncomfortably. "I...can see the logic," he muttered. "Making Project Socius known to the public would spark unprecedented amounts of unrest. The fires of civil war would engulf Human territory. A multitude of assassins would be sent at Ismaire's coterie of mages. And all the while, the Scouring would continue to gorge upon their lands and people. If Ismaire is fully convinced that this plan is her *only* recourse, then delaying it would just result in exponential casualties."

"...You know, when people say that it's better to ask forgiveness than permission, they usually mean it about something with lower stakes than *sacrificing millions*."

"I'm not saying I agree with Ismaire, Rob – merely that I can understand her." Duran's eyes darkened. "I understand her enough to be grateful that I was never required to make a decision of such magnitude."

Rob just shook his head, unable to come up with a response. The sheer *scale* of what he was witnessing right now was difficult to wrap his head around. He'd made some tough choices in his time on Elatra, but none of them even came remotely close to this. If anything, he'd been lucky, often finding a third option to circumvent tricky situations, giving him the luxury to choose a brighter path forward.

As he stared at Ismaire, seeing her determined expression for the desperate mask it was, a bolt of dread lanced up Rob's spine. This was what happened when there wasn't a third option. When your very best failed, and that which you held dear crumbled away because of your inability to protect it. When all there was left to do was pick the lesser of two evils and hope you could live with yourself afterwards.

I'll never let anything like this happen to me – was an easy thought to make. Yet somehow, Rob doubted that the Humans in this room had wanted things to turn out this way, and they were decades more experienced than him. These nine mages possessed a wealth of knowledge, expertise, and Levels...and it meant nothing in the face of an unstoppable, merciless enemy. The efforts of everyone else in Human territory hadn't amounted to anything, either.

Who was he to assume that he was better than them? That he couldn't *possibly* be forced to sacrifice some of the people he cared about in order to save others?

"It's too risky," said Felandril, folding his arms over his chest. "This mass-link spell of yours is virtually untested. If it misfires, or if it produces insufficient mana to transport half our populace across dimensions, then we'd just be hastening the Dragon Queen's work for her."

Ismaire locked eyes with him. "Our people face the threat of oblivion. While Project Socius contains no small measure of risk and sacrifice, it is necessary to prevent the worst from coming to pass. As for the spell itself – I am confident in my preparations."

"As are all Archmages before unleashing their 'innovations' upon the world."

"Then what do *you* propose, Felandril?"

"Simple," he replied, his hands fidgeting once more. "We continue the fight. The Dragon Queen may be a mighty foe, yet she is still mortal – and despised by many. Diverting resources to assassinate her will rally other nations to our cause."

Frustration crept into Ismaire's voice. "Divert what resources, pray tell? I've spent longer on the front lines than you, and I know for a fact that our armies are stretched thinner than a sheaf of parchment."

She built up momentum as she spoke, her aggravation rising with every word. "Adding to that...do you understand how fundamentally impossible it is to kill someone like the Dragon Queen? She can single-handedly defeat a Party of high-Level combatants. She has the highest Vitality in the world. She can fly to safety when pressured. And most importantly of all, she has *support*. The Queen is crazed and bloodlusted, yes, but not idiotic. She knows how strongly we wish to slay her, and so she never leaves camp without a large retinue of trusted soldiers in tow."

The Archmage clenched her fists. "It burns me to say, but the Dragon Queen is untouchable. We tried to assassinate her – many times – when Human territory was at full strength. Those attempts always ended in disaster, and they'd go even worse now that our armies are in shambles."

"Our armies won't be required."

Felandril's declaration earned him seven pairs of confused looks. Only Harken, still taciturn, seemed completely unbothered.

"Elaborate," said Ismaire, with barely-suppressed hope. "Do you have a method to defeat the Queen that has somehow slipped our minds? Is it an Enchanted Item from the Artificers? Or a new Awakened Class to match hers?"

A peal of unrestrained laughter spilled from Felandril's mouth, like crumbling rubble that heralded a landslide. Something about it made the hairs on Rob's neck stand up. "You've already delivered the method to us, Ismaire," the mage crowed. "Soul Burn can be used for grander designs than just opening portals."

He smacked his palm on the map. "If half our people must die, then they shall die with *purpose*. Use their Soul Burnt mana to launch an offensive spell at the Dragon Queen. Not even that abnormal creature would survive such a devastating mass of condensed power."

Rob could have heard a pin drop.

"What?" Ismaire blanched. "That's..."

She trailed off, her eyes searching the room – then widening as she discovering that the other mages seemed receptive to Felandril's plan. "It won't work," the Archmage hastily clarified. "I wouldn't know how to control an offensive spell with that much mana."

"Yet you can control a dimensional teleportation spell of the same caliber?" Felandril raised his eyebrows. "You're an Archmage. Devise a solution to the problem. It's what you do best."

For a moment, Ismaire appeared to consider the idea. Slowly, though, she shook her head. "I cannot condone this. It carries more risk than Project Socius."

"You would reject our greatest chance at killing the Dragon Queen?"

"Killing her is secondary to ensuring our people's survival. A *distant* second." Ismaire hesitated, carefully choosing her words. "Attacking with a mass Soul Burn has too many potential points of failure. With Project Socius, we need only worry about the spell misfiring, or the Humans of that other world proving hostile towards us. With your proposal, the spell can misfire, or miss, or be dodged, or have its damage mitigated via unforeseen Skill interactions. An attack is not guaranteed to succeed – and even if it does, what comes after will assure our downfall."

She grimaced. "Imagine such a sight from the perspective of the other nations. They wouldn't cheer the Dragon Queen being brought low by an overpowering show of force; they'd merely wonder what would happen if that spell was used on them, instead. It would give those knee-deep in slaughter further excuse to continue their butchery...and with half our population gone, we'd be hard-pressed to stop them."

"Then we shall levy their fear," Felandril proclaimed. "Even butchers will give pause when their lives are threatened. Tell the other nations that if they don't fall in line, they'll be next to partake of our wrath."

"Not everyone would acquiesce. In a best-case scenario, after all is said and done, I'd estimate that less than a third of our people would be left alive."

Ismaire frowned. "I will concede that your plan has some merit – at least compared to the prospect of guaranteed annihilation. However, I fail to see how it benefits our people more than Project Socius would."

"Because we wouldn't be *surrendering our homeland!*"

Felandril's thunderous tone caught Ismaire off-guard. Before she could say anything, the man kept screaming, his limbs twitching and flecks of spittle flying from his mouth. "This was the largest territory in all of Elatra! We took a desolate wasteland and made it *thrive!* And you expect me to throw everything away because of...what? Because a routine border conflict spiraled out of control? Because one Class-graced Queen can't handle her grief?"

He clenched both hands into fists, then slammed them onto the table, a loud crack resounding throughout the room. "NO! NEVER! I refuse to leave Human territory behind! You'll have to pry my cold, dead hands off our homeland before I let it disappear! These lands will be protected, and the Dragon Queen will face retribution for her transgressions!"

The mage bared his teeth like a wolf that had spotted a fleeing rabbit. "And so will all the other *savages* banging at our doors. They deserve no less for the pain and misery they have inflicted upon our nation. We shall crush them under heel, reveling in their pleas of mercy, meting out bloodshed as penance! Glorious, *rightful* penance!"

Ismaire's shock gradually gave way to apprehension and concern. She waited until Felandril had calmed down to respond, seeming strangely unsure of herself. "Felandril," she began, in a tentative tone. "You appear inordinately focused on the concept of defeating our enemies. I am loath to mention this, but...as a reminder, your Leveling High is currently Advanced."

Felandril jerked back like he'd been slapped, the other mages staring at Ismaire as if she'd yelled a slur at him. "How *dare* you," the man spat, leaning forward with hatred in his eyes. "I bear this curse as proof that I have slain many of Humanity's foes – and in the process, saved many Human lives."

"As have I." Ismaire sighed. "Which is why I know how you feel. This war has progressed our Leveling High beyond what it should ever reasonably be. In spite of that, we *must* hold fast. Don't allow it to influence your judgement. While taking revenge on the Dragon Queen is a tempting notion, our priority should be to ensure that as many people survive as possible."

"You fucking coward." Felandril kept fidgeting, the tic becoming more pronounced by the second, madness crystallizing within his eyes. "Little better than a simpering craven, ready to turn tail and—"

"Elatra is lost to us!" Ismaire bellowed. Unspent mana crackled around her fingertips. "Things can never return to the way they were before! Even if your plan succeeds, do you think a ceasefire would erase the enmity that this war has built between Human territory and the other nations? They hate us! We hate them! *I* hate them! The world would be engulfed in another war within a decade or less!"

"Then kill them all."

This time, it wasn't Felandril or Ismaire who spoke. Eight mages turned to stare at Harken, a serene smile adorning the man's face.

Rob took an instinctive step back. The sense of unease he'd felt from Felandril's outburst was nothing compared to the alarm bells that Harken's glassy, deadened gaze set off. It was like looking at two sheer marbles, his eyes devoid of passion, lifeless and dull except for the ambient light reflected in his pupils. Yet as the mage began to speak, a tiny corona of emotion flared within, so vibrant that it seemed about to expand outwards and devour him.

"You say that Elatra is lost to us." Harken nodded. "I am in agreement. This world has seen fit to renounce our people. Knowing that, and knowing of dimension magic and its boundless potential...I performed several experiments of my own."

He raised his hands, fingers alight with mana. Rob's meager Sense Magic couldn't parse the details of what Harken was showing, but everyone else – Duran included – gasped at the sight.

"Dimension magic shapes the barrier between worlds," he explained, "letting travelers pass beyond. Like water sifting through a membrane. However, that is not all that dimension magic can do. The barrier represents an untapped source of mana. Rather than shaping it, Ismaire, have you ever attempted to *siphon* it?"

"No," the Archmage immediately retorted, putting emphasis on the word. "There is no way of knowing how that would affect the fabric of reality. You are toying with highly dangerous elements, Harken."

"More dangerous than dragonfire raining down upon us? Or a mass travel spell that consumes half our people as fuel, and might fail and kill the rest of us regardless?" Harken's smile deepened. "Death approaches us, my friends. We cannot escape it. So I say: *embrace* it. Let us Soul Burn however many we need, siphon the barrier between worlds, combine that mana into one glorious confluence of energy...and unleash it upon those who've wronged our people."

The glimmer of emotion in his eyes swelled to a fever pitch. "We kill them all. Only then will Elatra be ours."

{There it is,} Leveling High whispered, from the depths of Rob's mind. *{My finest moment.}*

In the midst of a stunned silence, Felandril found the wherewithal to speak up. "You mean to destroy their armies?" he asked, his voice filled with awe. "All at once?"

"And their civilians," Harken remarked, as if it was a matter of course. "Cities, lands, and people. If so much as a scrap of them remains, then they will eventually rise up against us."

"But...the mana necessary for a spell of that size—"

"Would be far more than Soul Burning just half of our people, correct." Harken tapped his chin. "Hmm. Based on sociological and biological trends, I'd say leaving 1000 Humans alive should be sufficient to rebuild civilization afterwards. With the lands now open for them to explore, they'll propagate quickly, I think."

Ismaire glared at Harken as if he was drenched in raw sewage, shock and disgust vying for supremacy on her face. "Where in the hell did this fount of barbarous lunacy spring from?"

"Is this not what you desired, Ismaire?" he replied, with an innocence that almost sounded believable. "For Humanity to survive by any means?"

"Tread lightly, Harken. If I hear you comparing Project Socius to this...*apocalypse* masquerading as reasonable action, then I won't hesitate to cut you down. I'd consider it fulfilling my duty as a Human freeing another Human from their inborn curse. Either you've been completely subsumed by Leveling High, or you devised this scheme *yourself*, and I'm not sure which is worse."

She touched her forehead, momentarily overcome with disbelief. "Belroth above, have you listened to a single word coming out of your own mouth? Millions of innocent civilians across Elatra – people who had *nothing* to do with this war – will perish! You can't actually intend to reduce the world to a shattered ruin!"

Harken tilted his head. "It's already ruined, I think. Rotted from within. This way will merely make the outside match the in."

A mage stood up and pointed an accusing finger straight at him. "Madman!"

That was all it took for the room to descend into anarchy. The nine mages started talking over each other, their voices loudening with every passing second. Some of them even appeared close to engaging in fisticuffs – which would've been hilarious, but still unfitting behavior for the gravity of the situation.

Rob shared a dumbfounded glance with Duran. He could tell they were both thinking the same thing: *This is what the meeting to decide Humanity's fate became? A shouting contest?*

At least it was a contest that Ismaire seemed to be winning. To little surprise, Harken's peers hadn't been super keen to jump on Plan 'Nuke the World'. Support for Felandril's plan was waning as well, likely due to its similarities with Harken's. Meanwhile, Soul Burning half of Humanity to escape to Earth ended up sounding almost sane in comparison

While Ismaire wouldn't have unanimous support...as she'd said before, a majority was enough.

The Archmage nodded to herself. Whatever she'd hoped to gain from organizing this meeting – a fresh perspective, a better idea than Project Socius, a convincing argument for her to turn back – had failed to materialize. There was only one way forward she could envision.

Ismaire opened her mouth, ready to call for a vote.

"THOSE WHO KNOW NOTHING SHOULD NOT CHOOSE THEIR FATE."

The voice suppressed the mages' clamor with contemptuous ease, like an explosion drowning out a group of squabbling children. It boomed within Rob's mind, nearly crushing his thoughts under an oppressing, paralyzing aura.

His heart sank. That sensation was all too familiar. He looked to the side, discovered exactly what he'd expected.

An otherworldly figure was seated at one end of the table. Its form was humanoid, sort of, like a refutation of matter in the vague shape of a person. Staring at it too intently made his eyes start to prickle. As Rob watched, the figure pulled an ethereal coin from nowhere, then flipped it into the air, nonchalantly waiting for someone to find the courage to speak.

Ismaire took the plunge. "What...*are* you?" she asked.

With a muted *tink*, the coin landed tails on the table.

"YOUR GOD," Kismet answered.