

Chapter 154: Herald of the golden Tide

Hive-Mother had found a wonderful place to thrive in.

When it was young, it was always weak. Lonely. It felt cold and small, and only thrived by eating scraps from the floor. Slithering, crawling over sparse plants under red skies. It could hardly see, but it wanted to devour and grow.

It wanted to thrive and spawn more hivekin, to spread and devour and see its children spread all over the world. And it had never been able to do so.

Thrown in a cage.

That was what had been done to it. The mother hissed at the memory. It was caged by steel bars, trapped as the world around it blurred. It felt itself enveloped in something as it moved, felt its membrane shift and desynchronise from its insides. Felt itself tear and break.

And then, the sky was a different colour. It licked the air and drank from the ground. Writhing tendrils spread to devour Qi-infused plantmatter, transforming it into Echo instead. Writhing tendrils grew and spread, until it grew a mind intelligent enough to talk to.

Once it was wise, the usurper generals recruited Hive-Mother. It was a suitable nest candidate, they'd said, and that world had been ambrosia to it. A *nest*. It wanted nothing more than to be a nest. To enrapture and envelop as much as it could.

So it marched, where they told it to. It devoured the city, tossing bodies of half-human beasts into its maws, and devouring their flesh. It scoured and dissolved their bones until nothing was left. It wrapped around their buildings, and crawled towards that distant siren song it heard.

Down a long tunnel of cold stone, there was a beacon. A glowing light so bright to its eyes it had to have it. The shards of glass were devoured and consumed, morsels beyond any other, and it rooted itself in place. That is how it became Hive-Mother.

And now, an even brighter beacon hung in the sky before it.

A humanoid, with crystalline wings made of golden glass, radiant with the delicious thing it had tasted. That connection whirled in its chest like a maelstrom, a torrent of power that Hive-Mother could turn into a hundred, a thousand children.

It had to have it.

Tendrils reached out, and it commanded its children to hear it and obey. They swarmed. Slick, black and grey abominations, wreathed from its wonderful flesh. Covered in stringy, liquid shadow, the things stretched abominable wings that broke the membranes on their backs, and flapped them.

Shapes shifted and distorted, gooey mass changing itself to turn solid and dangerous. Bones became spikes, membranes turned to chitin, and an army of half developed blobs soon was one of demonic insects, scouring the skies like a locust swarm.

Hungrily, they ascended, and they would bring Hive-Mother the morsel it deserves. It craved. It *needed*.

And then, the morsel fought back.

There was a second maelstrom that blossomed in its hands. One of metal and violence, of cut skin and shattered bones. It whirled, and its presence descended. Almost instinctively, Hive-Mother felt fear. What was this thing? The mother screeched, Echoing across the fields. Its children boiled and bubbled, consuming each other into greater, more malignant forms, made for carnage.

For a moment, there was hope.

Until the tide of steel descended.

Golden metal spilled forth from the spiky maelstrom. It was such mass that there was nothing the mother could do. One moment, it saw the lavender sky through beating, shifting wings of black, and then, it was eclipsed. There was nothing but gold, covering it. An enormous amount, so vast it could drown a city.

That is what it did.

A scouring plague of liquid blades descended, massacring the flood of its children. Each strain of liquid became a spear in its own right, and the tide was like an avalanche of nails, breaking limbs and shattering them into disintegrating tendrils of goo.

Hive-Mother felt fear. It fought, spawning more creatures, coalescing their forms into that of a champion, when yet another maelstrom blossomed. This third one was pure divinity, the same it had devoured before, and it was just as bright as the other two.

For a moment, it felt hope. Had its generals come to feed it? To grow it? The endless legions it commanded would thrive with this power, and it would extinguish the disgusting gold until it

was devoured. It spawned more children, their limbs stretching into sharp shapes that warred with the flood of gold.

They stretched and deformed, clawing forward to the sky. Tendrils of the mother rose, holding the tide at bay. It would win, it would-

Suddenly, the tide was behind its barriers.

How? The gold had not moved. It was simply somewhere else! That was not- it must have crawled in, slithered through! There must have been a flaw! The Hive-Mother created a perfect shell, indestructible, reinforced with the lives of dozens of unformed children bearing its stygian touch. It was obsidian, smooth and hard and, and...

And it was suddenly flooded with gold.

The shell was intact. But the flood of disintegrating sharpness did not care. There was a touch of the glass on it, a touch that allowed it to simply move, unopposed, unimpeded. As if the mother herself was not even there.

It fought, it bit and scratched, but against the tide of metal, it could not even see its opponent. Pitifully, in a tide of spears forged from liquid gold, the mother drowned. To the very last breath, its will echoed only hunger, only the desperation to devour more, the grief that it did not spread further.

Undignified, it died.

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I lifted Astraeus, and with a flourish, the black goo splattered off him, disintegrating into the air. A small smile played on my lips. "Really?" I asked. "That's what you want your title to be?"

Happily, the spear chirped with satisfaction. "Yes!" he said, mentally.

Shaking my head slightly, I smiled. "Alright then, so it shall be." I lifted my spear, Astraeus, *Herald of the golden Tide*, and his maelstrom raged. Qi poured out in a torrent, liquid metal, where each tiny piece of that ocean was a spear in and of itself.

Watching it descend was incredible. I hardly even had to control it. Astraeus was a full scale maelstrom level being himself, now. Cass appeared on my shoulders anyway, wanting to test her powers, too. She still maintained that half-translucent avatar she'd had before, seemingly liking it quite a bit.

"I'll help out," she said, dangling her legs in the air. Her Qi poured out, fuelling [Hall of Mirrors], and I felt a shiver run through the flood of metal.

As the tremor spilled out, resistance suddenly became futile. Because space, itself, was meaningless. The tide was where it needed to be, without movement. It simply appeared. Inviolable.

There were barriers, and they didn't matter. Tendrils rose in defense, only to be consumed within moments, needled with holes and drowned. It was a torrent of power that marked my ascent to maelstrom. I spread my ruinous wings, let my companions handle much of the processing required for the tide of power, and instead focused myself on mastery.

My steel tide was unyielding, unstoppable, and consumed everything in its path. Any defense was crushed by my iron will, and engaged with a dozen masterfully wielded spears. It was quite literally Inevitable that the enemies would be crushed - my skill at using the weapon said it was so.

Whatever had devoured these gateways, it was meant to spawn an arms. That's what nests did. They were not wandering champions, they were corrupting influences on the land. Troublesome in their own way, and yet...

Its army drowned in my golden tide. Attacks landed on the sea and reflected back down. The metal superimposed itself above itself in writhing torrents of reinforcements, turning dozens of times harder than even the toughest steel.

Unbreakable, inevitable, and inviolable.

[Unyielding Metal has reached (Intermediate).]

[Manifestation has reached (Greater).]

The Gift saw my enlightenment, glimpsed in that moment. My understanding of what metal was. The remnants of my voyage, first through the golden shore, then the golden depths. Now, that golden ocean manifested itself on the world, even as I soar through the sky on my path.

Waves upon waves of unending gold spilled from the maelstrom that was Astraeus, churning, grinding and cutting the enemies down to thin ribbons, then nothing at all. I breathed, willed all my focus together, and controlled it.

Nest-champions were cut down, and buildings preserved. I marked the landscape as a non-target, and, though my head ached from the strain, and my meridians burned, it remained untouched. Gold simply spilled out, and then froze.

Contained by my will, splashes of Qi turned cutting liquid simply stopped midair, solidifying. Even round bits remained sharp, a combination of [Inexplicable Reinforcement] and [True Mirror] twisting space around them. Every bit of this ocean was a spear, every droplet, every molecule.

And none of it splashed to where my companions were fighting.

Instead, I simply encased the nest in a golden cocoon, until it was devoured to nothing.

Then, I swung Astraeus, and the golden tide rippled. For a moment, it churned, then turned into a maelstrom. Within Astraeus, that origin burned, and the liquid gold began to trail backwards. Bit by bit, inch by inch, it flowed upwards, growing faster and faster as the whirlpool consumed it.

And then, after a dozen seconds, the flood was gone.

All that remained was an empty city, the nest eradicated. Wayward strings of disintegrating goo remained draped over buildings, and, at the very heart of the gateway hall, filthy black Echo still stained the stone. Strands of the nest still clung to the remnants of the gateway.

Somehow, they still moved, as if trying to wring another bit of power from the dim glass. But it was not to be. Astraeus brushed through the air, and strands of black severed and disintegrated.

It had once been a prosperous city. There had been multiple gateways here, and though some had been fed to wandering champions, more than half had gone to this nest, specifically. There were multiple shards of glass, now, that I could take.

Much of that power had probably been devoured by the usurpers, or reclaimed by the keepers, but there was still a lot left. I took the shards of glass, feeling them turn malleable at my touch, as my skin turned silvery for a moment, consuming them. Then, I turned fully human again, feeling that sensation of golden glass wrapped around my bones again.

I took a deep breath, then repeated the procedure. Once, twice, thrice. Shard after shard, feeding into my gateway, noticing the whirlpool in my chest grow stronger each time. This, too, fed my advancement, growing my Qi.

[Golden Glass Maelstrom advanced to **3rd Step**.]

Slowly, air entered my lungs. I devoured the last shard that was there. My gateway pulsed with strength. A pulse of Qi eradicated any leftover Echo in the ruined halls of silent stone. Again, I took a breath, even though the air stank of dead filth and burned my nose with a chaotic mix of energy. I savoured it.

Then, I called open my gateway menu.

[Gateway:

- Strength: **73**
- Fragments: **84**
- Figments: **10**
- Manifestations: **2]**

And as I watched the counter next to manifestations tick up, a new clone of myself crawled out of my chest. Great, now I'd have to name this version of myself, too.