

New World 141

Chapter 141: His Design

I got a notification. The assassin died, finally. I opened my status, poured my points into endurance, and I hit finalize all at once. Another deluge of power swelled through me. I leveled further, gaining a profound boon in my ability.

We turned towards Brim. He pushed himself off the ground, picking up his arcane spear. He shook his head, chunks of mirror and stone falling off of him. Elessah floated towards him, casting healing magic over him. Once again, his mirrors returned.

Elessah rejuvenated Frode's arm. He still hobbled on the ground, stark naked. Althea turned towards me,

"What happened to him?"

I grimaced, "Yawn."

She frowned back at me, "Where is he? Torix said he was hurt bad. That's why we moved in."

I raised an eyebrow, "We?"

Behind Frode, his shadow loomed. From it, two arms lifted up from the shadow. A metal beak raised from the shade with circular, red eyes glaring at the Enigmatta. It opened its maw, drool leaking from it.

The hulking figure lifted out of the dark, silent as night. Claws brandished its hands, pitch black fire blazing along their length. It stepped forward, wrapping its massive hands around the neck of Frode. Even with physical touch, the monster made no noise.

The shadowy figure stepped forward, chunking the Frode at us. As Frode passed over Brim's head, he turned around. Elessah looked down as the living shadow leaped up. She used her antimagic, destroying the shadow covering the black figure.

Hod came out, his lanky form landing on her. He wrapped his spindly arms around Elessah, doing his best to hold her back. Hod squawked,

“Hod not understand why lady take shade form from Hod!”

Frode tumbled across the ground towards us before we charged him. Brim glanced at the both of us, looking at who to save. He pounded his heels into the dirt, reaching Frode before us. I jumped in front of Althea, taking on Brim’s stab of his spear.

I clapped my hands over the energy bolt, a sizzling sound ushering from my hands. Althea weaved around me, slicing a biotic sword towards Brim’s right side. Brim turned his spear sideways, blocking her strike. He freed my hands but cut the sharpened horn off of Althea’s arm.

Without the spear in my way, I swatted the back of my left fist at Brim’s head. The compact blow shook his head, and I rotated my mass on my heels. With a tectonic strike, I sent a quaking right straight into his jaw. A telekinetic bolt ripped across his jaw, his skull whipping with violence.

Althea growled as she sent a wild strike at Brim’s side at the same time. Her hand pierced his silvery skin. Puncturing into his torso, Althea grabbed his ribs and jerked them back. With brutish strength, she tore out his bones.

I burned a third of my health in a torrent, sending two gravitational spikes. These wells reached Frode, pulling his legs apart. His hips dislocated, skin tearing near the joint. He landed on the ground, writhing in agony.

Brim ignored me, kneeling Althea’s stomach. She vomited blood before Brim stepped sideways.

He elbowed her face, Althea’s skull caving in. Althea rolled along the ground, dead and limp. I shot out a jab at Brim, but he leaned back, dodging the strike. Brim twisted his arcane spear, slashing my wrist. I stepped forward as he stepped back.

Without Elessah canceling my magic, I freed the full force of my abilities. Brim lashed his spear out at me, but I deflected with an empowered gravity stream. I shot out short strikes, countering his techniques. He lacked the same concision in his movements, letting me abuse his sloppy style.

As the fight progressed, I gained the upper hand on Brim. The Breakers slaughtered most of the eldritch, but a few remained, powering Event Horizon. The conduits with the legion bolstered me, giving me a surge in strength.

Brim overpowered me over the short term, but my uncompromising regen turned the tide. Wounds accumulated over the next minute, Brim's movements growing sluggish. Elessah banged at Hod's face, trying to knock him off. He held on tight, biting her with his armored beak.

From behind Brim, Althea revived. As she did, she cloaked herself, becoming imperceptible. Her camouflage deepened, being hidden even against my gravitational sense.

With an unspoken understanding, I pressed Brim back. I distracted him, amping up the intensity of our struggle. It left Brim and me vulnerable. At the culmination of our conflict, Elessah wormed her way out of Hod's grasp.

She cast her antimagic at me, nullifying my mana. Off instinct, I molded my armor over my head. Three bullets snapped against my head in rapid succession. Only one pierced through the top of my head, the others bouncing off. They still collided with my head like cinderblocks.

The metal casing over my head rang as my vision blurred. Brim stabbed the spear through my throat. He twisted as Althea appeared behind him once more.

With two massive, reformed arms, Althea clapped Brim's head. Her swollen, bulbous arms squashed his skull like a melon. He fell down, the spear dislodging from my throat. Althea cartwheeled through the air, her motion graceful.

She sliced off one of Brim's hands during her somersault. She grabbed the spear, using Brim's amputated hand to hold it. Frode tossed something at us. I stepped in front of Althea, blood gushing from my throat. I wrapped my arms around the grenade, shifting my armor over it.

The metallic sphere blasted out with a firebomb following an arcane pulse. As I absorbed the assault, Althea walked up over my back. She grunted as she heaved the energy spear. It zipped through the air, bolts of electricity arcing off it.

The spear impaled Frode, leaving a hole in his chest. Frode fell to his knees. With his fingertips, Frode probed the inside of his chest. He gasped. Blood drooled from his anglerfish face. He glanced backward at Elessah.

The mage fired shot after shot at Hod. Hod was different now, however. He lacked the same clumsiness. Over the last few months, he mastered his eldritch form. He shifted across shadows, teleporting across the battlefield. No bolt hit his ethereal, changing shape. He dodged her antimagic now.

Like darkness come alive, Hod dashed between spots of shade. He lived there, hurling blobs of dusk at Elessah. She evaded, returning fire. With Hod keeping her busy, I charged Frode. My neck already healed.

Frode opened his dimensional storage. Behind me, Althea did the same. Pulling out the rifle I made her, The Omen, she generated a bolt of bone. With fluidity and precision, Althea loaded the slug, sliding it in place. She fired her biotic rifle, sheering Frode's only arm off.

I reached him. I threw a punch like throwing a baseball. As my punch landed, the impact destroyed Frode's noggin. The anglerfish's head turned inside out. From behind me, Althea sprinted forward. She jumped as I turned around to her.

She landed right above me, and I grabbed her with my arms. Like throwing a javelin, I flung Althea At Elessah. I molded Event Horizon away from the two of them as I ran with Althea.

She outraced me. Like a Valkyrie, Althea molded wings from herself. She zoomed over the ground towards Elessah. Elessah turned towards her. She raised a hand at Althea. Using an explosion of magic, I smacked her hand downwards.

Her pillar of light missed its mark. Elessah still controlled her flight. She jetted around, eluding Althea. On the other hand, Hod reached her. With his shade form intact, he gripped her arms with shadow claws. Hod pulled her down, crushing her against the side of a skyscraper.

Like a savage beast, he mauled her. Hod's massive form thrashed her. Elessah struggled, deflecting a few of the strikes. Before she regained composure, Althea fired

off two bolts. Each one impaled an arm of Elessah. Pinned and unable to fend Hod off, she perished.

After a minute, she revived. It mattered little. She tried surviving once more. With bolts from Althea, Hod's mobility, and my control magic, she didn't stand a chance. Elessah was a support, not a duelist. Her sniper friend was nowhere to be found either. My guess, it abandoned her.

As Elessah died, the three of us stood over her corpse. I turned towards Althea and Hod. Both were shorter now, though Althea wasn't as slender anymore. My guess was my legacy gave her the constitution to make her look different.

If anything, she was even more attractive.

It could be me not seeing her for so long. Hod looked beefier too. His shade form made him mirror my own size and height, though not as broad. If I had to describe his new look in one word, it'd be menacing. Darkness claws and a rippling form does that.

I raised my hands, shouting at the top of my lungs,

"We fucking won. I can't believe it."

Hod raised his hands, speaking a dark, booming voice,

"Hod like to say Hod had faith in Harbinger, but Hod not want to lie."

His shade form dissipated, revealing the spindly bird form of Hod,

"Hod have no faith in Harbinger when Harbinger left. Hod glad Hod wrong."

I reached out with an inkling of gravity, grabbing Althea. I pulled her to me, and she giggled as I wrapped my arm around her waist. She bit her lips, sexy and fiery. She locked her hands behind my neck, a bright grin gracing her lips.

With a mischievous grin, I lifted her up. I pulled back the helmet from my face,

“You’re a sight for sore eyes.”

She pulled me in, kissing me. Soft and warm, I indulged myself for a second, enjoying the sensation. Having enhanced senses paid off in spades here, letting me enjoy the slightest touch.

Hod covered his eyes with a winged hand,

“Hod Interrupting Harbinger big moment. Hod apologize.”

He raised his other winged hand to his chin, “But Hod wonder if Hod really ruin moment. Hod also wonder if Hod part of big moment.”

Hod nodded as if coming to a grand realization,

“Hod is, of course, part of big moment. Hard for moment to be big without Hod.”

I rolled my eyes while Althea laughed. I let Althea go, but she ran her hand down my arm as she dropped. We reached out our hands, our fingertips the last part to lose contact. Cheesy, yeah, but it’s hard not to be after being away from each other for so long.

Althea’s warmth turned cold after a few moments, “Where’s Yawm?”

I turned towards the skyscraper at the edge of the building. I pointed that way, “He’s there.”

She raised an eyebrow, “Why?”

I scratched the back of my head, “Uh...it’s complicated?”

Althea walked past me, “From what Torix told me, he’s nearly dead. Come on, let’s finish him.”

I jogged up, catching up to her,

“See, that’s the thing. I don’t know, hmmm, how do I say this…”

I waved my hands in front of me, “It’s…damn this weird to say…I don’t know if we should kill Yawm.”

Althea turned towards me, “There’s no way…did he brainwash you or something?”

I shook my head, putting my palms to Althea, “No, at least I don’t think so. Let me know if what I’m about to say sounds crazy though.”

Althea let her hands flop against her sides, “You already sound crazy.”

I sighed, “Yeah, maybe I am.”

A thick, icy chill leaked into Althea’s voice, “You remember what that he’s done, right? We can’t give up this chance. He’s weak, alone, and injured. We slit his throat now, or he’ll slit ours.”

We hobbled over rubble, the broken city surrounding us.

“I’ve been talking to him for a while. He seems to regret what he did.”

Althea frowned, staring at the abandoned high rise,

“He hasn’t done a thing for anyone he killed or hurt. To me, that means he hasn’t changed.” Althea turned towards me, raising a hand,

“Seriously, did he even stop experimenting on things?”

I remembered the eldritch we hunted down from Springfield. I shook my head.

“What about changing his plans or goals? Did he do any of that either?”

I frowned.

Althea shook her head, walking into the abandoned skyscraper,

“That’s what I thought. Let’s be glad you’re so hardheaded. Otherwise, he might have brainwashed you already.”

I grimaced. Maybe Althea was right. I couldn’t tell anymore. Why I wanted to save him, well, perhaps it was his charisma or the contract we made. It didn’t matter why. What mattered was quelching the urge in its entirety. Leaving Yawm alive was like giving away a bunch of nukes. It wasn’t worth the risk.

With that on my mind, we all reached the shady high rise. Only sunlight illuminated the inside, casting long shadows around us. Entire floors collapsed from the fight earlier, cracks smothering every surface. The post-apocalyptic environment suited us.

By now, it might as well be home.

I dashed through floors of the building towards Yawm. The holes I left behind let Hod and Althea follow me. After a few dozen stories, we reached the world eater.

He landed in a parking lot, several cars plowed out of his path. A glowing green trail of blood led to him. My black armor covered him from head to toe, but he gasped underneath it. His chest wheezed for air. When I stepped up to him, he murmured,

“Is it my maker, perchance?”

I frowned, “Nope. Just me.”

“And the others? Who are they?”

Hod answered, “Hod is Hod. Lady friend is lady friend.”

Yawm coughed, “I see you only associate yourself with companions of the highest intelligence.”

Hod spread out his wings, “Hod grateful that Yawm understand depth of Hod intelligence.”

Yawm let out a pained chuckle, “As deep as a puddle.”

Althea stepped up, placing the barrel of her rifle at Yawm’s head.

Yawm murmured,

“Ah, so that’s who you are...Have you come to kill me then?”

Althea growled, “Yes.”

“And so the orphan I took under my wing comes to murder me...No good deed goes unpunished, I suppose. My own father told me that after my mother was slain for my own bounty.”

Althea shouted, pain in her voice, “You killed my own parents. Why are you even talking right now?”

I reached down, pulling my armor back to me. It uncurled from Yawm, revealing what a mess he was. He turned towards Althea, his eyes searching,

“Is that what they told you? No wonder they convinced you to hunt bounties for their own gain. To think they put my most prized possession in harm’s way.”

Althea kicked Yawm’s side. He coughed up blood, and she pressed her barrel back onto his forehead,

“You just turned me into a freak. I hated myself. I tried killing myself so many times.”

I turned towards Althea, my stomach sinking.

Yawm's eyes softened, "And there was nothing I could do to stop your fate. You came out half eldritch. I did nothing but expose you to the Tears of Etorhma. It gave you the strength to stand on your own."

Yawm reached out a hand. "And so my lotus turned deadly, a viper given fangs. I slew the scientists that tried twisting you. You came out a beautiful young woman. A woman with eyes hard as stone."

Althea's breath turned ragged, "Daniel is the one that gave me fangs. He never babied me, and yeah, it was a bit rough at first. He did kill me when we first met."

Althea grimaced, "But he's why I can stay the way I am."

Yawm turned towards me, "Ahhh...Your armor...A conduit."

She nodded, "That's right. I don't even need it anymore."

She raised a hand, molding it like liquid, "I choose to be a monster now."

Yawm radiated a kind voice, "You turned your curse into a blessing."

Althea took a step back, "Yeah...that's right."

I turned towards Althea. She shivered, her aim no longer straight. Yawm's words left her uncertain.

Yawm raised a hand towards her, "I want nothing more than for you to flourish. You were never a monster, not to me. I saw you as my most excellent creation. A natural combination of two halves becoming one."

Althea whispered in disbelief, "Really?"

I turned towards Althea, dread racing up my throat. Yawm was controlling her within seconds of speaking with her.

“I am painted out like a demon, but I do not lie. I consider myself a poor father, but a proud one all the same.”

Yawm let his hand smack against the concrete, “Do any of you ever dwell on your future?”

Hod nodded, “Hod want Eltari safe. Hod want new home for tribe.”

Yawm nodded, “I as well wanted a new home for my people. Our world was left decayed and destroyed after we were invaded. Schema gave us nothing after we were assimilated.”

Yawm gestured all around us with a slow, weak move of his arm,

“What was done to your city was done to my entire world. Every world thereafter was glassed in the name of Schema. Once I’ve been here for much longer, this world will share the same fate.”

His words got to me a little with that one.

“The skies will burn with a light that blinds any that see it. Even if you kill me, they will come. Schema will want to disintegrate the world tree. If you let me live, I can help you all.”

Yawm looked up, “I...I don’t want to watch another horizon bathe in fire.”

Althea and Hod looked up at me. Hod murmured,

“Hod like Earth. Earth new home of Eltari.”

I looked back down at Yawm, my eyes narrowing,

“And why should we trust you?”

Yawm shook his head, “You shouldn’t. You can only have faith in my words.”

Althea grabbed her forehead, her eyes darting around,

“I looked forward to killing you...This is all just...some kind of trick.”

Yawm’s eyes narrowed, “Kill me then. Billions will burn for it.”

I didn’t know if I could trust Yawm, but he laid the seed for serious doubt. I didn’t know who or what to think at this point.

As my doubt mounted, a whisper rang in my ear,

“To think they all fall to his words.”

A figure phased onto our realm behind Yawm. Ajax stood there, raising a thin hand. As he lowered his arm, he cleaved the dimensional fabric in a line towards Yawm.

The world eater was ready.

His ancient voice rang out like iron,

“Finally.”

Yawm snapped his fingers. Green spheres of energy appeared over each of us. We froze, all of us unable to move. The glow permeating Yawm’s blood dimmed, making it a sickly yellow. Vibrant waves of cascading energy rained over Yawm, healing him in seconds.

He rolled onto his chest, pushing himself from the floor. He brushed off his shoulders, some dirt and pebbles clattering against the floor.

He stared at each sphere, his eyes wide.

“You appear once more, Volan.”

He tapped the orb over Ajax. Yawm laughed slow at first. The laughing edged into madness. Malignance rushed into the laughter.

He spoke,

“And here I believe I lost you.”

Chapter 142: One Against Many

No one answered Yawm since he held us in place. Yawm put his hands behind his back, interlocking his fingers. He walked up to me,

“You fought against my words for so long. I failed to break you after months. How you’ve endured is a feat I’ve seen in no one else. You should be proud.”

He turned towards Althea, “This one broke after a few sentences by comparison, as did the bird. To have such weak-willed friends...it does you a disservice, Harbinger. We’ll rectify that over time.”

A chill ran down my spine.

He turned back to Ajax,

“You know, molding you with the spear might be my greatest mistake. I trusted you as an equal, Ajax. I wanted us to fight alongside each other. Doing so proved impossible. You grew greedy. You wanted more from the spear. You wanted absolute freedom and zero responsibility.”

Yawm shook his head, “You turned from my greatest friend into one of my most hated enemies. I’ll be taking back the spear I integrated with you. I’ll mold it with myself this

time. Obviously, you don't deserve to wield its power. Giving it to you was like giving a grenade to a child."

Yawm spread out his arms, a bitterness leaking into his voice,

"I wish I could hear what retorts you have. I truly desire to listen to you and your concerns, but if I release you for even a moment, you will disappear forever. I never wanted this, but you forced my hand. You begged for the spear. You begged on your knees for that power I gave you."

Yawm's hands shook with fury,

"I give to you, and now you use my gift against me. I will never give again."

Yawm turned away, walking up to me,

"At least I understand your actions against me. You even gave a half-hearted attempt at rescuing me. It wasn't nearly enough to ensure my survival, but you were protecting yourself. I empathize. Even then..."

Yawm sighed, "You refuse to turn your back on Schema. You've plotted against me since you've come. I saw through your lies and deception. You are no master of words. Reasonable attempts mind you, but nowhere near enough."

Yawm shook his hands at me,

"What we could have been given time...I cringe at the thought of losing your potential. As a warrior, you are tremendous. You mirror my own progress, a being beyond normal sentients. You throw it at that automation's feet. That absurd potential is wasted in his hands."

Frustration leaked into his voice,

"I warned you. He would use you until you died. You still refused to listen to me. You were meant to be molded into my arbiter, a force against Schema. In the end, you chose a machine over flesh and blood. You chose greed over reason. So be it."

At this point, listening to him became infuriating. Hell, I tried saving his ass. He was trying to break my mind the whole time, yet he's acting like I betrayed his ass. We didn't even attack him. Ajax, the newly named mister dumbass, did.

Finished speaking with me, Yawm turned towards Hod,

"You'll listen over time, unlike the Harbinger. You will make a fine follower, if a bit dull."

Yawm grabbed his own chin, "I'm curious about what kind of being you are exactly...I sense you utilize eldritch energy as Althea does, yet it doesn't overwhelm you in the same manner. You lack the same deformation. It's as if your biology stabilizes it better. Intriguing."

Yawm tapped his chin, "It's like a potent medicine for you, and when taking too much, it acts like poison. Studying your unique species may give me unique answers. Look forward to it."

Hearing that made my stomach sink. Hod was trying to find a safe place for the Eltari. Having his entire race in the hands of a madman...Well, it couldn't feel good.

With supreme confidence, Yawm turned back to me. He tilted his head,

"In all honesty, you are the creature I'm most curious about. Your resilience disregards all norms and expectations. Since you're useless as a soldier, we'll explore the properties that allow for such tenacity."

He shrugged, "The contract we signed only forbid killing one another after all."

He turned to Althea,

"You know, managing our comradery was an actual struggle, Daniel. It's been some time since I formed a genuine relationship with someone else. Lying and manipulating you proved impossible."

Yawm tapped the surface of Althea's barrier, sending a ripple through it,

"Every time I felt as though I gained your trust, your doubt resurfaced. Indeed, you embody the word 'stubborn.'"

He walked over to me, tapping my barrier as well, "I believed you'd finally understood my reasoning after the incident with the Old Ones. Planting those agents on us both required a great deal of trouble, I assure you."

Yawm let his hands flop against his sides, "Even after noticing your sense of gravity and using it against you, you never lost your conviction against me. Once more, I schemed with the contract. Here I imagined you'd summon Ajax for escape."

I winced. The whole time I was right. Being right felt pretty damn bad.

Yawm raised a single finger, "Once more, my plan fell through. I couldn't tell if you discovered my plan or not. I'll assume you did. Even then, my persistence finally came together with this deception. The results I aimed for finally materialized."

At this point, dread rushed through me like jumping into cold water.

Yawm raised his fists, "Now I've lost nothing. I regained all four of my followers. You all are much more powerful than my previous subordinates. Each of you is an enormous boon to my research as well. My situation could not be better."

My mind raced with options. Torix's mana streams still flowed to me, as did Amara's mana. The legion was coming. With our numbers, maybe we could break Yawm with a war of attrition. Preventing Yawm from obliterating them was the problem.

Yawm understood how trivial armies were against him just as we did. He rubbed his hands together, glaring at me,

"You, in particular, will prove worthy of my study. The tenacity of your metal flesh will hold together even under...unfavorable circumstances. You also can channel mana into the cipher."

Yawm laughed, a bit of his inner madness leaking out,

“I’ll learn your secrets. I’ll learn all of your secrets. Once I have, we’ll see what the Tears of Etorhma will do to you. I pray you don’t disappoint.”

It was like Yawm’s mask was taken off in full, revealing the demon underneath. He steepled his fingers together in excitement,

“Our contract won’t let me kill you, but after all, you’re no use to me dead. You’re far more valuable in other ways.”

In the distance, a rumbling surged across the ground. The legion was coming, a group of several thousand soldiers. Torix trained, armed, and led them. If Yawm so much as touched them with his magic, they’d perish. If they reached us, we had a chance.

Otherwise, Yawm would have his way with us.

I winced at the thought. The legion reaching Yawm seemed unlikely. As the legion’s thunder sounded louder, Yawm turned towards the source of all the noise. He spread out his arms,

“So this would be the other intruders then? Considering the number of them, it must be the group that escaped my grasp because of that pestering lich.”

Yawm clapped his hands together, sending out a shockwave.

“They await another demonstration.”

Air popped, and the ensuing green aura integrated into Yawm’s palm. He clasped it, and our scenery changed. Atop a low lying building, we faced the oncoming legion.

Many of them flew across the sky on eldritch, jetpacks, or helicopters. Others raced across the ground on monstrous steeds of all different sizes. Many rode Torix’s summons, covering the rough terrain with ease. All the eltari flew with grace. They were doomed at this rate.

Yawm raised a hand at the group. Knowing what would come next, I tried moving. As I expected, I couldn't even budge. Trying out option two, I reached out with mana. It affected the inside of the stasis, but it didn't change anything outside it. This prison froze me in place to perfection.

Yawm glanced at me,

“Trying your magic then? Good luck with your attempts at escape. This power over stasis was a gift from Etorhma. I have no idea the principles it uses to operate, but I do understand what it does. None of you will escape, not even Ajax.”

I charged my mana, keeping it flowing through me. If Yawm stored a burst of mana in his body, why couldn't I? After a few seconds, the mana saturated my blood, bones, and muscle. A fundamental bloodlust came over me as the mana leaked into my head. I kept holding it in, the pressure growing.

As I charged myself, Yawm consolidated mana until it turned crystalline. The visible grain of mana sat on his palm. It looked like an emerald grain of sand. Stored within was an atomic power. In the hands of Yawm, it meant genocide.

With a casual air, Yawm hummed a cheery tune while preparing his attack. I could only think of one way to stop him. As the storming feet of Torix's army rushed down nearby streets and over the city, Yawm reared back his hand.

Yawm whispered, “It's a shame...Yet another skyline is consumed with fire.”

As he pushed his hand forward, I used every bit of mana I stored up at the last minute. I even dipped into my health, leaving about 71% of my health remaining. The millions of mana burst, creating a gravity well.

I condensed the well, compressing it. At the edge of the emerald barrier, it collapsed. The resulting implosion cracked the green forcefield, launching me forward. I propelled to the front of Yawm's hand as he released his attack.

As I appeared in front of him, Yawm's eyes turned wide. He murmured,

“What?”

His attack destroyed the barrier, erasing me from existence. Everything turned white. No sensation. No thoughts. Nothing. I sat in that peace for a few seconds. As I opened my eyes, Yawm and I laid at the bottom of a massive crater.

Around us, several buildings collapsed. Further beyond, three green orbs lodged in the concrete wall of a parking deck. Each of the force fields cracked under the shockwave of Yawm’s attack. Even then, none of the others escaped.

I sat up. The only reason I survived was because of my Invincibility tree. If I took over 70% of my health, I would live and store the overkill damage.

Charged with that overkill damage, I glanced at Yawm.

On his chest, bark skin flaked from burns. Half the skin on his face was gone, wooden fibers lying under it. I raised my hands, orienting myself. The cosmic energy in my hands amazed me. Twice already the tree saved my ass.

Wielding that otherworldly strength, I stood up. I dashed towards Yawm. As my feet thudded against the ground, he sat up. He rolled his eyes, raising a hand at me. Using the last bit of glow in his chest, he created a green sphere over me. With that, his chest no longer glowed green.

It was a dark yellow color, like snot.

Yawm grunted,

“If you believe I’ll fall for that trick once more, you’re sadly mistaken.”

Once more in stasis, I watched Yawm push himself up. He shook his head, shaking off his confusion. He raised a hand to me again, building mana. He sent out another pulse.

My legs disintegrated. Yawm turned his arm, destroying my arms after. He lowered his hand,

“Let’s see you utilize your magic in that state.”

Yawm turned towards the others in their cracked green shells. He sighed,

“I can only imagine what I’d do if Ajax actually escaped. Death would be the least of your worries, I assure you.”

He raised his palm. After a series of cracks, he placed mana into his hand. Before casting his spell, roots ripped out of the ground. They wrapped around his arm, pulling it downwards. A path of green forcefield formed as his arm moved.

Yawm squinted at the roots,

“What in Baldowah’s name is this...Amara.”

More roots came out of the ground from the world tree. They smothered Yawm, covering his entire frame. He roared in frustration, tearing the wood apart as it formed around him.

“There will be legends told of your suffering, Lost One. You will be remembered.”

In the distance, other roots wrapped around the cracked orbs. Althea, Hod, and Ajax stood still as the wooden tendrils squeezed down. Fissures spread along the sphere’s surface.

Amidst the turmoil, I charged my own mana once more. Yawm swatted through the abundance of roots. Along the edge of the crater, the legion arrived. A thick wave of troops ran down the side of the slope towards us.

Yawm turned to the oncoming soldiers. He turned towards Ajax and the others. He lifted his hand again, coalescing power. At the same time, he resisted the pull of the roots. Before he finished his spell, four eltari dived down from the sky. They crashed into him, their talons flared.

Yawm roared, “So the bird has allies I take it?”

He waved his arm, rending an armored eltari apart. Guts and blood splattered out, and Yawm laughed,

“Frail. Weak. Like waving away mist.”

As if squashing bugs, he minced the eltari into slush. Beside Yawm, several vanguards landed from above. Coated in heavy power armor and hydraulics, they charged towards Yawm. With each move of his hand, Yawm killed one after the other.

Several of these vanguards landed blows on Yawm. They did no damage whatsoever. He tore them asunder. They bought time, however. The other troops reached us in a massive wave. Yawm fought off roots, diving eltari, and the charging cavalry all at once.

It was chaos.

Dozens of eldritch were sent flying with each of Yawm’s strikes. A machine of war, he broke them apart. When he lifted his hand and tried magic, a flurry of attacks from all sides stopped him.

Within minutes, he killed hundreds of soldiers. It gave me the time I needed though. With another gravitational implosion, I cracked the green barrier once more. I launched myself right at Yawm’s back. As he turned around, he struck my forcefield off instinct.

His attack sent me flying backward. I rolled, crushing soldiers and eldritch alike. After bouncing for a few seconds, a bolt of ice crashed into the sphere. A plume of icy wind crashed over me, wind brushing across my face. I smacked on the ground.

I coughed into the dirt, my limbs regenerating. Even in this state, I shivered with stored energy from the Invincible tree. I still contained the dormant power from Yawm’s earlier blast. I intended on using it.

As I gained my limbs and armor back, I pushed my face up off the ground.

A bony hand appeared in front of me. I took it, keeping my pull to a minimum. Torix grunted,

“By Schema you’re heavy.”

I lifted up, seeing his smiling, dry face. I grinned,

“Damn is it good to see you again.”

With a curt nod, Torix pointed towards Yawm, “You as well, disciple. There’s no time for greetings, however. Ready yourself. This is our last attempt at slaying him.”

I turned towards Yawm. I spit my words a bit,

“I need an opening. I can injure him.”

Torix nodded, opening a portal. From it, several ogres came out. Covered in scales and holding clubs of stone, they charged at Yawm. Torix opened another portal,

“I’m going to free the others. Show the eater of worlds why you herald calamity.”

I shook my head and banged my fists together. With hundreds of legion members running past me, I dived into the ground. I drilled for a few seconds. With a detonation of my runes, I exploded out of the earth.

Yawm turned towards me, dragging his fist behind him. He swung it overhead. It collided with my own fist, unleashing a shockwave. In a thirty foot radius, soldiers and monsters alike flung aside like sand in a wind tunnel. My own bones groaned with effort, but they somehow held.

Yawm’s own bones somehow didn’t.

His fist cracked under pressure, my armor more durable than his skin. His upper arm bone split, stabbing up through his shoulder. He stayed standing, but the arm went limp after taking on the attack. It flopped against his side as useless as Kessiah in a fight.

Alright, that was a low blow. Anyways, I still took damage. Even though my own arm held up under the punishment, my body absorbed the shock of it. I'd never withstood the brunt of an impact like that. It rocked me to my core, fractures going through my bones and skin.

Blood exploded from my mouth, my eyes bleeding. My nose turned stuffy in an instant, filling up with god knows what. My knees wobbled as I took two steps back from the point of impact. Yawm boomed out a warcry, swatting his broken arm at me like a club.

The broken limb flashed before my eyes. I blacked out. I woke up, flopping into the side of a skyscraper like a ragdoll. Glass shattered. Concrete splintered. Dust from crushed stone erupted. Dazed and confused. I pushed myself out of the side of the building. I wobbled on my feet, running right back at Yawm. I may not be as strong as he was, but he wouldn't catch me giving in.

I wanted to give him a demonstration on being relentless.

I reached the fight once more. Yawm didn't seem as eager for the battle. He glanced around, an inkling of panic showing on his face. He found Torix floating on a ball of black mana. The lich cast scorching, elemental magic onto the sphere holding Althea. The orb was more crevice than forcefield at this point.

Yawm raised his hand, but once more a swarm of soldiers covered him from head to toe. Eltari jabbed their talons into him. Vanguard's struck out with hydraulic fists. Yawm shouted in annoyance,

"I own goals that I must accomplish. Begone."

He lifted his fist, slamming it into the dirt. Another explosion sent soldiers outwards. With the second or two of an opening, he lifted up his hand at Torix. Before he could finish, I slammed into him like a speeding bullet.

Yawm fell to the ground, rolling from the crash.

From inside my armor, I pulled out the tip of Brim's spear that I stole earlier. Using the arcane blade, I stabbed it into the back of Yawm's neck. He lifted me up. I gouged the edge of the knife deeper as he did.

Yawm shook his back, shaking me like a tire swing in a hurricane. Using gravity, my grip, and molded armor, I held on by the breadth of a hair. I reared my fist back, punching Yawm three or four times in the face. Yawm looked around unfazed, growling out his words,

"I'm going to tear your insides out and wear that skin of yours."

He grabbed my head with his right arm, the only one still functioning. He pulled me from his back, pieces of my armor snapping. He slammed me into the ground. Tectonic impacts rippled outwards, the pavement launching out like shrapnel.

Using me as a club, he swung me at approaching soldiers. They splat against me, soft as playdough. I grabbed Yawm's arm, digging my armor into his flesh. I concentrated Event Horizon over his arm, enhancing the effect.

Yawm spun me around over his head then tossed me away again with a loud roar. I crashed through two skyscrapers, landing hundreds of meters away. Facing the sky, I looked up at my own foot. It bent the wrong way, along with one of my elbows.

Using my armor and gravity streams, I snapped my bones back into place. With tendrils of my armor and gravity wells, I hobbled back onto my feet. I created pillars of armor over my leg and arm like makeshift splints.

I shuffled over chunks of broken rock and concrete towards Yawm.

I raised a hand, using a bit of my mana regen. I pulled myself along, speeding up as my bones healed. Once fixed, I dove into the ground, racing back towards Yawm.

Once I got there, Yawm busied himself with harpoons from Althea, magic from Torix, roots, and soldiers. When Torix and Althea reloaded or recharged, soldiers dog piled Yawm. The world tree helped amplify the effect of both.

Yawm's composure was cracking under the onslaught.

With his usual nobility gone, he swung out in desperation. He looked for opportunities to strike back with his magic. The recharge rate of his magic prevented him from doing so. With a vicious grin, I dashed into the fray.

As I did, Yawm turned towards me. His eyes widened, and his shoulders slumped,

“How do you still stand?”

When I reached him, he swung out with his arm. I jerked myself from his blow using a well of gravity. He charged towards me, but I dove into the ground, evading his grasp. I lifted myself back up out of the landscape, striking at his back.

He backhanded me, his hand landing on my right arm blocking my side. He crushed the arm, cracking my ribs like twigs. I shot into the sloped side of the crater he fought in.

As the dust settled, I pushed myself from the pile of broken rock and dirt. I stumbled on my right leg, my left one broken. I pulled my left leg back into place. I hobbled forward with my right arm looking like a slinky.

Yawm stood gawking at me in amazement,

“What are you?”

I didn't answer. I was too busy putting one shaky foot in front of the other one. It felt like running with someone else's legs. No one had time for me to wait until it was easy to move. We had a world eater to kill.

I wobbled back and forth, dashing downhill at Yawm. Above me, Althea and Torix rained down hell on Hod's green sphere. Soldiers drowned Yawm when he tried stopping them.

As I reached Yawm again, Hod's sphere shattered. Hod dove down like an eagle, his shade form condensing over him. Hod landed on the shadow of the building. Without any noise, he fell into the shade like a still pool of black water.

From behind Yawm, he rose. I tackled Yawm's front while Hod struck his back. Yawm swatted a hand out at Hod, but Hod disintegrated into Yawm's shadow. Taking advantage, I swiveled on my heels, launching a massive uppercut at Yawm's gut.

With gravity aiding my power, it left cracks in Yawm's bark skin. Yawm swung his fist over his head, slamming his knuckles into my forehead. My neck broke. My teeth shattered. I crushed into the ground. From behind me, Hod jumped out of my shadow and sliced at Yawm's arm.

His claws left three umbral streaks of fire. Yawm swatted his hand at Hod, but I jerked the bird from Yawm's grasp with gravity. Two bolts from Althea stabbed into Yawm's back while he was distracted. A fireball detonated on him right after.

I laid there, crushed beneath Yawm. Bruning from two different kinds of fires, Yawm no longer panicked. Yawm turned towards me, lifting his foot. He stomped my chest, my torso caving in. Yawm lifted his foot again, harpoons jamming into his neck and head.

Yawm absorbed the damage and continued stomping. The crater we fought in deepened with each strike, shockwaves rippling out. Hod appeared behind Yawm again, ripping at his legs. It didn't matter.

Yawm ignored the incoming damage, stomping me over and over. After ten stomps, my health dwindled. I lifted my arms, blocking another two stomps. He broke my arms under his heels. This must be what Korga felt like.

As my health reached 10%, my body was mush. I gurgled,

"What about the contract Yawm?"

Yawm wheezed in between stomps, "I'll. Endure. The. Consequences."

Yawm lifted his foot for a final time. Before he lowered his heel, I remembered the arcane blade lodged in his neck. With a burst of gravity, I shifted the edge. It cut through Yawm's neck.

At the same time, I moved it into the trajectory of one of Althea's bolts. The harpoon smashed into the arcane blade, slicing through 80% of Yawm's neck.

A fountain of yellow gunk spurted from his neck. Yawm stumbled sideways, grabbing at his throat. He was trying to hold in his blood. It was far too late.

Yawm fell onto his side. Hod picked up the arcane blade, jumping on top of Yawm.

He sliced at him, stabbing with brutality. Althea fired bolts into Yawm's head. Yawm's arms twitched as he struggled, weakened by blood loss. He choked out,

"I...I can't die...There is so....so much more...I need to do...Schema...eldritch..."

Yawm's hand quivered,

"Mother...father...no more..."

Yawm's hand thumped against the ground. When everyone ceased the slaughter, Yawm was nothing but mush. I splinted my neck with my armor, letting me heal. As sat up, I turned towards the others. A deafening silence passed over the battlefield.

We all looked at Yawm, disbelief spread over everyone. It didn't feel real. Everyone was thinking the same thing. He'd come back at any second now.

After the silence stretched, it was apparent. A series of notifications appeared in my inbox. Yawm was gone.

We killed the worldeater. We slayed Yawm of Flesh.

Chapter 143: Free

Well, we didn't kill him. Hod did. I looked over at the one and only birdman. With vibrant splashes of yellow gunk over him, he laid on his knees beside Yawm's corpse. He heaved for breath. I regenerated and walked over towards him. He glanced up at me,

"Hod kill Yawm?"

I grinned, “Yeah, I think so.”

Hod hobbled up to his feet, glancing around at the soldiers. His shade form dissipated,

“Legion slay Yawm? Legion save Earth, home of eltari and human!”

The legion roared in approval, the celebration spreading through the ranks. With absolute delight, the soldiers threw helmets, shouted in joy, and celebrated. We won. We beat the unbeatable. We killed the unkillable.

I grabbed Hod’s wing, pulling it up as I boomed my words,

“We pushed back the tide. We held the line.”

All eyes set on me. I turned around, gesturing around us, “We will honor those that fell in battle against that monster. Grieving can wait, however. Tonight, we celebrate our victory. Long live the Legion!”

The members of my guild banged a fist to their chest in unison. They shouted with discipline,

“Long live the Harbinger!”

I turned up, glancing at Torix. He smiled back and shrugged. He taught them a commemoration. Even if it was unnecessary, it was a nice touch. I put my hand over Hod, cleaning off blood with my armor. The black metal receded, showing Hod good as new.

Hod ran up and hugged me, banging his wing against my back,

“Hod happy that Harbinger back. Hod miss friend.”

I pat his back, “Me too. Me too.”

Hod let go and ran forward. He jumped into the air, flying upwards by flapping his wings. A swarm of eltari went over him. They dashed around in complex shapes, some ritual taking place no doubt. I didn't know what to think.

Althea and Torix came over towards me. I leaned over Yawm's body, using my armor to eat his corpse. As I did, my mass increased. Each second I absorbed the latent energy, I gained thousands of pounds. By the time I finished, my feet cracked into the ground yet again. Great.

With Overwhelming presence, I dispersed my weight. Torix landed beside me, a full head and shoulders shorter than me. The crowd of troops raced down the sides of the slope towards me too.

Before they reached us, Torix walked up, his hands clasped behind him. A bright grin ran up and down his thin lips. I put a hand on his shoulder. I raised a fist in front of us both,

"We got em."

Torix laughed, an almost hysterical tone in his voice. He unclasped his hands, tapping a bony fist against my own,

"That we did."

The horde of soldiers reached me as Althea ran up. They gave us space as we executed a flawless running hug. I held her up by her waist, spinning her around. She giggled before I leaned her over into a kiss. As I did, the throng of soldiers around us gave out a loud hoopla.

It was awesome, not gonna lie.

Althea blushed like crazy, but an irrepressible smile plastered itself on her face. We unlocked our lips. She grabbed my cheeks, pulling her forehead against mine. We just grinned at each other, at a loss for words. It was finally over.

After that, I stood straight up. I looked around me, everyone reaching just up to my elbows. It gave me a great view of the sheer number of soldiers. All different eldritch stood beside them, some with the summons of Torix. I raised a fist. They built it with me, and we thundered out our victory.

Torix even raised a hand, casting fire magic at the sky. Below the Eltari and above our troops, majestic flames danced in the air for us. The moment took my breath away.

After that, I spoke with the troops on a more personal level. Many mentioned how they always knew we'd get Yawm in the end. Some said how they're finally away from the devil instructor called Kessiah. Others talked about settling down with a family they made here.

They treated me like a celebrity. If I was to make a comparison, I imagined this is what Alexander the Great felt like when he conquered Persia. After talking for a few more hours though, the situation settled down. Torix handled the Legion's return to the mountain base.

I stayed behind with Hod and Althea. I walked around with Althea. It turns out that absorbing and looting the corpses of Breakers makes a decent date. Hod and the eltari just flew around above us doing their own thing. The whole while, Althea and I gushed to one another.

"That sounds like literal hell."

I nodded, "Eh, it could have been a lot worse. Yawm wasn't...mean or anything like that. He was twisted, yeah, but deep down he wasn't bad. He was just misguided in my opinion. It's actually kind of sad we couldn't save him..."

Althea rolled her eyes, "We'll agree to disagree there. He made me live in a dungeon with other children I had to watch die."

I raised my hands, torn between two sides, "That's the thing. None of those children would have had a childhood. You all were orphans, even you."

She frowned, "I had parents."

I raised my hands, “But can you remember them?”

Althea glanced down. She stared at the rubble beneath our pacing feet,

“No, not really. I just thought it was because I couldn’t remember being a kid.”

I nodded, “I’m not saying Yawm was perfect. We had to take him down for sure. I’m just saying he wasn’t pure evil.”

Althea sighed, “I can’t accept that.”

I shrugged, “Eh, I can’t blame you. You saw a different side of Yawm.”

She shook her head, “I never saw him really. I saw what he did to the others. No one ended up the same after leaving to see him. He was always like that. You never got to see him doing the evil thing, but it was obvious what he was doing.”

I frowned, “Yeah, maybe so.”

I bent over, my armor eating the remains of the assassin. Turns out the assassin lady was a remnant named Eleanor Bacht. Beside the corpse was the assassin’s red knife. Althea picked up the blade, inspecting it. I did as well.

Viral Menace(lvl req: 4,000) – This osmium alloy has been transfused with the blood of Living Flesh, many viral versions of eldritch, and enzymes for speeding up the reaction of eldritch. This hardened the blade and give’s the edge a devastating effect. Make sure you don’t cut yourself with its sharp edge, however. The consequences are disastrous.

Bonuses:

+100 Dexterity | +100 Strength | +50 Perception | +50 Intelligence

+20% to poisons | +10% critical damage | +10% handling speed

Critical Multiplier: 3.20*Normal Damage

I looked up at Althea. She twirled the blade on her fingers, locking her eyes with mine,

“Oh yeah. This will do nicely.”

We took two dimensional storage rings from Elenor’s body. After that, we found Brim’s two rings, Korga’s four rings, and Elessah’s five rings. The Breakers were decked out from front to back. We wouldn’t let the loot go to waste.

Once we finished that, we walked back towards the world tree. The whole time, we raved on and on about what we’d been doing. Althea actually gained a legendary skill, and so did Hod. Her’s involved stealth, using blades for crits, and gunnery.

Hod’s legendary skill was his shade form. Teleporting from shadow to shadow, the black flames, and the enhanced strength made up most of the ability. Either way, both of them worked wonders in our fight. That’s for sure.

We reached the world tree after an hours walk. It felt weird just walking somewhere. I was so used to running everywhere that I forgot how pleasant it was to just slow down sometimes.

We soaked in the view and the smell of greenery surrounding the tree. We met Amara sitting in the fetal position. She wafted in a pool of glowing green liquid. Several of the dimensional cipher’s runes changed since I last saw them. She’d been hard at work.

I stepped up to a transparent chunk of bark near Amara. I pressed my hand on it. I couldn’t make it budge. I reared back and hit it. Nothing. Althea walked up, pushing her finger into the bark. Like slicing through butter, she cut the material with a single finger.

I raised an eyebrow at her, “Damn. You’ve been practicing?”

Althea shrugged, “I didn’t know what I could do before.”

She finished the circle. She grabbed the edge of the circular hunk, her arm reforming into a bulging mass,

“Now I do.”

She pulled the plate of bark aside with ease. I walked over, lifting the bark. It had heft, though it wasn't impossible to move by any means. Althea was stout as hell though like a titan was in her tiny body.

I absorbed the plate of clear bark. From inside the tree, a thick, glowing green jelly globbed out. Althea took a step back,

“And here's your specialty. Doing gross stuff.”

I gave her a mock glare, and she laughed. I cracked a grin as I leaned into a sprinter's position,

“Eh, pretty much.”

I shot into the shining slime. It covered me. With gravity magic, I pulled myself along until I reached Amara. I grabbed her, pulling her out. I set Amara down, and Althea put her hands on her hips,

“You didn't have to go in there. You could have just waved your hands and pulled her out, right?”

I shrugged, turning back to the hole in the tree,

“I'm getting rid of this damn thing.”

I jumped back into the world tree. I extended out my metal skin into the goop, draining its mana. Once more, my weight increased. This time it occurred much slower. After sitting inside the tree for several hours, the entire structure shriveled up.

Once the mana dried up, I opened my eyes and looked around. No more gunk, only dust remained within the trunk. Outside the center, the roots crumbled into rich, dark earth. The construct altered back into what it came from.

A shell of bark encapsulated the branches of it, supporting the dilapidated structure. Before I climbed out, I opened my status. I figured now was a good time. No point in waiting anymore to sink my teeth into my rewards. There were more than a few.

(Quest)A Call To Action – Completed! 100,655,321 Credits awarded!

Obliterator III bonuses rewarded —> Level cap increased by 3,000.

Level Cap: 5,000—>8,000!

Other rewards are as Follows:

Exile terminated! Assist on bounty earned!

Guild tier upgraded to A+!

Unknown status elimination quests unlocked!

Class advancement quests unlocked!

Bounty reduction quests unlocked!

Sentinel rights advancement quests unlocked!

Speak with the nearest sentinel or Overseer for further information.

Good work, Harbinger. You've proven yourself.

I raised an eyebrow, closing those messages and opening my status. I'd think about those messages after handling my level-ups. Boy oh boy were there level ups too. I gained 1,877 levels, putting me up to level 5,443. I exceeded my previous level cap in one fell swoop.

Without really thinking about it, I just invested all my points into endurance. The plan worked out so far. Why stop now? Halfway through investing points, a perk screen appeared.

Dignity of a Mind(Willpower of 10,000 or more) – There are forces that can take away your strength, your limbs, even your voice. There are no forces that can take away your spirit. Unlocks the Dignity of a Mind legacy.

I invested into the perk since it only took one point. Once I finished pouring points into endurance, I selected finalize. As I selected yes, I fell onto my knees.

My armor ruptured all along my body, like a snake breaking its scaly skin. I gasped, my hands shaking. The pulse of blood sounded throughout me. With each pulse, I expanded in all aspects.

The grip of my hands turned undeniable. The clarity of my mind turned impeccable. Mana manifested through me, turning into a solid like what Yawm created.

Microscopic crystals of red mana amalgamated through me. They weaved with the arcane bonds in my flesh, forming ropes.

They interconnected with the metallic wires of my armor, weaving together. The fibers reinforced one another, creating new material.

Throughout me, these crystalline formations reinforced my armor. As I gripped my hand, these robust collections of metal and mana clasped. They operated like a muscle. It gave my own strength both form and function.

I was unbreakable. I was untouchable, an invincible force. At least I felt like it. Compared with before, I doubled in strength. As I pulled from my mana generation, it poured out oceans of mana. Three, four, five million a minute, I kept pressing for more mana every second.

As I reached my peak, a maelstrom of energy roared around me. Crimson lightning carved out portions of the world tree. The mana thickened the air, making it unbreathable. It pressed down like an oppressive force. It was like liquid violence, a concentrated cocktail of entropy.

I pulled the mana back in, sending it into the dimensional cipher on my forearms. I twisted my neck, feeling the grace of my motions. Even with so much mass, I handled it with ease. Like a well-oiled machine, I moved without effort. Everything glided together. I was free.

At the bottom of the hollowed out trunk of the world tree, I relished my bonuses. Interrupting my glee, a portal opened beside me. From inside it, the Overseer walked out. I stared at him for a moment. He spoke in a monotone,

“I see you’ve already dealt with the world tree...That is optimal.”

I frowned at him, standing up straight. My eyes met his. I was his height, maybe even taller now. I tapped my teeth together,

“So...what is it?”

The Overseer sighed. He opened his palm towards me,

“I came here to congratulate you for killing Yawm. Schema took a chance with you, and it paid off in spades.”

I raised my eyebrows and crossed my arms, “Yeah, he sure did.”

An awkward silence passed over us before the Overseer looked away,

“I...I also want to apologize for my accusations earlier.” He looked back at me,

“I assumed you fell to Yawm’s words like all the others before you. I was wrong. Schema was right to trust in you. I shouldn’t have exiled you. You destroyed Yawm

despite the difficulty I placed you in. For that, you've garnered loyalty. Not just from Schema, but from me as well."

I uncrossed my arms, "Hmmm...Thank you. I can accept that. As for the loyalty bit, did you mean these quests?"

The Overseer nodded, "They allow you to expunge your unknown status, your high bounty, and to gain sentinel rights as agreed."

I scratched my head, "Are they challenging quests?"

He laughed, his electronic voice echoing through the world tree,

"They mirror the difficulty and risk involved with giving you freedom. Do not forget, you're obligated by a contract written in the cipher. You are Schema's enemy, yet he offers you freedom. That is generous, and that is kind. For Schema, especially so."

I nodded, "I almost forgot about that contract. Is there any way to break it?"

The Overseer shook his head, "If there is, it isn't known to us."

"Shit...alright then." I weighed my hands back and forth, "I guess Schema won't just let me stroll in to handle a casual bug fix or something?"

The Overseer laid a palm over his face, "Actually, no."

I snapped my fingers, "Oh really? Damn. Who'd have guessed." I raised an eyebrow, "For real though, are there any leads for canceling the contract?"

The Overseer shrugged, "Perhaps Etorhma will rewrite it for you. He is no doubt grateful to you for killing Yawm."

I grimaced, "Yeah, I want to steer clear of the Old Ones. I saw what they did to Yawm."

“Wise.” The Overseer raised a hand towards me, opening a red screen,

“Now that my personal reasons for visiting are finished let’s proceed with business.”

Several black screens appeared in front of me. Their text was white, like the dark layout option on a website. I peered at them as the Overseer continued,

“These are the quests mentioned earlier. Within them are three separate tasks you may accomplish at your leisure. There are no time restrictions, and you are free to go about as you please.”

The Overseer turned towards his portal, “Along with them is an offer should you complete them all.” Before he stepped through, he stared at me,

“Daniel.”

I looked up from the quests, closing them for now.

“What is it?”

The Overseer opened a dimensional storage portal beside him. He pulled out a vial full of black sludge. He tossed it towards me. I caught it with gravity, having it spin in the air.

“Within the glass is a mountain of eldritch energy. Your armor will no doubt enjoy the feast. That is my thanks for killing Yawm. He was my enemy. The enemy of my enemy is a friend.”

I raised a hand, “I have a question. Why are you an Overseer? What makes you want to be one?”

The Overseer looked off into the distance, “That is a strange question. My race benefits from having an Overseer in their ranks. Schema offers advantages to us for it.”

“Oh...ok, cool.” I gave him a polite nod, “Good luck with...”

I had no idea what Overseers did.

“Uh, things.”

The Overseer laughed, “We Overseer’s handle administrative duties. Diligence is all that is required.”

He stepped through the portal, “Good luck and goodbye, Harbinger.”

He disappeared, leaving nothing behind. I looked at the vial of eldritch mana. It wasn’t smoke anymore. It was like the ichor of some evil god. Well, either that or tar.

Eldritch Concentrate – This vial contains the remnants of eldritch energy. An inordinate amount is stored here from the cleansed worlds of a Fringe Walker.

Cool. It was a vial of eldritch from a fringe walking badass. I wrapped my armor around it. I crushed the jar, spilling out the eldritch energy. An icy sensation raced out from the smashed glass. The cold reached far out, like jumping into an ice bath.

As it faded, I shook my head. I jittered a bit, the vial like a shot of adrenaline. I calmed myself down and opened my status. I looked at my condition. In a nutshell, my condition was pretty damn good.

Level 5,443

Strength – 4,617 | Constitution – 7,845 | Endurance – 34,018

Dexterity – 1,926 | Willpower – 16,976 | Intelligence – 6,315

Charisma – 653 | Luck – 2,130 | Perception – 772

Health: 4.87 Million/4.87 Million | Health Regen: 9.1 Million/min or 151,980/sec

Stamina: 3.01 Million/ 3.01 Million | Stamina Regen: 46,336/sec

Living Dimension: 1.01 Trillion/4.30 Trillion

Mass: 360,805 pounds(169,411 kilos~) | Height: 11'7(3.55 meters)

Damage Res – 98.5% | Dimensional Res – 49.25%

Phys Dam Bonus – 244,513% | Damage Bonus – 40%

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

My health regen tripled. It was higher than when Amara and the beetles swarmed around me. Much higher. My physical damage, mass, and health over doubled. Even with those boons, the most surprising thing was my progress with my armor.

Even after all the mana left in Yawm plus the vial from the overseer, I still wasn't even a quarter the way to my evolution. That much mana was unbelievable. I bet there wasn't even enough eldritch mana on Earth for my armor's development. It was that insane.

I didn't need the evolution anytime soon though. My healing was already ridiculous. Whatever else my armor gave me wasn't really necessary. The bonuses would come eventually.

With that in mind, I reopened the quests the Overseer gave me. I scrutinized them this time instead of giving them a glance.

Planetary Cleanser(Quest | A+ Tier) – There are worlds on the brink. You can save them given your unique abilities.

Create a beachhead on three different fringe worlds. These worlds must be high priority worlds. (Worlds of B tier or higher grade of importance.)

Rewards: Unlocks Fringe Walker class. Territory granted on saved worlds.

This one seemed interesting. From what I researched, Fringe Walkers had enhanced regeneration, great aoe abilities, and were anti-eldritch all around. It made sense that Schema was giving me a way of becoming one. My build was perfect for it.

Ambassador of Earth(Quest | Tier B+) – Earth needs an ambassador. As the highest leveled native species on Earth, this task falls onto your shoulders.

Establish contact with The Empire, the steel legion, and the nearest world within Schema's system, Gliese 667, known as Giess.

Once contact is established, create favorable or at least neutral alliances with these groups. To accomplish this, it's recommended that embassies be built on both sides. Trading relations, cultural adjustments, and educational programs may assist with this mission.

Rewards: Elimination of unknown status for you and any participating party members. Guild rights expanded towards factions that are befriended.

Creating a beachhead on an alien world was simple. Fostering good relations with aliens...Well, that was complicated. It sounded fun anyway. Seeing otherworldly capitals and cities would be exhilarating. Who knows, maybe we could even get Torix a girlfriend.

Cutting Open the Belly of the Beast(Quest | Tier B+) – To prove your lawfulness, you must enact the law.

Destroy an unauthorized organization that actively acts against Schema's tenants. This organization must be tier B or higher. Destroy in this instance means to neutralize the leader and organizational bodies leading the movement or group.

Rewards: Pardoning of all previous offenses against Schema, eliminating your current A- Tier bounty.

Damn. I had an A- tier bounty. To my knowledge, that's a high as hell bounty. Considering the contract, it wasn't so bad I suppose. The quest appeared reasonable as well.

I eliminate an A tier bounty for getting rid of a B tier organization. I'd need to get a better idea of the scale of things from Torix first.

The Status of a Sentinel(Quest | Tier A+) – By killing a great evil, you've earned the right to ascend. Find the spear and armor of a fallen sentinel and return it to Schema.

Rewards: Status updated from sentient to a sentinel. You obtain the benefits of being a sentinel along with their responsibilities.

Requirements: Finish the questline Ambassador of Earth and accept a Sentinel's responsibilities.

After reading through all these quests, I needed to research what 'rights' a sentinel had. The mention of having responsibilities put me off, however. It could involve quite a bit, but I wouldn't until after unlocking it. Yenno, unless I found a forum or something about it. Considering it was a reward by Schema, there was probably official posts on it.

Once I figured them out, I'd be able to make an informed decision. As I finished reading the last quest, I closed my status. I walked up towards the edge of the world tree. The bark held firm. I lifted my hands, creating a condensed well of gravity above me.

I and a cloud of dust floated up. As I floated up, I skimmed over the quests again. The quest that stuck out was the Ambassador of Earth one. It would unlock the unknown status of everybody, not just me. The other ones helped only me.

Considering I wanted some company on my next quest, it suited my goals. Of course, walking up to another planet with a bounty wasn't optimal either. Considering we killed Yawm, I doubt they'd attack us as a group. Either way, we might be able to take out two birds with one stone.

My primary focus would be getting back to base for now though. I reached the clear bark of earlier. It remained after the goop inside drained, like a wall of glass.

Looking out of it, I found Amara and Althea where I left them. The hole I made healed even as I drained the tree. That's why Amara was still able to sleep. The sound of my mana or the overseer would've leaked out otherwise, waking her up.

Althea guarded Amara. Althea made the eldritch a bed of broken branches. After that, she cleaned her to some extent. In the present, Althea trained with the Viral Menace. She poured sweat, enjoying the new blade.

I tapped the glass, interrupting her. She brandished the blade at me, narrowing her eyes. As they locked with mine, she smiled. She walked up and cut through the glass with the knife. It sliced in with absolute ease, no effort required whatsoever.

She placed her palm on the glass circle, the panel sticking to her. She tossed it aside, the circular glass whizzing through the air. Seconds later and it splashed in the lake beneath us.

I pulled myself out of the tree, hovering through it. Althea propped out a hip, leaning on one leg,

“Getting fancy now?”

I rolled my eyes, “I've gotten a bit better at magic. That's all.”

As I landed beside her, she looked up at me. I dwarfed her.

“You're like...a foot taller now. Wow.”

I leaned down while lifting her chin, “Is that a problem?”

She shook her head, “Nope. Not yet.”

She grew bat wings, flapping them. She maintained a few feet up off the ground, matching my eyesight. I grabbed her hip, putting her on my shoulders. I walked over, lifting Amara with a gravity well. I turned up to Althea,

“You ready to get back to base?”

She nodded, “Yes please.”

I smiled wide, “Which way?”

Althea pointed. I gave her a quick salute, “Aye aye. I have two things left to do before we’re off.”

I glanced down. I floated myself up by burning some mana. As I did, I looked behind me. The world tree stood on its last legs. The shell of the bark withstood the wind, but it was like swiss cheese; hole littered it everywhere.

I charged mana into me. After floating away for a reasonable distance, I discharged a massive burst of mana. A wave of gravitational force rippled across the landscape, bending trees with ease. The shell of bark crumbled under the wake of the magic.

This caused a chain reaction, the barren branches of the tree following suit. A wave of dust and ash echoed the collapse. As the plume of brown dust dissipated, the derelict remains of Springfield stood covered in the powder of the world tree. It looked like fresh earth, ready for life to grow out of.

A notification ran into my status. I read it. Keeja died. I bit my lip, a hint of disgust rushing up from my gut. The poor man was at the brink of being consumed by eldritch. For him, living was torment. Dying was mercy, though I didn’t feel good about it.

I sighed, turning towards Ajax. He remained in stasis, his green sphere still stuck inside a skyscraper. I floated towards him and picked him up with another field of gravity.

After that, I looked where Althea pointed. It was finally time to move on from where I was born. An eager, almost childish grin ran up and down my lips. A fire was burning in my chest. I clasped my fists, ready and waiting.

For the first time since Schema took over, I wasn’t just struggling for survival. I could do whatever I wanted. No more big bad looming over my shoulder, threatening my life.

For once, I was the master of my fate and the captain of my soul.

I was free.

Chapter 144: Fortress

At the same time, free didn't mean settling, at least not for me. We floated away before I turned back around. I observed the ground, Althea putting her elbow on the top of my head.

"What are you looking at?"

I squinted, "I'm looking for any leftover eldritch. I don't want them wrecking havoc a month from now."

Althea shook her hands, "Don't worry. Torix already handled what was left. Something about transferring ownership with magic."

I glanced up, "Really now?"

She nodded, "Yeah." She grinned at me, "Ready to go?"

I charged my mana for a second, my armor resonating with the energy. I raised a hand in front of me, "Of course."

We flew through the air towards Torix's base. Flew might be the wrong word, however. When I pulled myself forward with gravity, it didn't feel like flying. Nothing propelled us forward, it was more like we were falling in a direction.

No wind grazed my cheeks. No dust or insects flew onto us. It all collected into the gravity well just out of our reach. A tiny ball of dirt, bugs, and water condensed into the well ahead as we moved. Althea tapped my head with her hand,

"Hey. Can you get rid of that disgusting spitball?"

I rolled my eyes, "Is it that bad?"

She shrugged, “Not really. If you could though, I’d give you my eternal thanks.”

I flicked the spitball aside with a burst of telekinesis. Althea hugged my head, “Thanks.”

I placed a hand on her arm, “No problem.”

We reached the base, and my jaw dropped at the progress. Before I left, there was no sign of development. On the outside, few changes showed. The inside was a different story altogether.

Beneath the pines and oaks covering the mountain, Eltari made huts. They enjoyed the smell of earth and open housing so they could fly. An untrained eye wouldn’t see their homes. I wasn’t trained per say, but I could see the broad wings of eltari here or there.

They dug out hollows leading into the mountain base. Steel and concrete beams reinforced the mountain, blending in well. A few strips of exposed concrete let me see the hidden buttresses. Fresh ground revealed tunnels as well.

The sentries Yawm sent out wouldn’t pick up on subtle signs like this, however. As we fell towards the mountain, I slowed our descent. Althea pointed at a small stream near the base,

“That’s the entrance I use.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Why?”

She looked at it, “You’ll get it when you get there.”

We reached the stream, and Althea pointed at a waterfall big enough for us to enter. I peered at it,

“So it’s like an evil villain’s entrance?”

Althea rolled her eyes, “How else do you think Torix would do it?”

I smiled as we reached the cascade. As we neared it, I generated an antigravity well at its origin. The water fell away from it, bending around the gravitational flux. This opened up a dry path for us. As we passed it, Althea looked at the water falling upward,

“Wow...that’s so cool.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Huh? I guess so.”

We passed into the entrance. Torix fancied it up some. Someone carved doors of stone into the cavern walls. While not intricate, the simple pattern still impressed me. I set us down onto a floor of smooth stone. I walked up, and Althea jumped off my shoulders. She looked up at me, waving at me with waving, sprite-like fingers,

“Are you going to move it with more magic? Ooooh.”

I lifted my chin, making myself sound like a pompous rich person, “So the plebian is Jealous then?”

I waved my hand like I couldn’t be bothered to open the door. Antigravity pushed the doorway open in a steady crawl.

I flourished my hand, “How quaint!”

We laughed while walking in. The floors shined, the polished concrete making a simple yet effective flooring. Glass panels lined the roof, two rows of fluorescent lights lined a hallway. It looked like someone sliced through stone, made a hall, then installed lights.

I turned towards Althea,

“Did you cut this out?”

She nodded, “Yeah. It took a bit of practice, but I got a handle on it.”

I turned forward, walking down the hallway, “Hell yeah.”

We walked for a few minutes, chatting with enthusiasm. We reached an old vault doorway. Althea walked up to a passcode at the side of it. She input a code, and the doors hissed. The vault door turned three notches. I walked up, grabbing it.

I turned towards Althea, “Can I open it now?”

She spread out her arms, “Yeah, of course...why are asking?”

I frowned at the door, “Well, I don’t want to break it.”

She giggled at my dilemma as I pulled the door open. The giant slab of iron glided on the hinge, offering no resistance. I swung it back and forth, playing with the door for a second. After I bounced it back and forth with some telekinesis, Althea gave me a stern look,

I shrugged, “Sorry.”

We walked into the base. It wasn’t as barebones anymore, not by a long shot. It was vast, open cavern. Besides that, the first thing I noticed was how bright everything was. It didn’t feel like inside a cave. The air was too fresh, and the ceiling was too bright.

I discovered why. Above us, glass panels lined the roof, looking like reflections of the sun.

Althea pointed up at them, “So people complained to Torix that it was too dark.”

I smirked, “Woah. Torix made a base too dark and brooding? Who’d have guessed.”

Althea waved her hands at the panels, “I know right? Anyways, he set up some mirrors outside. They reflect down these, er, aluminum tubes. They bounce the light back and forth until it comes inside.”

I glanced around at the cave houses, “Oh shit. That’s clever.”

She pointed at the houses, “We worked with some architects and designed windows and everything in the houses too. It makes the place feel way less...cave-ey.”

I remembered my time in Bloodhollow.

“Yeah, I get that. Being underground like that can mess with your head if you’re in it long enough.”

Althea pointed at the houses, “Torix made the whole mountain like a wedding cake. This is the residential area at the very bottom.”

She pointed up, “Above here is the military base.”

I surveyed the area. A wealth of information flooded in due to Hunter of Many. Lots of people lived in apartments, wooden boards lining the cave walls. Light poured out of the windows with people doing all sorts of random stuff.

Knitting, woodworking, writing, studying, training, reading, you name it, people were doing it. In between these living spaces, bars, repair places, stores, and even skill shops were open. Children also ran out in public areas, watched by their parents. That’s right. Children.

I gave them a long, hard look out of the corner of my eye. They were alien almost. I couldn’t remember the last time I saw a kid.

At the same time, everyone stared at us as we passed. I’ll admit it. We made a scene. I towered over everyone, a full five feet taller. Althea sat on my shoulders. More than any of that, Amara and Ajax floated behind me, one of them in an emerald shell.

We drew the eye, that’s for sure.

The children stared in horror at me. The ran to their parents who pointed at me. Most of the parents smiled, saying that I was some kind of savior and such. In a way, I guess I was.

The children didn't look as scared after talking with their parents. At least my helmet wasn't on. Otherwise, they'd be in abject terror. None of them walked up to me still. Maybe after a few visits, people would get used to me.

At least one reason they feared me was my level. I analyzed many of the people as I walked through the base. They averaged level 100 or so. It made sense that the residential area wouldn't be full of warriors after all. If I activated Event Horizon, every person here would die instantly.

It was a sobering thought.

We reached a cylindrical pillar of natural stone lined with steel girders. It was the core of the mountain base. Many oversized and a few smaller elevators were at the ground level of the giant column. Althea pointed at one,

"Those are the elevators for people. The other ones are for supplies, vehicles, and uh, eldritch. We'll have to use those because you're so tall. That and Amara and Ajax."

I raised my eyebrows, "How many eldritch are here?"

Althea shrugged, "At least a few thousand. We've got over a hundred species now."

We reached the industrial elevator. I didn't even need to bend under it. Althea pressed the 2nd-floor button.

"Don't worry. Torix has the eldritch on a leash with Torix's mythical skill. He's smart like that."

We walked into the elevator. Before the gears broke trying to lift us, I aided it with gravity again. I looked at Althea,

"Is he still handing out lectures for every question asked?"

Althea spread out her arms, "Of course. You know who you're talking about, right?"

I looked up, “It would be a nice change of pace. Yawm was the polar opposite. If anything, he always acted like he knew nothing about almost anything. Well, besides for some life advice. That may have been his way of hiding information.”

Althea frowned, “Yeah, I’m assuming he was just lying to you the entire time about everything.”

I sighed, “You’re probably right about that.”

We reached the second floor. Althea lifted a hand up and laid it on my shoulder, “Hey. He talked about how you never fell for him. I for one am deeply impressed.”

I looked at her, raising an eyebrow, “Really?”

She nodded, “I couldn’t tell him no after a few sentences. You were with him for months. I can’t even imagine what that was like.”

We walked into the militarized zone.

“It was...unusual. You’d think Yawm would put you on edge all the time. If anything, he had this soothing effect. It was like I didn’t have to worry about anything anymore. He’d handle it, or something to that effect. It’s hard to describe.”

I shook my head, “It wasn’t like I was stressed the entire time I was there. If anything, the struggle was in becoming comfortable. Once your comfortable, Yawm could pull you to his side with ease.”

Althea looked down, “Yeah. It couldn’t argue with him after three or so sentences.”

I put a finger under her chin and lifted it up, “Hey, don’t be too hard on yourself. Hod required one sentence after all.”

She gave out a reluctant laugh, “Yeah. Hod’s not that hard to convince though.”

We walked through another hallway like the waterfall entrance. At the end was another vault door. Althea typed in the code at the side of it while I shrugged,

“Hod has excellent intuition. I’d follow his gut reaction before my own, ten times out of ten. I mean, he trusted me when I first arrived on his planet. Look at how that ended up working out for him.”

Althea rolled her eyes, “Now he’s the killer of Yawm, the hero of his race, and obviously the most humble person I’ve ever met.”

I pulled open the vault door, “It’s so damn funny though.”

We walked into the militarized zone. It was a smaller cavern than the residential district but still massive. The vertical planning implemented metal walkways above everything. This lets vehicles and eldritch populate the ground floor. Ordinary people walked or ran along these walkways above all the chaos.

And boy oh boy was their chaos. Eldritch shambled by, many of them large and horrific. Runic inscriptions lined their face, sealing their homicidal tendencies. Someone either rode them or walked beside the eldritch at all times. They controlled them with a wristband covered in inscriptions of the same type.

The vehicles were more conventional. Of course, a few runic markings lined some of the armored cars. Atop them were turrets, either made of guns or from actual gemstones. The gemstones amplified the spells of the user, letting them blast enemies with mana.

My favorite integration came with the mana rifles. We walked down a firing range. In it, troops held these modern rifles with crystalized mana in the chamber instead of bullets. They either whispered spells or used silent casting.

After saying their spell, they mana stones glowed, firing off elemental bullets. Giant clusters of ice, plumes of fire, and blobs of acid smothered firing targets. The multicolored bolts decimated the paper boards, crumbling them.

It was awe inspiring.

After walking past the firing range, we reached several cages full of various eldritch species. The monsters lived in all kinds of environments, some covered in lava others in ice. The fauna adapted with them, giving the beasts something to feast on.

For safety, each and every eldritch covered itself in runes of Torix's making. Some workers fed the eldritch meat, grain, whatever it was they ate. A group of civilians gawked at these demons through glass windows. It was like a zoo of sorts.

I raised an eyebrow at it, "Practical. Torix adds some entertainment while breeding them. It seems kind of risky though."

Althea shook her head, "They're at the very center of the combat training part of the base. Someone guards them 24/7. None of them are over level 300 either."

I analyzed a few of the monsters. Althea was right. The horrors were malnourished and lower leveled. None of them were rapidly spreading varieties either. No hives of swarming insects or intelligent eldritch here. They were all harmless, by comparison.

After walking past the exhibits, we neared the third and final area of the 2nd floor. Sparks and fires flew out of blowtorches. Electricity wrapped around Tesla coils. Pieces of gear spread out over tables. It was a tinkerer's wet dream, a verdant oasis of equipment and apparatuses.

We walked into it, looking around at various projects laid out on tables. Chalkboards scattered across the walls, blueprints pinned across them. Most of the inventors wore soundproof headphones, letting them focus. They built all kinds of different tech.

Power armor, rifles, runic inscriptions, incantations, alchemy, and batteries, there was no limits here. We walked further, revealing more. Summoning rituals, biological weapons, cloaking devices, elemental grenades, they toiled on all weapons of war.

It was out of love. Few fighters trained the day after the climactic battle. Most idled at the private section, getting over some killer hangovers. The inventors worked out of respect for their craft though. Why take a day off when you love what you do after all?

As we paced by the inventors, we found Diesel grinding away at a prototype rifle. He was an engineer who designed Althea's guns for me. I crafted the weapon using his

blueprints. He looked up at us, wearing a pair of black goggles and a grease-smeared jumpsuit.

He smiled at us. It looked like he and Althea knew each other now.

Althea walked up to him, their heights mirroring each other. Diesel looked at us both, shock spreading over his face.

“Well, I’ll be damned. You actually did it, sir.”

I shook my head, gesturing to everyone around us, “Trust me when I say this. We killed Yawm.”

He walked up, two or three heads shorter than me. Diesel looked up, putting a hand on my shoulder,

“We do our part when we can...Heh, here I thought I got taller because of your legacy. You’re a giant, sir.”

I patted his shoulder, making sure not to put too much force behind it, “If anything, I think you’re catching up. What level are you now?”

He looked up at my level while lowering his hands, “Only 677. You’re already over 5,000.” He turned towards Althea, “And it looks like the lovely lady is 5,000 dead even. I’m glad we have monsters like you two on our side.”

Althea shrugged, “I hit the level cap. I have to get a class if I want to advance any further.”

I turned towards her, raising my eyebrow, “Really?”

She glanced up at me, “What? You’re over level 5,000? How the hell did that happen?”

I waved my hands back and forth, “It’s a long story. I got two trees called Obliterator one and two. After Yawm died, I unlocked and finished Obliterator three for some

reason. It was probably a gesture of goodwill by Schema or something like that. That's what I'm guessing at least."

Diesel shook his head in disbelief, "I wish I had the same problem as you, mam. Being too high a level, well...It's a hell of a problem to have."

She walked up, inspecting the new model Diesel was working on. She ran her hand down the polished steel, "How much longer till you finish it?"

Diesel tapped his chin, "Oh, this beauty...If I had to guess, about three months."

Althea bit her lip. She sighed, "That sucks, but I get it. I've tried redesigning my rifle too. It's impossible for me."

Diesel turned back to his rifle, "Speaking of redesigning, I gotta get back to work. It's good to talk to you both, but this cannon isn't going to finish itself."

He grinned, putting back on a pair of goggles,

"Besides, I don't want to interrupt your reunion. Go and enjoy each other's company. You're only young once."

I frowned. Diesel had a crush on Althea last time we talked. It looked like he learned that Althea and I were dating after I left. He moved on, though an inkling of bitterness lingered in his voice. Althea waved as we left him to get back to work.

After pacing past all the tech, Althea walked back up to the central area of the base,

"Don't worry, the tours almost over."

We entered the elevator and rode back up to level three. After pacing through another vault door, we reached a training camp. The last floor involved research and development. This area designed itself around learning.

The same reinforced cylinder sat at the center. Bookshelves lined the pillar at the center of the hall, making a study. A circular set of rooms laid outside it. People in all garments, from military uniforms to dresses, walked from place to place.

They paced into rooms of all kinds. Obstacle courses, lecture halls, and dueling areas spread out across the circular study. The dueling rooms were lined with glass, letting spectators watch from the library.

Inside the room, two magicians covered in power armor cast spells at each other. One of them specialized in earth magic, molding stone to his advantage. The other mage focused on teleportation combined with energy blades.

The earth mage stood still, firing condensed clumps of stone at his opponent. All the while, the teleporter phased across the room, striking from all angles. The earth mage kept molding stone right before the energy blades landed on him.

The stone melted into magma when the energy blades touched. The earth mage pooled the magma under the concrete arena. As the blade mage sliced through the earth mage's barrier, he sliced one last time. Instead of landing, the earth mage plummeted them into the magma pit beneath them.

They both fell in. I walked up behind the crowd, entranced by the battle. They both exploded from the pit of mana, each of them wrestling with each other. Covered in molten rock, the blade mage swung his blade at the throat of the earth mage.

The earth mage swung his arms out, the magma on the blade mage condensing. The blade mage froze in place, covered in stone. The earth mage rolled backward. As he stood up, he lifted his arms. A pillar of stone lifted up, striking the chin of the blade mage.

The pillar stopped right before contact. From out of my vision, Torix walked onto the arena. Torix clapped his hands, the rock and blade magic disintegrating. He turned towards the mages, giving them pointers while congratulating them.

He looked like a natural principal, that's for sure.

The spectators burst into a frenzy of chatter. I made out a conversation,

“Damn, that fight was amazing.”

“I know right? Didn’t it feel like everything was getting heavier halfway through it?”

The other student nodded, “Yeah, the weight of situation felt so real.”

I laughed a little, everyone looking at me. The students gawked and gasped. One of the students turned towards the other one,

“Ahh, that’s why it got heavier.”

We walked past the students, pacing into the arena. As we did, Torix turned towards us. He spread out his hands,

“Ahhh. It’s good to see you both. I see you brought company?”

I analyzed Torix. He was at level 5,000 as well now. Everyone was level capped. I pointed at Amara,

“This is Amara, the Lost One. She’s a sentient eldritch that saved my ass versus Yawm.”

Amara stayed sleeping, my gravity well suspending her. Torix nodded,

“She’s a heavy sleeper I presume.”

I shrugged, “Eh, she hacked into the world tree somehow. That’s probably why she’s tired.”

Torix walked up, his long robe giving him a noble bearing. He leaned towards Amara,

“She’s quite powerful. She’s the highest level eldritch I’ve ever see at level 5,000.”

I pointed at her, “That’s because she can hack into Schema’s system. She even gained experience from helping us kill Yawm apparently.”

Torix’s jaw dropped, “H-h-hacked Sc-c-hema?”

I grinned, “Eh, I told you she saved my ass.”

The crowd of onlookers crowded around us, looking at Ajax and Amara. Torix turned towards the students. Some of the onlookers wore power armor. Others covered up in simple jeans and t-shirt. Torix looked around at them. He raised a hand as if an idea popped into his head.

He pointed the raised hand towards a student in the back of the pack,

“Alexander, come here.”

An orange headed teenager walked up. He looked at me like I was Godzilla. Torix pointed at us both, “If you wouldn’t mind Daniel, could you duel Alexander for us?”

I looked at the poor, tiny guy sitting in front of me. He didn’t seem frightened, so that was a plus. I pointed at him,

“Uh, why?”

Torix pointed at those listening, “Because many of the students could use a demonstration of what a human can become.”

Whispers spread throughout the crowd.

“He’s human?”

“What? No way.”

“He’s about as human as Torix.”

I shook my head at Torix, “I don’t think they need a demonstration though. I think looking at me is enough.”

A few of the students nodded. Torix shook his head, “No, that simply will not do. A few of the students have been slacking off on some of the more uncomfortable training. Alexander happens to be one of those students.”

I looked down at him. I lunged onto one knee, still taller than him,

“This guy?”

Alexander looked up at me. He had defiant, blue eyes with orange hair. He wore a loose, black robe and was shorter than most of the other teens, making him minuscule. I frowned at him,

“Ah...ok.”

I stood up, walking over towards the arena. Alexander paced off towards the edge of the stage. I looked at Torix. I spread out my arms, waving my hands back and forth. Torix grinned at me, raising a finger,

“You’ll see,”

I rolled my eyes, looking over at Alexander on the other side of the arena. He pulled up his sleeves, revealing several tattoos on his forearms. He channeled mana, the runes glowing a violet color.

Torix grinned at me, “You both may begin.”

I stood there, waiting for Alexander to prepare himself. After a few more seconds, he lifted his hand. An arcane bolt of lightning appeared over his head. He chunked it towards me. I raised my hand, the flash landing against my palm.

With true damage in tow, it bore a six-inch hole into my forearm. In other words, it did nothing. My flesh reconstituted in seconds. I walked up, gripping my hand. A well of gravity lifted Alexander off the ground. He squirmed in the air as I pulled him towards me.

I made my hand out like I was about to flick him. Instead of making contact, I let the wind off my finger brush his forehead. He flopped backward, tumbling across the ground. He skinned his elbow, and he broke one of his fingers.

He howled out, so I rolled my eyes yet again and walked up. With a pinch of telekinesis, I snapped his finger in place. He grimaced as I lifted him up off the ground towards Torix. I turned towards the lich,

“Does he not even have pain tolerance unlocked?”

Torix shook his head, “An apt observation as usual. In fact, no. He doesn’t.”

I spread out my arms, “It would’ve been nice letting me know that beforehand.”

Torix turned towards the students, “But you see students, in an actual fight, a broken finger is the least of your worries.”

Alexander whimpered while floating in the air. Torix raised a hand, turning towards the students,

“Do you see the gap between these two?”

Torix pointed at Alexander, “Even the most gifted duelist among you all stood no chance. Can any of you describe why exactly?”

No one replied. Torix pressed his fingers into a single point,

“It is less the difference in power and more so the grit of their minds.”

Torix pointed at Alexander, “He is gifted with an affinity for arcane magic, and he refined his offensive prowess. At the same time, he never tempered his mind.”

Torix pinched his fingers together, “Even after having his hand blown off, Daniel didn’t even so much as flinch. After having a small finger broken, Alexander was brought to his knees.”

Torix walked up to Alexander. He waved a green light over the talented teen, healing his injuries. Torix continued,

“I use Alexander as an example since he is the only one among you that could even injure Daniel. He also refused to train his Pain Tolerance. Even if Daniel were one percent of his strength now, that crucial difference would be decisive in real combat. When you fight against eldritch, that will be your kind of combat.”

Torix looked around, getting as much eye contact as possible, “It’s the might of your spirit that makes you different from your peers. Remember that, and you will go far. Not just in class, but in life.”

Torix chuckled as he gestured to himself, “And in death.”

The class laughed, and Torix clapped his hand twice, “You are dismissed.”

The class buzzed with chatter, friends chatting away with each other. Some were amazed that I beat Alexander so easily. Others were amazed that Alexander even put up a fight at all. Two friends of Alexander walked up, to him, asking if he was alright. He replied in a high voice,

“He just grabbed me, and I was done...never felt anything like that before.”

I walked up to Torix, “I still don’t know if that was necessary.”

Torix waved me concern away, “Bah. I will leave the leading and fighting in your capable hands. You lead the teaching in mine.”

I shrugged, “Eh, alright.” I held up a hand, looking at Alexander,

“Give me a second.”

The poor student bit his lip, frustration etched all over his face. Being thrashed in front of a class and used as an example was probably humiliating. Taking away the sting, I walked up,

“You’re Alexander, right?”

He looked up at me, his expression shocked, “What? Oh, uh, yeah. That’s me.”

I offered a handshake, “It was a good fight.”

He reached up, grabbing my hand. He held two of my fingers, but he grinned up at me,

“Heh, I got destroyed. You really are the guild leader for a reason.”

I grinned, “Who knows. Maybe one day you could lead a guild too. Arcane magic is powerful. Don’t waste it.”

I turned away, waving at him, “Cya around.”

He gave me a salute, “Uh, yes sir!”

After an internal wince, I walked up to Torix. Sir made me feel old.

I pointed at Ajax and Amara who I kept floating the entire time,

“So any plans for these two?”

Torix rubbed his hands together,

“I may have a few.”

An evil grin grew on his face,

“If you’d enjoy hearing them, that is.”

Chapter 145: Let Loose

I shrugged, “Yeah, sure.”

Torix pointed upwards, “Let’s go up to the fourth floor then.”

I turned towards Althea, “How many floors are there?”

She raised a hand and counted on her fingers, “There’s five. They’re called the residential, tech, magic, logistics, and sky floors. They’re pretty self-explanatory honestly.”

Torix nodded, “The fourth floor’s name is where we’ll discuss plans and hold meetings. That’s where we’re headed next.”

I gestured forward, “Lead the way.”

We walked out of the dueling area and through the study. After reaching a series of elevators on the floor, Torix waved a hand at them,

“The first three floors are public access. The fourth and fifth floor require clearance.”

Two of the elevators carried runic inscriptions along their edging. Laminated with glass, the runes powered the lift. The inefficient etchings required quite a bit of mana. Torix walked up, placing a palm on the doorway,

“The mana requirements act as the preventative measure.”

The door slid open, and we all walked in. After elevating up, we walked out of the runic doorway. As we walked out, the lack of light stuck out. I turned around, glancing at the supporting pillar. All across it, a dozen plasma screens covered the column.

They streamed the view of many scouts. Most of them were out in nature. A few of the screens showed our agents visiting other towns. They acted as ambassadors for my guild, spreading the word about our stronghold. Considering we had weaponry and knowledge, the offer must be tempting.

Torix nodded at the structure, “This keeps us up to date on the comings and goings of scouts. It allows us to better organize them and create an up to date map of our surroundings.”

I frowned, “This seems like a bit too much surveillance.”

Torix shook his hand, “Do you see the dark screens?”

I nodded. About 30% of the screens were blank.

“Those screens indicate that a scout has shut down their video cameras. Most scouts opt into the recording process for safety reasons. It’s much easier to send pre-emptive help in real time, something which is otherwise impossible.”

“Oh...” I cupped my chin, “How are the other towns doing near us?”

Althea chimed, “I’ve seen a lot of it myself while flying around. Most towns are really well off. So far the average level is about 80 at this point. People have organized town governments and are even fighting for dungeons.”

She shook her head, “I couldn’t believe it at first, but...yeah, humans were killing each other.”

I shrugged, “Eh, if anything, it’s a good sign.”

Torix nodded, walking away, “I agree entirely. This means that humanity isn’t struggling against normal eldritch growth. Quite the opposite.”

As Torix walked out, I observed the rest of the room. Circular desks lined the middle pillar, much like the study below us. The difference was that almost everyone used an obelisk. Situated inside spheres of white, they operated within a digital medium.

Compared with the previous floor, this one oozed data, charts, and numbers. The last level oriented itself around experience, emotion, and magic. The granite floor and jet black walls emphasized this shift. It closed the room off as if the only way out was with a connection to outside.

Torix pointed at the various desks, “These members of the legion handle distribution of income, resources, and logistical difficulties. Having workers with independent thought helped more than I imagined it would in that regard.”

Torix flicked his hand in disgust, “No matter how long I attempted training my summons, such tasks were beyond them. These men and women took to the challenge with gusto by comparison.”

We walked past the series of desks. Rooms lined the wall like in the previous floor. These rooms had different purposes, however. Meeting rooms, personal offices, and summoning ritual rooms were placed here. Out of those three kinds of places, one didn’t fit.

I pointed at the conjuring room, “Uh, why are personal offices and monster summoning rooms right beside each other?”

Torix raised a hand, “Excellent question. What you see below is where the most magic takes place. Unlike most magic, however, summoning is more of a science. Instead of ‘feeling’ your way through the spells, you must act with precision.”

Torix spread out his hands, “That kind of procedural thinking aligns better with data sciences than actual magic. Most of the summoners under my tutelage agreed with me.”

Althea jumped up while spawning wings. She flapped them beside me, whispering in my ear, “Trust me. Torix is an expert at making magic boring.”

I snickered with Althea while Torix rolled his eyes,

“Laugh if you must. Summoning must be performed with great restraint. Otherwise, you may bring over something that is more than you can chew. Unlike you, the monster will have no qualms or worries with chewing you.”

I nodded, “That makes a lot of sense.”

Torix gestured at one of the offices, “Now that you’ve seen the floor, for the most part, let’s discuss our plans in the meeting room.”

We walked into the meeting room, the doors sliding on the ground as we opened them. As they closed, the air sucked into place. This made the space airtight and soundproof.

Around us, numerous blackboards lined the walls. A square desk sat in the middle of the place. At the center of the office, a three-dimensional projector was waiting to be used. In front of every seat around the table, a touchpad was present. Beneath that, a notebook was available with pens.

Torix sat at one of the chairs. Torix pointed at the other chairs, “Go on and make yourself comfortable.”

I walked over and sat down. Althea sat down beside me. Torix opened his status screen, sending a series of messages. Althea sighed, and I raised an eyebrow,

“What messages are you sending?”

Torix raised his wrinkly eyebrows, “Oh, that? It was a message to Hod’s caretaker. You see, Hod rarely if ever responds to my inquiries. I gave him a responsible assistant who will help get him here on time. I send her the messages rather than Hod for obvious reasons.”

I chuckled a bit before Torix raised a finger, “As much as I despise admitting it, Hod is a valuable asset in discussions. His perception is by far the highest among us. His intuition gives him answers to the most difficult questions.”

The meeting room door opened. A large, female Eltari tossed Hod into the room and slammed the door. Torix steepled his fingers, grinning with glee,

“Oh, how I do enjoy her way of handling things.”

Hod scrambled to his feet, “But Hod having fun with lady friends.”

He turned towards us, several kiss marks and scratches on his metal beak. I turned towards Althea,

“Are those...human lips?”

She grimaced, “By Schema...I think so.”

Torix narrowed his eyes, “I see your slaying of Yawm has assisted in your love life.”

Hod shook his head, “Hod already popular with ladies. Ladies attracted to strong, handsome, and smart male. Hod think ladies attention only natural.”

Torix’s blue fire eyes flared orange, “As natural as my disdain for you.”

Hod walked up, flopping into a seat, “Hod wonder what Dry Man favorite sandwich is?”

Torix’s eyes narrowed, “Why do you ask?”

Hod raised a finger, “Hod wonder why as well. Hod already know Dry Man’s favorite sandwich. Peanut butter and jealous flavor.”

Althea and I sat flabbergasted for a second. The joke was so dumb and so meandering that I didn’t get it at first. When we did, Althea and I bust out laughing.

Torix looked at us, “Oh hah hah. Very humorous.”

Hod nodded at him, “Hod agree.”

Torix pinched the bridge of his nose. He snapped his fingers, dimming the lights of the room. I turned towards him,

“Where’s Kessiah?”

Torix looked up at me, “Oh, her? She’s training soldiers here.”

I looked at Althea then back at Torix, “Why not include her in the discussion?”

Hod looked up, “Hod know why. Lady Friend #2 not want to meet Harbinger.”

I looked at them both, “What did I do?”

The room went silent. Torix sighed, “Hmmm...Well, Kessiah is as you know, a remnant. Korga Ryker was actually one of her childhood heroes. While you didn’t kill him per say, you didn’t save him either.”

I scoffed, “So it’s my fault that Yawm killed him? That seems kind of ridiculous.”

Althea put a hand on my shoulder, “I talked with her. She already knows it’s unfair. Kessiah’s just getting past it is all. Please, give her some time.”

I looked at Althea. I sighed, “Yeah, I get that.”

Althea hugged her arms around my waist, “Good.”

Torix leaned his elbows on the desk in front of him, “Now let’s begin our discussion.”

Torix gestured his hand outwards at everyone, “You all saw the quests granted to us, I presume?”

We all nodded.

“Excellent. I’ll write the tasks down for reference.”

Althea and I sat facing Torix while Hod sat on his own side of the table. Torix flicked his fingers, a piece of chalk writing on a blackboard. On the bottom of the table with no one sitting, Torix wrote out the quests gained from Yawm’s death.

They didn’t have the sentinel rights or Fringe Walker quest lines. Torix did have the unknown status and bounty quests though. They were the quests up for discussion.

Torix looked at everyone with his hands spread out,

“Of course we should finish these quests as a team. We can all agree on that?”

We agreed with curt nods.

Torix pointed at the quests, “I am of the opinion that we should handle our bounty questline first.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Why?”

Torix waved an arm at the entire room, “Our bounties put targets on our backs. This compounds itself with our unknown status. Lawful organizations, in particular, will aim to gain favor with Schema by eliminating us.”

He raised a single finger, “But if we attack an illegal organization first, then our endangerment doesn’t increase with our bounties. This makes attacking the criminal organization the least risky endeavor.”

That line of thinking fell right in with what Torix usually suggests. Torix valued safety above all us. Time or efficiency didn’t matter since he was effectively immortal.

Althea leaned against the table, “Why wouldn’t an unlawful organization want to get our bounties too?”

Torix leaned back into his chair, “They’ve already shown that they care little about Schema’s favor. Why would that factor change?”

Hod spread his wings, “Hod thinks criminals hard to find.”

I leaned forward in my chair, “Good point Hod. How are we supposed to find these criminal organizations without the help of locals?”

Torix waved off the concern, “I’ll gather intel and Althea will scout for us. I assure you, discovering their location will not be an issue in the slightest.”

I tapped the table. My finger echoed pit like someone dropped a fridge with each tap. I stopped, the sound distracting me.

Torix’s idea was safe, but it didn’t seem practical to me. I narrowed my eyes, deep in thought. For some reason, my mind wandered towards Yawm. Before we killed him, he didn’t just want to escape Earth. He wanted his followers back too.

I called his strategy ‘layering.’ You could also call it killing two birds with one stone. In his case, Yawm’s greed and arrogance ruined his plan. Learning from him was a good idea though.

I leaned onto my elbows and steeped my fingers. I tried negotiating like Yawm for a second,

“How about this instead. We make contact with some Giess, then we offer to take care of a criminal or organization as a gesture of good will?”

Torix’s eyes opened wide as I continued, “We can bridge the gap between our worlds, build our relations with them, and we can finish both quests-” I snapped my fingers,

“Just like that.”

Torix leaned back in his chair, “I quite like this scheme of yours.”

Althea raised an eyebrow at me, “Won’t it be crazy dangerous walking into some alien city with our bounties so high?”

I raised a finger, “Maybe, but I doubt it.”

I placed a palm on the touch screen in front of me. I looked at Torix,

“How do I use this thing? I think it’ll help me make my point.”

Torix sat up, tapping his console,

“Oh, the hologram projector. Ah yes, it works like your obelisk does. It integrates with your interface, allowing you to project your thoughts into reality. It takes a bit of finagling, but most get it within a few minutes.”

Torix flicked his fingers, dimming the lights. The projector opened, showing a galaxy using shades of blue. Tiny, microscopic lasers beamed up, building the image in real time. After making a few rocks and random foods, I developed back up the galaxy.

I pointed at a random location,

“See this. Let’s say this is Earth, right?”

We closed in on it. I moved one hand across the image. A blue wave passed over Earth, “Let’s say this is Schema’s, er, assimilation range.”

Torix raised an eyebrow, “What?”

I waved my hand back and forth, “Like, it’s a line showing where his influence is. He’s always expanding outwards right?”

Torix nodded. I continued, “So Earth is relatively new. Geiss is the nearest planet to us that has life.”

I pointed at where it might be, “Based on Schema’s rate of expansion, there’s no way that Geiss has been around for a long time under Schema’s system. That means we won’t be dealing with a bunch of level 12,000 Breakers.”

I leaned back against my chair, “At most, we’ll be contending with people at level 3,000 or so if I had to guess. Someone should fact check me there though.”

Torix waved a finger, “That’s quite correct. Geiss has been within Schema’s system for about twenty five years or so. The highest level sentient there is level 9,000, so it lacks Breakers, Fringe Walkers, etcetera. Of course there may be some ancient creatures there that surpass that barrier. We won’t likely run into them given our mission.”

Hod pointed at himself, “Hod kill Yawm. Yawm over level 14,000. Hod scare off fighters.”

Torix rolled his eyes, “We would all scare off anyone looking for a fight.”

Hod waved his hand at Torix, “Hod think Dry Man underestimate Hod. Hod intimidating.”

Hod raised his wings, flexing his arms. They were like toothpicks, thin and wiry. His derpy eyes and thin shoulders didn’t help either. Althea giggled at Hod, and I let out a smile,

“Make sure you intimidate them in your shade form. I feel like that would work better.”

Hod squinted his eyes at me, “Hod think that not necessary.” Hod struck a disco pose, “Hod sight to be seen after all.”

Torix laid his face into his hands. Althea snorted a little bit as she tried suppressing laughter. She looked away,

“He’s killing me. By Baldowah I love Hod.”

Torix lifted his head and exhaled, “Outside of that concentrated dose of idiocy, I agree with the points made.”

I clapped my hands, “Then that’s what we’ll be working with. Sound good?”

Torix nodded. Althea shrugged, “I guess it’s a good plan. We may need to flesh it out later though.”

I weighed my hands back and forth, “It’s a work in progress. I think of it like this is the skeleton of the plan.”

I pulled with a hand, making Ajax float towards the center of the room. The holographic projection dissipated, and the lights brightened. Althea pointed at Ajax, “So uh, what’s the plan with him?”

Torix frowned and interlocked his fingers, “Unfortunately, we’ve had numerous issues with Ajax.”

I shrugged, “I figured something was up. You didn’t free Ajax in the fight versus Yawm.”

Althea leaned against one of her hands, “Yeah. There’s a pretty good reason for all that.”

Torix nodded, “On numerous occasions, we found Ajax acting bizarre than dangerous. It began benign enough. A few legionnaires found Ajax torturing eldritch. After that, he broke down and attacked several of our mages.”

Torix weighed his hands back and forth, “He killed them, but I couldn’t reprimand him. Ajax’s abilities are...impressive to say the very least. Yawm kept him in check with extreme methods. Without any limiters on his behavior, however, I suspect Ajax will spiral further out of control.”

I looked at the porytian suspended in the green sphere, “Damn...What else did he do?”

Torix sighed, “He injured Kessiah and Hod at one point.”

Hod raised a wing at me, “Hod still believe Hod assaulted!”

Torix sat up in his chair, “For once, I agree with the bird. Ajax overreacted to one of Hod’s ‘hoddities.’. Kessiah still has the scar on her face.”

Torix tapped the table, “So several counts of murder, torture of animals, and numerous assaults. In my eyes, Ajax is obviously untrustworthy.”

I frowned at him, “Jesus. I thought he wasn’t so impulsive.”

Althea frowned, “Yeah, me too. You have to think about it though. He joined Yawm. He let Yawm experiment on him for more power. There’s no way he thought that through.”

Althea spread out her hands, “For real though, the way he joined us was the same way. He didn’t really help at all versus Yawm. He just jumped in on a whim. If you think about who and what Yawm is, Ajax’s plan wasn’t very foolproof.”

I leaned towards Ajax, “Yeah, not the sharpest tool in the shed I suppose. He’s even killed our own. What do you think is making him act like this?”

Torix swished a hand, “I hypothesize that the eldritch energy within him has corrupted his mind.” Torix leaned back into his chair, “Either that or he’s just a genuine psychopath.”

Torix pressed his chest, “That’s coming from me, mind you.”

I scratched my head, “Well shit. You know it’s bad when the lich is dishing out moral judgment. Why did he attack Kessiah exactly?”

Torix rolled his eyes, “She made a pass at him.”

I creased my eyebrows, “The fuck? Really?”

Althea squinted her eyes at Ajax, “I’m sure Ajax has plenty of morning wood to go around.”

I turned towards Althea, my jaw slack. She lifted herself up off the table, looking at everybody, “What? I’ve been reading human novels on my downtime. I can make jokes too.”

I scoffed, “Yeah, of course. The joke just surprised me is all.”

She pointed at Ajax, “The point is, he sliced half her face off for making a pass.”

I glared at Ajax, “Ok, so no one mentioned the severity of the wounds.”

Torix shrugged, “What does it matter? With healing magic, even a fatal wound—”

I snapped, “He used magic on her. Dimensional slicing magic. If he’s just throwing that shit around, then he’s dangerous as hell. Period.”

I shook my head, “You guys are out of touch with this kind of thing. To me, that’s way over the line.”

Torix tilted his head, “Are we? Hmmm, I suppose we could very well be. After seeing you be torn apart for sparring, our sense of danger may be blunted.”

I pointed at Ajax, “Then we kill him?”

Althea shrugged, “Yeah, I’d say so, but how? Ajax can teleport and phase through dimensions.” She waved her hands around, “He just blips in and out.”

I grimaced, “Oh yeah. That’s tough to beat.”

Torix leaned toward me, “What about the technique you used to crack open the sphere holding you? Perhaps that may work.”

I pushed myself up, “That’s a good idea. I gotta try and make it happen again though. It’s going to take a second.”

Torix stood up with me, “Let’s go and try this within the fifth floor. It better suits our purposes.”

We walked out of the room. After reaching the final elevator, we reached the last floor. The doors of the lift opened, revealing beams of sunshine. The entire level was a garden, a glass roof letting in light. Inside it, fruit trees, crops, and all kinds of blooms grew.

Torix spruced the greenhouse up with all kinds of exotic plants. Flaming flowers, burning buds, and reflective leaves, every type of plant grew here. Handlers of the crops walked around, tending to them. Some of them wore mages robes. Others wore power armor.

Torix waved his hand at all of them, “Here we grow the food and alchemical ingredients for the refuge. As you may have noticed, both mages and technicians benefit from the resources.”

I took a deep breath, the air sweet,

“Yeah, it’s pretty damn nice.”

We walked forward, towards the most open area inside the hollow mountain. Using a portion of the open air here, we stood near the center of the expanse. With soft earth beneath our feet, Torix pointed up,

“Here’s a large, open area for you to illustrate your technique.” He turned towards everyone else, “If anyone would like to see this event, do shield yourself. You’ve been warned.”

I charged my mana. The energy built into my blood and veins. I struggled to keep it in, sparks of the energy firing outward. I gritted my teeth and clasped my hands into fists. I shook, and after a minute, I hummed with turbulence.

Torix raised an eyebrow at me, “What is your mana generation now?”

I grumbled, “Nine million a minute.”

Torix took a step back, gasping in open shock,

“That’s...that’s over a hundred times my own.”

I grinned, “Specialization is king.”

I kept focused, blocking out his voice after that. Maintaining mana of this magnitude required intense concentration. After five full minutes, I resonated with my own energy. It dealt damage to me, so I raised a hand at the ceiling. With absolute fixation, I compressed a gravity well.

With all the mana discharging, a dense well of gravity formed. Air from all around the room sucked inside like I tore open a hole in a space shuttle. Loose leaves, bits of dirt, and mulch funneled into the single point. A moment later, the gravity well collapsed.

A shockwave ebbed outwards, shattering all the glass above the room. The metal supporting the glass bent outwards. Dust and rock ricocheted like shrapnel, sinking inches into stone. Trees uprooted. The spell left a crater underneath the attack.

We all gasped at the sheer might of the implosion. A notification appeared in the corner of my vision.

Unknown skill unlocked! Gravitational Singularity(lvl 1) unlocked! 500 tree points rewarded for unlocking hidden skillset.

Gravitational Singularity(lvl 1) – You wield the laws of nature, akin to a god. Allows the user to create singularities.

From behind us, Amara roused up from her comatose. She pulled a rock out of her arm and gasped,

“Is this how you choose to wake me?”

She looked around at the destruction,

“Did Yawm do this? Were you all that idiotic to let him live?”

She looked up at us, and we turned towards her. The others shook their heads, pointing at me. I scratched the back of my head,

“Whoops.”

Chapter 146: Aligning Time

Amara lifted her palms towards me, her eyes narrowed, “You imbecile... You let him live?”

I shook my head, “Oh, hell no. We got him. I meant whoops at the explosion.”

She looked around at the destruction, “You did all this?”

I shrugged, “Yawm gave experience. What else can I say.”

Amara stood up, looking at my friends. I gestured a hand at Althea, “This is my girlfriend, Althea. The birdman is Hod. He means well I guess. The lich is Torix. He’s a scholar who enjoys teaching. You mentioned making a center of learning for eldritch right? He could help.”

Torix gave Amara a short bow, “I’m at your service.”

She took a step back, “Then where is this?”

Hod raised a hand, “Base of Harbinger.”

Amara kept one eye on me, but she moved her other hand across the others. She frowned,

“You’ve created so much...It seems unfitting for one like you.”

Althea’s expression turned sharp, “And why would you say that?”

Amara turned an eye towards Althea, “He is a destroyer, not a builder.”

Althea crossed her arms, but she stayed quiet. I put a hand on Althea’s shoulder,

“You gotta think about what she’s seen from me. Amara knows I killed Yawm and the followers. She really doesn’t know much else.”

I turned a palm towards Amara, “If anything, she’s probably suspicious as hell of us.” I looked at Amara, “But let me know if I’m wrong. I don’t mean to speak for you there.”

Amara sniffed, her slitted nostrils opening wide. She licked the air,

“It tastes...delicious.”

Althea griped, “Yeah, ok...She’s still a bit too eldritch-ey.”

Amara glanced at Althea, and the eldritch tilted her head, “You are as eldritch as I. So is the bird. Despite appearances, the walking corpse is the least eldritch of all of you.”

The sound of Althea’s teeth biting down on her tongue. I put my other hand on her shoulder, “Hey, you hungry?”

I looked at Amara. Her raven hair lifted up, feeling the air around her. She drooled, “What may I eat here?”

Torix clapped his hands, “Most members of this party must be starving. How about you all eat something that isn’t rations?”

I nodded, “That sounds good. Let’s do that.”

Torix opened his status, sending several messages. He grinned at all of us,

“A cleaning crew will come up to fix this level soon. We’ll be dining at Dark Coffee, a local cafe in the residential area.”

We moved down three floors into the residential area. We sat at the local cafe, rustic decorations everywhere. While not the most sizable establishment, the cozy, comfortable atmosphere was pleasant. We got our fair share of stares too.

Everyone gawked at our group. They whispered about each of us, a growing legend forming about us. I didn’t pay much attention to it as we all faced one another on a black, circular table. After ordering some food, Amara kept drooling as she spoke,

“I have many questions.”

I raised a hand, “Let me state a few facts before you start: 1st, we killed Yawm. 2nd, we’re planning on killing Ajax. 3rd, we’re going to leave to another planet to get rid of our unknown status and bounties.”

Amara glanced with her palms, “Then here is safe?”

Hod nodded, “Hod safest person to be around. Hod protect lady friend #3.”

Amara ignored Hod utterly. She sniffed the air. She looked at Torix, “I smell other eldritch here.”

Torix raised his palms to her, “Ah yes, the other eldritch here. You see, your kind is ordinarily unagreeable in the extreme. In order to protect us, I’ve developed techniques for restraining them.”

Amara snickered, her laugh like a hiss,

“Don’t worry about my feelings, lich. I am not unaware of the danger my kind presents. We’re not welcome here as we are. Our acceptance relies on us changing. As we have always done, we will adapt.”

Amara looked around the table, “Are there intelligent eldritch under this keep?”

Torix nodded, “There are a few, I suppose. I rarely let the bright eldritch live as their insidious nature is difficult to contain.”

She turned towards me, “I want an area of my own to teach them.”

I crossed my arms, “Are you ok with some surveillance?”

She narrowed her eyes, “As much as you need for your comfort. I require freedom in my teaching methods, however.”

I pointed at her, “No killing or eating people. Animals are game as long as you don’t eat too many.” I looked at Torix, “Are you ok with observing her?”

He nodded, “But of course.”

Several waiters walked up with a trolley as I clapped my hands together,

“Then we should be good, right?”

Amara nodded. I turned towards our food, “God I haven’t had something sweet in literal years.”

They handed us pastries and a few kinds of jerky and greens. I lifted the warm, fluffy bread and chomped into it. I relished the texture and flavor. It was all soft, but varying kinds of soft. Imagine textures between water and pudding. That’s what the food was like.

Even then, it was a tremendous increase in the diversity of texture that I was used too. Compared with liquid rations that I splashed on my face, there wasn’t much food that was worse. All this food was the best thing I’d had since I could remember eating something decent.

After we finished our meal, Amara kept ogling everything around her. I frowned at her, “Are you still hungry?”

She sighed, “We are always hungry. I will suppress it. I will survive on this much food.”

Several minutes later, and her drooling ceased. As we stood up, I pointed at Hod, “Hey, can you and your, er, assistant help Amara find a place to teach in? I think the third floor with the other students would be best.”

Hod gave a short salute, “Hod help the beautiful lady.”

Amara stared at him in disgust. Why Hod thought she was gorgeous, I’ll never know. After they left, I turned towards Torix, “How are the troops?”

He tapped his chin with a loose fist, “They’re in high spirits. We did just destroy our greatest enemy. Now we can focus on rebuilding.”

I waved my hand,

“I don’t think that’s enough. Let’s upgrade the legion’s gear. I can spend a few weeks making enchanted gear for everyone who was a part of the climactic battle. We’ll make it a medal since they risked their lives.”

Torix opened his status, writing down notes, “Anything else we might need to do?”

I brainstormed for a second, and an idea popped into my head, “We should commemorate the day of the battle. After a funeral service, how about we make it a holiday or something like that?”

Althea pursed her lips, “Why would we do that?”

I raised an eyebrow at her, “To honor the dead and make it clear that these people were part of history.”

Torix leaned back, placing a hand on my shoulder, “That’s an idea requiring some finesse. When did you think of it?”

I frowned, “You said we lost several hundred soldiers. That’s a large chunk of our population. Even if we got our job done, it doesn’t mean we don’t have any wounds. This is a good way of recognizing that and trying to move on. You know, make their deaths mean something.”

Torix jotted down some more notes with his status, “You sound like a patriot.”

I shrugged, “It just seems like the right thing to do.”

Torix pointed at me, “So you’ll be practicing that explosion technique in the meantime while I organize the upgrade system?”

I wrapped my arm around Althea’s waist,

“Yeah, sure.”

Torix turned around, “Then it’s a plan. I’ll make sure that Hod isn’t letting Amara eat my students.”

“Hey, Torix.”

He turned towards my voice, “Hmmm?”

I gestured to everything around me, “You did an incredible job on the base while I was with Yawm. I can’t describe to you how good it feels to come home to a place like this.”

Torix grinned with a bright smile, “But of course. Ah yes, Althea will show you your living quarters.” He let out a chuckle as he walked off, “Ah, to be young and fully living.”

I turned towards Althea, and she smiled at me,

“So, you wanna check out your room?”

I grinned right back, “Of course.”

We walked into the elevator and back up to the third floor. Althea told Torix to build my room on the top level since she thought it would be my favorite floor.

She was right. I loved trees for some reason.

After pacing through the abundant greenery, we reached a spiral staircase. Althea talked as we walked up,

“So I took a bit of time making these rooms myself. I wanted them to be perfect since they’d be yours.”

Althea’s candidness caught me off guard. I looked away and blushed, “Uh, thank you.”

She giggled, “Did you just lighten...wait, are you actually blushing?”

I rolled my eyes, “I can be surprised too. If anything, I’m amazed you guys made all this.”

She looked at the polished steps,

“Torix explained it like this. We don’t have to struggle with food or machinery. Schema’s enhanced attributes pretty much eliminate the need for shelter or the struggle for food. When that’s the case, you got to spend your time on something. Why not building stuff?”

I looked around, noticing the temperature,

“I never thought about it, but you’re right. For one, the ground isn’t even uncomfortable with any constitution. With a little endurance, you can sleep through even the coldest nights. A lot of the reason for building a house is pointless at that point.”

She nodded, “So people just kind of focus on making their house look good. If they can of course. Either that or handling the eldritch.”

We reached a set of oak doors, polished a dark brown. On them, pages worth of runes littered on their surface. I read them. They locked the door unless you offered a mixed mana type. In my case, I used ascendant mana, a mix of augments and dominion manas.

It was perfect for me.

I shoved a spike of mana into the door. A red glow traced through the lines of the wood. I pressed the doorway, opening them. I walked into the room. A wall of glass exposed a majestic view. Being high up on the mountaintop, we had a near perfect view of the spectacle.

Sandwiched between two hills, the sun dipped halfway down them. Oranges, yellows, and purples hues the horizon. It was like an apartment out of Manhattan, luxury incarnate. The modern, sleek design of the room was out of place with the rest of the mountain’s logical layout.

Althea opened her arms, “Tadah! I spent some time looking at some old architecture magazines some legionaries brought. I also had a few people help with the design and making the furniture.”

I gasped at the quality, running my fingertips across the sleek stone tabletops. Althea walked around the room, showing me an island beside an up to date kitchen,

“I got you a bunch of cooking supplies since you liked cooking so much. I figured it was something we can do together.”

She walked over towards a left corner of the room. Two posters hung on the wall, one of Mike Tyson and the other of Ali. I walked up to them, running my hand down them. To my surprise, they were real, though a bit worn down.

Althea locked her hands behind her, looking up at me, “I remember hearing you talk about, uh, what was it...boxing, that’s it. I heard you talk about it with Torix. I asked

Diesel if he knew any boxers. He mentioned these guys. I found posters of them in some abandoned houses. Do you like them?"

An intense wave of nostalgia whipped through me. I closed my eyes, remembering the smell of sweat and leather. I relived the hours listening to jump rope tap against concrete. I recalled the pop and crack of a fist hammering against a heavy bag.

I turned towards Althea, touched by the gesture. She stared at me, grinning from ear to ear, "Hah, I knew you'd like it."

I shook my head, "Like it? Hell no. I love it."

I hugged her against me, holding her tight. Well, relatively tight. I didn't want to squash her after all. She hugged me back, my armor creaking under her unreal strength. With a bit of emotion in my voice, I whispered,

"Thank you."

We looked at each other, pressing our bodies together. Althea placed a fingertip against my lips, "You wanna repay me? I have one way you could start."

She stared at me. I leaned over, pressing my lips against hers. She wrapped her arms around my neck, pulling me close. My armor bent away from me, letting her body push against me. It was like taking my shoes off after a long day.

With enhanced senses, I relished the silky texture of her soft lips. I grabbed her, our breath hastening. Our heart rates rose, and Althea shivered at my touch. She gasped when I caressed her. I lifted her up, tossing her onto the bed.

With tousled hair, she narrowed her eyes at me. She bit her lip as I laid on top of her. Starting with her shoulders, I guided my hands down her thin waist. As I reached her shapely hips, she shuddered again. She grabbed her jumpsuit and unbuckled four notches around her belt.

She jerked it, throwing it across the room. She pulled her shirt off, exposing her bare chest. They bounced, jiggling for a moment. I brushed my hands against them, and she trembled. She let out a moan. I continued as she pressed herself against me.

We whispered to one another. I told Althea how much I missed her body. Althea told me how much she missed my voice. We loved each other, admiring each other. After spending hours on the bed, Althea fell asleep in my arms. I watched her sleep for a few minutes, soaking the moment in.

I never thought I'd get this far. I never imagined I'd have a life like this. After all the fighting, I arrived somewhere I could relax at.

I found a home.

I held onto Althea until she was buried in sleep. I picked myself up, my armor remolding onto my skin. Spikes from the armor pierced my skin, connecting on my bones from between muscles. This reinforced my bones, like giving it another layer of supporting structure.

I walked over towards the bathroom of my personal room. After closing the door, I cut on the light. I found a mirror, showing myself. I was massive. My armor didn't have as many spikes as I remembered. It appeared more organic.

I pulled my helmet off my face, the armor molding like liquid. It made no sound anymore, the smooth transition too well practiced. I looked at my face. Gray skin, flat scars, and gray pupils, I looked alien. I wasn't ugly per say, just rugged. Personally, I liked the look. It suited me.

I pulled my armor back onto my face, looking at the helmet. Crimson light leaked out from the eyeholes still. I smiled, my armor following with a jagged grin of its own. I bit forward, my armor snapping shut like a guillotine.

Honestly, I was unnerved, to say the least. The children had every right to fear me. I pulled the armor back, my hair tousled. I grinned, my teeth white. I looked around the bathroom, finding actual soap and shampoo. My metal skin stayed on me when I stepped in the shower. It seemed like the living metal only left my normal skin when having sex. Great.

I washed my hair, brushed my teeth, and handled basic hygiene. I sighed with relief, finding comfort in old habits. After leaving the bathroom, I walked out of my room and closed the doors. I sent Althea a message, letting her know where I was going.

While walking, I opened my status. After gaining the unknown skill Gravitational Singularity, I obtained 500 skill points. I invested the massive boon into my current skill tree, Immense.

You leverage mass for might. You abuse size for strength. You wield this stature as a tool of devastation. You usher forth annihilation with the swing of your fist. As your heels shake the planet beneath you, the enemy sees you on the horizon. They tremble.

Immense(Tier 4) unlocked! 20% of your total mass is added to your physical bonus damage. Unlocks the unique skill, Goliath's Fall.

Unique skill unlocked, Goliath's Fall!

Goliath's Fall(lvl 1) – You've seen the mighty crumble under the might of stone. You learned the lesson of those that have fallen before you. Grants enhanced stability and better footing on soft surfaces. Effect increases with level.

I selected finalize again. A surging pulse of strength flowed through me. It paled in comparison with the boost after killing Yawm. I still grinned and stepped with excitement. Goliath's fall made the ground seem less like putty and more like sand. Not perfect, but it was better.

The immense tree was near completion too, with 2,325 out of 2,500 points left. Finishing it might give me something incredible, like another mythical skill.

Burning with that fervor, I walked through the camp. The ever present stares followed me as I went. After reaching outside the base, I called Torix with my obelisk. He answered, a screen appearing with soldiers in the background.

"Hello, disciple. What is it?"

I opened a projection of the base, pointing at it, "Where would you guys like to farm here? I'm about to train that new skill. If I can clear out some fields at the same time, that would be great."

Skill unlocked, Efficiency(lvl 1)!

Efficiency(lvl 1) – You work smarter, not harder. Increases the ratio of time and effort to output in tasks.

Torix grinned at me, “An excellent method of partitioning out your time. I’ve noticed you seem sharper in wit as of late. Are you investing in intelligence?”

I shook my head, “Nope. I do have a bit of intelligence because of all my endurance though.”

Torix shook his head, highlighting four areas on the map, “I suppose with that absurd strategy of yours, none of your stats are lacking.”

I frowned, “Eh, Charisma could use some work.”

Torix shrugged, “Perhaps you could try intimidation rather than persuasion? I find that fear works in the short term rather nicely.” Torix turned and looked at the soldiers,

“Once you’ve struck fear into their hearts, you can show kindness. It motivates them from both sides I’ve found.”

Torix turned back towards the soldiers behind him,

“That call just saved each of you several hours of labor.”

As the soldiers let out a roar of approval, Torix gave me a curt nod,

“Goodbye and good luck.”

I said the same, and we closed our calls. I walked towards the areas, and I charged my mana. It reminded me of overcharging my runes, but the stress applied to my health instead of the runes.

The technique wouldn't be beneficial if my mana regen were lower. I would disintegrate myself before I could get a large pool of mana brewing. My regeneration allowed me to regenerate faster than I could be destroyed.

As I readied my first strike of the skill, I let out a strained laugh. This was something Yawm could do. It was beyond what Schema's system customarily allowed. Mastering Gravitational Singularity was new territory. If I kept at it, maybe I wouldn't be at the mercy of Overseers, Schema, or even the Old Ones.

Maybe they'd be at the mercy of me.

Chapter 147: Disillusion

No point in getting ahead of myself though. Same as always, I charged the mana. After a few minutes, I looked at my status,

New skill learned! Mana saturation(lvl 1) unlocked!

Mana Saturation(lvl 1) – With your own flesh and blood as a cage, you extend your mana pool beyond its ordinary means. Increases charging speed and efficiency with level, and also reduces health cost while saturated.

After obtaining the skill, the intense discomfort from charging lessened. I raised a hand, aiming at a cluster of trees. I let the mana go, a singularity forming. It pulled in a few trees before detonating. It pulled inward for far less time than the previous singularity in the fourth floor.

After creating several more explosions, I learned a few tricks. For starters, the gravity wells needed to pull in matter before they exploded. The denser the objects absorbed, the faster the gravity well blew. Whatever fell in fueled the explosion, sending out the shockwave.

No matter what fell in, they left nothing behind.

It was a culling kind of spell. When I used it, this strange pulling sensation passed through me. Along with it, a snap of coldness. Right after the detonation, a flash of heat washed over me. I stared at my status during these moments and discovered the cause.

The cold originated from the tiny, minuscule black hole sucking in heat. After that, it dispersed in a wave of radiation. That created the warmth. Hawking's radiation at work I guess. I honestly didn't know exactly how it worked.

After hours of messing around with the black holes, I got a few level ups in the skill. Compared with most abilities, I gained levels in the talent at a snail's pace. In my eyes, that was fair. Considering what a ridiculous ability it was, I didn't complain.

By the time I finished two of the four farms, I had ended the day's session. There wasn't a real reason to grind like my life depended on it. With that in mind, I headed back up to my room.

I found Althea still sleeping on her side. I walked by her, giving her a morning kiss. She woke up, grinning at me. We enjoyed a simple breakfast together. I used the kitchen at my place, making an omelet and a leafy green salad. I stay away from spinach since it tastes like dirt.

At this point, I didn't need it to be like Popeye either.

After the eggs and a few leafy greens, I went downstairs. I spoke with Torix. In the third floor, Torix sat within an empty classroom. He stared at his status screen,

"It's good to see you, Daniel. What may I help you with?"

I grabbed one of my hands like I was pulling off a ring, "I have to upgrade the gear. I was hoping to get an idea of what to give the troops."

Torix closed his status, turning in his seat, "Well then, I'd recommend something that would enhance their growth. Perhaps something that will give them an extra burst of strength in times of need?"

I tapped my chin with a hand, "Well, how about I create a mana crystal for them and a...hmmm...maybe a medallion that enhances intelligence and perception?"

Torix nodded, "Those stats seem perfect. How would you go about creating mana crystals? They normally need to be harvested from worlds that are dense in mana."

I shrugged, “I remember seeing some people charge mana into gemstones in BloodHollow. Couldn’t I do the same here?”

Torix nodded, “There is a cluster of raw amethyst in the mountain that you could use for it. I’ll have someone send the jewels to you.”

I pointed at Torix, “I’ll be in the research area on the second floor. Cya professor.”

Torix waved goodbye, still staring at his status. I paced down onto the second floor. Welding torches sent out sparks that arced in the air. I walked towards the back of the tinkering area, walking past the caged eldritch.

Amara spoke to the monsters inside the glass zoo.

She tried convincing the monsters something. As I imagined, they didn’t respond to her. I passed by Diesel, his eyes intent on a new design for Althea. He worked on the framework for a prototype. I waved at him,

“Still working on that new design?”

Diesel looked towards me, raising an eyebrow. After seeing me, he waved back, “Ah, you know how it is. These things take time. What are you in here for?”

I kept walking until I reached my own bench, “A reward for those that took part in the battle against Yawm. It’s going to take a while.”

Diesel wiped imaginary sweat from his forehead, “It makes me sweat just thinking about it. Good luck.”

I laughed a bit, “You too man.”

I settled in, cleaning off a few wood shavings from my desk. With the gears of my mind turning, I opened my dimensional storage. I pulled out my grimoire, flipping it to a blank page. I outlined a few runes and set to work.

Like with any runes, I began with getting an understanding of what I wanted to carve first. Unlike endurance, intelligence required finesse in its application. To manage that, I dwelled on what intellect was.

I decided smarts came down to dozens of factors. I boiled it down to the most important one – the ability to do. Some people thought of intellect as latent potential. It was this imaginary line deciding how far you could go in a subject. I didn't like that definition.

Did the ability to work hard and stay motivated not fall under intelligence? Hell, finding meaning in something and staying focused was one of the smartest things a person could do. In my opinion, of course.

With that goal in mind, I etched out some inscriptions. After about two hours of carving, I finished a compelling series of runes. I drilled them into my grimoire. After a few refinements, I was ready to mass produce.

With my armor, I molded outwards. I created plates shaped like hexagons. I built one over a few seconds before snapping it off. Within an hour, I piled a massive heap of them beside my table. I set out onto work, grinding off the jagged edges of the medallion's snapped side.

After two more hours, I completed two hundred of the medallions. I dispersed mana into my grimoire. The letters glowed a bright crimson. I set the runic inscription onto a hexagon, the letters forming on its surface. The procedure took about ten seconds apiece.

After thirty minutes, I completed my first batch. I pushed through another bunch of two hundred before the amethysts arrived. A group of five vanguards carried several amethyst geodes. They walked beside me, unstrapped the geodes, and left after a salute.

I thanked them as they did. With my fingers, I snapped off cubic pieces of the jewels. They snapped like breaking off chunks of crystal candy. Creating a pile of them, I separated the pieces of amethyst into large and small portions. I figured the families or friends of our fallen soldiers deserved the large ones.

I charged energy into the amethysts. As I did, the purple crystals turned brighter and into magenta. They glowed at their center, the light fading towards the outside. The shine depended on the amount of mana stored.

They varied. Some gems held two hundred thousand mana. Some held six hundred thousand apiece. They each took a couple seconds to charge. While a hassle, it wasn't too overbearing.

After finishing the pile, I carved them with a piece of sharpened armor. The black metal's hardness far exceeded the amethyst. That let me zip through the process. I sliced indentations into the metal. I then took an amethyst, implanting it into each medallion.

I bent straps of the metal, pinning the gems in place. With the runes and mana finished, the item was complete.

Hand of the Harbinger(lvl req: 400) – This medallion was created as a reward for those that fought against Yawm. It strengthens the user's mind and offers protection in times of need.

Bonuses: Willpower +50 | Intelligence +50 | Luck +25 | Charisma +25

Ability: The Harbinger's Shield – If some kind of damage would kill the user, this medallion floods the user with the vitality of Dimension-C138. This heals the user and fills them with great vigor, sending them into a berserker mode.

I glanced at the emblem, proud of my work. It seemed pretty solid. I finished several dozen more before heading back upstairs. I could push through the process over a few weeks. Once more, there wasn't much need to. I planned on injecting variety into my day, preventing anything from becoming a chore.

With that intention, I spent the rest of my afternoon with Althea. We read together and enjoyed each other's company after dinner. This routine repeated for at least two months. Finishing the medallions took time. Training my singularity skill took time too, reaching the mid 70's in level.

I didn't know much about unknown skills either. Did they have a cap? Where they linear or exponential in growth? Did it get harder to upgrade at a higher level? I had no way of knowing. Neither did Schema's internet.

Anything I discovered came in rumor form like legendary skills. Few people shared their skills unless you paid the price for them. For a mythical ability, the amount was exorbitant and the sources shady. Any posts or videos about legendary skills were from salesman types.

They were more a conman than a fighter.

I didn't let that stop me though. The months flew by, habit taking over. By the time I finished the medals and handed them out, Torix already organized our trip to Giess. He used the same rune setup from before. He tried earlier, but Schema's quarantine ruined his magic. Without a quarantine in place, we could leave whenever.

We just needed a few final details before leaving. We weren't worried about missing leadership either. The soldier's moral was overwhelming. No one expected the handcrafted medallions. They didn't expect the trinkets to be useful either. They were both and more.

The badges offered a second life to most. That kind of benefit suited what we asked of the soldiers. They risked everything against Yawm. They deserved a meaningful reward. It would be a memento, something that gives proof when they tell stories to their children.

While handing the rewards out, I enjoyed my celebrity status. So many thank yous, fans, and bright smiles astonished me. It made the impact of my actions real in a way. After that though, I kept to myself for the most part. I didn't want to make a scene wherever I went.

Like that the days flew by. It was the day before we finalized the details on leaving Earth. Althea and I scheduled a dinner date. Inside our cozy room, we hand-cooked some flank steak and a Mediterranean salad. Althea still struggled a bit with balancing the ingredients.

It was a work in progress.

After finishing the meal, the two of us fell asleep. I held Althea in my arms, my armor surrounding us both. It always did when I laid down with her. I relaxed with my eyes closed, thinking about the last few years. It had been hard, and everything changed. It was an adventure though, and I came out stronger for it.

After three hours of letting my mind wander, I snapped open my eyes. I lifted myself up. I looked around, nothing visible. An itch crawled up my spine, an ominous chill radiating.

There was no need for it. A pitch black enveloped us both, muting all but the sound of our breathing. I questioned my own physical response. For no reason, my heart pounded in my chest like a thudding hammer. My senses fired away like a fire alarm. It baffled me.

A second later, a click muffled out from beneath the bed. Gears spun into place. Chemicals reacted. A kinetic wave smothered the inside of my armor shell, engulfing us in a freezing fire. Just like the sound, everything clicked into place in my head. It was a bomb.

And my armor locked us inside.

Chapter 148: A Calm Killing

A sapphire flame suffused the metal dome. My vision dimmed. My armor cracked, the shell surrounding us holding in the explosion. Fragments of my armor fell down. Sensing damage, the metal shell around me rushed back onto my charred skin.

Charred might be the wrong word. The flames left a deep cooling sensation after the initial, brilliant flash of heat. It was like someone injected liquid nitrogen into my blood. The bits of Althea froze in burning piles around me.

I checked out my health, 1/5th of it gone. I looked around, seeing the ashen bed. I stretched my awareness, looking for other bombs. I found two other spheres embedded in the wall. Their consistency matched the concrete, blending them in. Now that I looked closer, they appeared like a vague outline.

I reached out a hand, charging my mana. With a swift jerk, I plucked two chunks of concrete from the wall. The bombs clicked, but I kicked my foot on a telekinetic pad.

The telekinetic pulse punted the two chunks of concrete out of the window. After crashing out of the glass, I bent down and molded my armor. I created a cape of moving metal around Althea's bits and pieces.

Outside the room, the two blue fire bombs detonated. A chain reaction began, two more bombs exploding outside. Someone assumed we would try and leave the room and pinned us in from both sides.

Thank god I'm not one for running away. I looked around, the explosion leaving our room trashed. It was odd. Most of the room charred from the blast. The fire now froze what remained of it. Before it did more damage, I spread my arms and clapped them together.

A shockwave ushered out a wave of wind. The flames blew out, an echo radiating through the mountainside. After a few more seconds, Althea materialized from the bits of cold mush. I bent towards her as she shivered. Her eyes darted around, grasping for information. I grabbed her hand, "Are you ok?"

She nodded her head.

She looked around, her eyes wide with terror,

"What in the hell just happened?"

I frowned, "Someone just tried to assassinate us." My wounds regenerated already. "They didn't do such a good job, but it was a pretty good shot."

She glanced around at the room, "Why isn't everything destroyed?"

I tapped my armor, "My armor kept the first explosion contained. That's why it did so much damage in the first place." I walked over towards a dresser,

"It seems like someone knew the armor enclosed around us while we slept. That's why the bomb was there. They must have snuck into our room while we weren't here if I had to guess."

Althea shook as I threw her a jumpsuit. It reminded me of a surfer's outfit. She slipped it on,

"For a bomb, it sure feels cold."

I nodded, "Yeah. It feels like a cryo grenade or something weird like that. I don't really know."

I opened my status screen, "What I do know is we need to talk this out."

I sent Torix, Hod's assistant Isa, Amara, and Kessiah a message to meet up. Althea looked down. She sighed and rolled her eyes, "Here I thought we were finally done with people trying to kill us. At least for a little bit."

I shrugged, "This is why we're going to Giess after all."

We turned and ran out of the room. We sent messages to Torix and the others for a midnight meeting. Torix was already there by the time Althea, and I arrived. Hod's assistant, Isa, threw the birdman into the room. He groveled on the ground, half asleep,

"Hod not ready for sun yet." He raised his wings, "Sun go away."

Torix crossed his fingers, his eyebrows creased and his flaming eyes purple, "Cease your mindless chatter. We've important matters to discuss."

He turned towards me, interlocking his fingers, "I assume you called because of the explosion?"

I frowned, "Yeah, someone just tried to kill us."

Torix sighed, "A few of my undead sentries sent telepathic messages to me. Damage done to the base is rather...extreme. I'm left wondering why didn't they try to kill all of us and only you two?"

Hod pulled himself onto a chair. He pointed at me, “Hod believe it because bomber not like Daniel.”

Kessiah walked into the room, the doors opening. We all stared at her, the white hair on her head ruffled. She sat down on Hod’s side of the table. She looked around,

“What? Are you all that surprised I showed up?”

Torix shook his head, “Not necessarily. I’m amazed everyone came so swiftly in all honesty. I don’t sleep, and neither does Daniel. Having the rest of you rush here is an excellent sign of alertness.”

Kessiah turned towards me, “What’s the hassle this time?”

I shrugged, “Someone blew up Althea and my room with some ice bombs.”

Kessiah sneered, “Well when you do great things, you’re bound to make enemies I guess.”

Althea raised an eyebrow, “What do you mean?”

Kessiah looked between all of us, “Are you serious? None of you know?”

Our confused expressions answered her question. She tapped the touchpad, opening the holographic projector. A second later, a white block appeared.

A video arose onto both sides. On it, the battle between Yawm and the Breakers played out. The brutality of Yawm’s last moments was laid bare for all to see. A quick edit and I popped up on the screen. It showed my battle against Frode and Brim.

Minutes later, and the battle was over. From a different angle, the camera viewed us over Yawm. It showed him trapping us, my launch into his attack, and the bloody aftermath that ensued. In excruciating, high resolution, someone created a viral video of the fight.

An odd sensation traveled through me at the sight of it. I didn't know if I should feel proud or insulted. On the one hand, evidence existed that we killed Yawm outside of our titles. On the other hand, our life and death struggle devolved into entertainment on the web.

Kessiah scrolled down showing comments about the battle. A few armchair quarterbacks debated how we should have fought. Even more people marveled at the insanity of Yawm's powers. A small but vocal crowd also called Yawm an idiot for how he used his abilities.

Fierce troll fests cropped up even. Several commenters threw memes out, mentioning how we had level's lower than our IQs.

Ahhhh, the internet.

Kessiah raised her arms at the video, "There you go. 30 trillion views already. This is why you were attacked if I had to guess."

I blinked a few times, amazed at the sheer scale of the numbers mentioned,

"You're telling me people are trying to kill me because of this video?"

Kessiah rolled her eyes, "Uh, yeah. You're a high-level unknown, and they know where you are. Put two and two together."

I grimaced, "So that's all it takes? For real?"

Kessiah crossed her arms behind her, "Welcome to the life of a remnant. Hope you enjoy it."

Torix raised a hand, "But this doesn't explain why they didn't try to kill us?"

Kessiah raised her eyebrows at Torix, "Daniel killed Korga Ryker, alright. The Korga Ryker. Every unknown across the galaxy hates you now."

I tapped the desk, “I mean...I didn’t kill him exactly.”

Kessiah shook her head, “People don’t care. The video tells them that you helped Yawm then he betrayed you. After that, you betrayed him. Simple and easy. Everybody already made their mind up about you.”

I scratched the top of my head, “Well fuck...Thank god we’re nearly indestructible.”

Torix steepled his fingers, “I believe that the sniper that survived our encounter published this video. It’s also a safe assumption to believe they are the assassin we’re after as well.”

Althea bit her lip, “Hmm...that sounds like something the sniper would want to do. We did kill her leader and all her friends. Yenno, assuming they were friends.”

I tapped the table, “Ok, so now what? We leave here and let them pick the legion apart, or do we stay and play a tower defense against waves of assassins?”

Torix waved a hand, “They wouldn’t dare kill any of our legions. Murder of an ordinary sentient would give them a bounty. This is especially so considering Earth is still a new planet.”

Torix pointed around us, “That’s likely why the bombs in your room weren’t nuclear. They couldn’t risk killing that many people. That’s why the assassin’s killing Yawm didn’t use a nuclear bomb for destroying him either.”

Kessiah sighed, “But if we were all unknowns, they wouldn’t even hesitate. Great.”

I spread out my arms, “I don’t remember you being such an edgelord Kessiah.”

Kessiah let her hands go out from behind her head. She bit her lip, “Alright, my bad. I’m just pissed off. We finally kill that unkillable monster and now look. We’re still being hunted down. Doesn’t that seem a little, I don’t know, unfair?”

I tilted my head. Kessiah wasn’t wrong per say. At the same time, being right doesn’t mean someone is useful. I laid my hands on the table, “Here’s the thing. It doesn’t

matter if the situation is unfair. What matters is that we find a way to get through the situation.”

Hod raised a wing, “Hod agree.”

Torix tapped his touchpad, closing the video,

“Then let’s finalize the last details of leaving. This place will be safer once we’ve left. Anyone who remains here will have to hide their identities until we finish the missions on Giess. Who wishes to go?”

Athea, me, Torix, and Kessiah raised our hands. Hod didn’t. I looked at him,

“Why don’t you want to leave?”

Hod glanced at everybody, “Hod like all of Hod’s friends, and Hod want to go. Hod can’t. Hod have to stay with Eltari.”

Hod gripped his feathers into something like a fist,

“Hod leader of tribe. Hod have responsibility as leader. Hod find Eltari home, and Hod make sure new home safe and good for eltari. Hod sorry.”

I lifted my palms to Hod, “What? Don’t apologize man. You have to do what you have to do.”

It surprised me that Hod thought that deeply about, well, anything. It was mature and, gasp...level-headed. I turned towards the others,

“So we’re all leaving tomorrow?” Everyone besides Hod nodded. Hod pointed behind himself,

“Hod let friends know Amara not leaving either. Amara not good with crowds. Amara eldritch after all, so Amara get attacked fast. She stay and teach other eldritch. Amara goal not the same as Harbinger.”

I stood up, “That’s totally fine.” I turned towards Hod, “Are you going to be able to handle the sniper though?”

Hod laughed, “Hod not worried. Hod and Amara strong together.”

Kessiah stood up, walking over to Hod. She got in his face, making him lean back,

“Wait a second...you love her don’t you?”

Hod sat there, expressionless as a brick. He shook his head,

“What? No, Hod say nooooo. Hod not love beautiful Amara. Why Lady Friend number two think that?”

Hod blushed like crazy if you could call it blushing. His feathers ruffled out like he was being attacked. He glanced back in forth in a minor frenzy. Hod stood up, pointing at everyone, “Hod command others not tell Amara; otherwise Hod hate friends forever!”

Amara walked in. She raised a palm, the eye narrowed,

“Tell me what exactly?”

Hod fumbled back into his chair, trying to look cool but failing miserably,

“Pshhhhhh, what Amara talk about? Hod not know a thing.”

He turned his head to the side, trying to whistle. Spit flopped everywhere instead. Amara looked at it then back at Hod,

“You are disgusting.”

Kessiah smirked at Hod, “Oh yes he is.”

Torix stood up with us, “It seems as though the conversation took a nosedive in an instant. Bring everything you need in your dimensional storages. What you can’t fit within them, just use packs. My teleportation magic is more limited by volume than by space.”

He turned his gaze towards me, “I’ve already sorted through the belongings of the Breakers and placed useful pieces in a room. Daniel, being the densest and most massive of the group by far, should use them instead of us.”

Torix walked past me, placing a hand on my shoulder, “Would you like to do that now?”

I shrugged. I turned towards Althea, “Where’s somewhere she could sleep?”

Torix pointed downstairs, “I’d recommend somewhere in the residential district. Our assailant wouldn’t dare to use a bomb there. Either that or perhaps sleeping somewhere while stealthed will do.”

Althea punched my arm, “I’m going to be fine. You don’t have to worry that much. I can handle it.”

I scratched my cheek, “Ah yeah, sorry about that.” I turned to Hod, “Are you going to be able to hunt down the sniper?”

Hod nodded, “Hod sure of it.”

I turned towards Amara, “See if you can’t help him out some. If you wouldn’t mind that is.”

She turned an eye towards Hod, “If it helps me survive...”

With the meeting handled, Torix and I walked out of the room. In silence, we entered the third floor. After passing by some students pulling all-nighters, we reached into Torix’s personal office. With skulls, heads in jars, and all the lich cliches present, we sat at his mahogany desk.

Torix opened a black portal beside him. He pointed at it, “Most of the supplies are here. You can pick and choose what you’d like to keep from within.”

I stood up and pointed at it, “How do you even make this?”

Torix weighed his hands back and forth, “It’s a mana locking technique. You create a mental projection of space and hold materials within the projection. In exchange, you lower your maximum mana pool.”

I frowned, “Could you keep me in there?”

Torix laughed, “Hardly. You’d smash it apart with your mental strength if not your physical might. Keeping the projection formed while you’re in there will be difficult enough, let alone trapping you there.”

Torix raised a hand, “In fact, if you could just pull items out with your gravitation, I’d prefer that.”

I shook my head, “I’m sorry for the false accusation. The bomb has me paranoid.”

He scoffed, “I’d imagine so. Althea probably came out as mush. Her unique composition saved her yet again...even still, it was a harrowing experience.”

I glanced into the portal, seeing an old room. Assortments of books, glassware, ink, and gemstones littered desks. A fireplace burned behind rows of shelves, oddities, and knick-knacks. Scrolls and maps spread over the mantle. Torix pointed inside,

“Allow me.”

He stepped within, wooden floorboards creaking. I walked in right after. The room shifted, dust falling. Torix gasped,

“By Baldowah you are heavy.”

I lifted some of my weight with a small gravity well. Dust floated upwards, the air funneling up towards the well. The room unshifted, and Torix stood back up straight,

“Thank you.”

I looked around, “What do you need on an intergalactic scale anyways?”

Torix raised a hand, “Well that depends on the person asking. In your case, I’d recommend a few things.”

Torix pulled out a transparent disk, “This is a series of downloadable maps for Giess and Feontis, their capital. We’ll be heading there as it has the highest density in population. There we’ll find the most trouble and make the most allies.”

I grabbed the disk. Torix handed me packages of his tasteless rations,

“These shall serve as a backup in case you run out of food.” Torix pulled out a few bottles, “These are essential nutrients for your survival based on studies from your previous society.”

I took the objects as Torix pulled them out, “Of course you’ll need basic hygienic supplies, a few silver rings for enchanting, gemstones, data discs for extra memory in your obelisk, water and air is a must, a scent neutralizing cologne, a guide for immigrants of Giess...”

He went on and on. I dropped each item into my personal dimensional storage as he handed the stuff to me. I didn’t even need my actual ring since my armor could store literal tons of mass.

After an entire catalog’s worth of equipment, Torix turned towards me,

“That’s the trifle I imagined you’d need.”

I laughed a bit,

“Are you shitting me? You just gave me a whole store’s worth of, er, things.”

Torix put his hands on his hips, “I’m glad I overdid it. Here I believed I’d skimmed you out on the necessities.”

We walked out his mental projection and back into his office. Torix grinned at me,

“You know, this reminds me of sending Alfred off to school many, many years ago.”

I pursed my lips, “Isn’t that hard to remember?”

Torix shook his head, “The sting of his passing has long since passed. Now I cherish any moment that brings back his memory. That is my greatest regret. With loved ones, I took them for granted until after they’d left me.”

Torix reached up and put his hands on my shoulders, “I won’t make the same mistake twice, I assure you.”

I gave Torix a bearhug, lifting him up off the ground,

“You’re just a big old softie.”

I set him down, “But I appreciate it, master.”

Torix laughed, “As you should, disciple.”

We said our goodbyes, each of us waving towards the other. As I walked out of his office, I remembered why I called him master. The reason changed over time.

At first, I did so out of fear. After a while, it was out of awe. At this point, calling him master was more a sign of respect. I could probably beat Torix down in a fight, but I wouldn’t. I was his old apprentice, and I wanted him to enjoy the title. I wanted him to take pride in the student he helped make.

Those ideas dashed around in my head while I walked down towards the eatery. I put about several hundred pounds of random foodstuffs into storage. Vegetables, grains, oils, meat, seasonings, you name it, and it went into storage. I didn't want to go for two years without a burger ever again.

Never again.

It took several hours to do all that though since I needed to heal. I also filled up a ring with water and air. It sounds strange, but it might save me from dying later on.

After I finished packing, the sun rose up. Torix sent everyone messages, and we met up on the third floor. Inside a room on the third floor, Torix created a teleportation ritual.

As I walked in, runic glyphs met my eye. They smothered the walls with a few charged gemstones placed at varying points. They shimmered with dormant mana. Althea and Kessiah already arrived, a variety of packs idling by.

We were almost ready. As I walked up without any gear, Kessiah frowned at me, "Why don't you have anything with you...wait, let me guess, you plan on roughing it for training?"

I rolled my eyes, "Oh haha, very funny." I showed her my hand, five silver rings on them reflecting the room's light, "Everything I need is in these. Since I weigh so much, I don't have to actually carry anything."

Kessiah stood up, walking over. I dwarfed her now. She banged my chest, a metallic ring echoing through the room. She shook her hand, "You're heavy alright. How about you carry all of my stuff too?"

I tapped my chin, "Hmmm. I could carry anything you don't use every day. Otherwise, I'll be constantly giving you whatever you need."

Althea walked up, "Oooh, would you hold my stuff too?"

I grinned at her, "Of course."

Kessiah stuck her tongue out and looked away, "Bleck. Gross."

I pointed at her, "In the immortal words of Hod, you're just peanut butter and jealous."

Kessiah raised her arms up, "He spoke those words in a sentence? Damn is he dumb."

I shook my head, "He got Torix pretty good with those exact words."

Kessiah smiled, "Oh yeah, I'm sure it took awhile for that bag of bones to wrap his head around that one."

Torix walked up, looking at us, "I see I'm a popular subject of discussion. Of what may I ask you?"

Kessiah propped her weight on one leg, "Don't worry about it."

I grabbed Althea's packs and put them in storage as Torix and Kessiah exchanged witty banter. Each time I put a gun or some armor into the repository, a chunk of my body disintegrated. It took a few seconds for it to regenerate.

Kessiah looked at it, then back up at me, "What the fuck is that?"

I raised an eyebrow, "What do you mean? I'm regenerating."

She narrowed her eyes at me, "It looks so gross."

Althea leaned towards me and whispered, "Poor her. She's being so defensive."

I leaned towards Althea, "Yeah, tell me about it."

Kessiah shrugged, "Just pointing out the obvious. Still, what is your regeneration now? It looks higher than 400,000 a minute."

I scoffed, “Uh, yeah. It’s a little bit higher than that.”

Torix nudged Kessiah with his elbow, “While you’ve been training soldiers, my disciple helped kill Yawm of Flesh, the avatar of the world eater. He’s improved more than a bit.”

Kessiah spread out her arms, “Can you just tell me how much it is?”

Torix’s grin turned vicious, “Oh, somewhere in the realm of 9 million. I believe it’s even higher now.”

Kessiah took a step back, her knees shaking a little. Her jaw went slack. She blinked a few times. She looked at Torix then back at me. She waved her hands,

“Show me your status.”

Torix pointed upstairs, “Before all that, we need to deal with Ajax.”

I sighed, “Damn. I almost forgot about him.”

Kessiah’s eyes turned into slits, “I heard you guys decided to just kill him.”

I nodded. The slightest smile ran up Kessiah’s lips, “Good. That asshole deserves it.”

Kessiah looked sideways, hiding her new scar. Right before it went out of view, the old wound reflected light. It cast a glossy sheen. I grimaced,

“God...I’m surprised he did that to you.”

Kessiah glared at me, “You and me both. All I did was ask the guy out. Before you know it, he’s shouting crazy stuff. ‘I won’t let my guard down around anyone again. I know we’re enemies, be glad Yawm is an even greater one.’ Blah blah.”

Kessiah shook her head, “Then I put a hand on his shoulder while saying sorry. Bam. Slices off half my face. Thank god mister bones over there spies on everybody, or else I’d be dead.”

Torix crossed his arms, “I do not.”

I pointed outside, “Where’s Ajax? Let’s finish this.”

Torix opened a portal. A purple ring of mana radiated from a starry, black center. Within it, many eyes stared back at me. Torix put his hand into the portal, and he pulled out Ajax in his green sphere. Frozen in stasis, he looked both elated and full of anger at the same time.

The sphere held him in place at the moment right before he killed his greatest foe. His eyes were wide with rage. He wanted Yawm dead. I’m sure when Yawm froze him in stasis, his heart sank. All that satisfaction transformed into a bitter disappointment. Now he’s been stuck for months, unable to move.

I felt for the guy. I really did. At the same time, letting loose ends live already bit me in the ass more than once. The sniper nearly killed Althea and me. Way back at the start of Yawm’s plague, Michael and Kelsy almost destroyed Althea and me too.

It wasn’t a fun decision, but it was a necessary one. I wasn’t going to make the same mistake as Yawm did. His arrogance killed him off because he didn’t think he needed to fear anyone. I was afraid of Ajax alright, and I listened to what it told me.

Kill or be killed.

I turned towards Torix, “Let’s go somewhere more open.”

We all walked outside of the base. Torix kept a shield of mana over the sphere of green. I told him too. I didn’t want the sniper to burst the bubble before we killed him. That was a can of worms I was going to leave unopened.

We reached the entrance Althea showed me after we first arrived. After walking through the waterfall, we paced several hundred yards into the forest. Surrounded by evergreens, I pulled Ajax’s sphere away from everyone.

I wasted no time. I charged mana, the sensation no longer foreign after months of training. I spoke out to the porytian,

“I’m sorry. If you hadn’t attacked Hod and Kessiah, then we wouldn’t be doing this. You also nearly killed us against Yawm. I can’t say you won’t do something worse in the future man. That’s why I’m doing this.”

Mana radiated from my hands, “Goodbye.”

From within the green sphere, I generated a singularity. The green shell cracked under pressure. The black hole feasted on Ajax, eating his legs and lower torso. After reaching critical mass, it blew.

The sphere vaporized as did Ajax. A notification appeared in my inbox, It told me that Ajax died. The only thing remaining of him was a delicate, yellow mist of his blood. No bones, no other mess stayed.

For some reason, this death stuck with me. It reminded me of suffocating that other guy when I first met Ajax. A sense of disillusion washed over me. For a second, it felt like I was in someone else’s body.

I rationalized both these murders in my head. That’s the thing though, they were murders, through and through. Ajax didn’t attack me. That nameless man didn’t strike me down either. I killed them both for my own safety. I leaned over, hitting myself in the head.

At least with the nameless man, I didn’t have any time for an alternate solution. I had plenty of time to dwell on this though. There were no excuses. I killed Ajax for me, that’s it – nothing noble about it.

I shook my head, crushing down a swell of nausea. I covered my face with my hands, and I dragged them down my nose and mouth. I shook my hands as if they were covered in blood.

The discomfort passed. I opened my status. I gained 121 levels. The boost left a bitter aftertaste, reminding me of what I did to get them. I turned towards the others,

“I’m not fit to be an executioner. It isn’t in me.”

I closed my eyes, wind blowing against me. The yellow mist pulling towards me. It seeped into my skin, my armor devouring it. I stepped towards the base,

“Let’s go.”

Chapter 149: A Gift

An awkward atmosphere haunted the group on the walk back. I caused it. After a few minutes, we reached the elevator. As we funneled up, Kessiah spread out her arms,

“So...what are you guys wanting to do once we get to Giess?”

Torix jumped into the conversation, eager to get rid of the malaise,

“I’ve been meaning to brush up on my alchemy. As diverse as Earth is, it lacks basic ingredients for recipes or rituals.”

I raised an eyebrow, “I thought we were going to just run in, get the mission done, and come back?”

Kessiah rolled her eyes, “Of course you would think that. You’re going off-world for the first time, alright? Live a little.”

I spread out my arms, “I don’t want to live a little. I’d rather live a lot. Fucking around the whole time we’re there won’t help with that.”

Althea frowned, but she stayed quiet. Kessiah nudged me, “Maybe, just maybe, Althea was looking forward to going somewhere with you.”

I glanced at Althea. She averted my gaze. I put my hand around her waist,

“How about it? It sounds fun to me.”

A slight grin went up Althea's lips, "I...yeah, I'd like that."

The elevator doors opened, and we walked out. Torix turned towards us, "We'll need to survey the city first. While Feontis isn't the most developed capital, it's still the hub of a world. We'll need to procure shelter, disguises, etcetera before we do something for fun. After that, however..."

Torix opened his status, ogling over his credits, "I have no problem whatsoever with a shopping spree of sorts."

Kessiah rolled her eyes, "Good luck getting through all the prying eyes."

Torix grinned, "Oh, I doubt we'll have to worry about that. I've got a few tactics for going unnoticed. We'll also be plenty safe at level 5,000. You, on the other hand, may struggle with it a bit."

Kessiah glared as Torix continued, "Being a measly level 2,400, well there will surely be many who discover your identity."

I raised an eyebrow, "Why?"

Torix gestured towards Kessiah, "Care to explain."

She crossed her arms, "Your perception can help mask you."

Torix grinned, "Althea invests into perception as one of her cardinal attributes. A good rule of thumb is to double your perception then assume anyone below that level cannot identify you. "

Althea nodded, "So for me, someone would need to be over the level cap to analyze me. Torix has spells for helping us out with that anyways. If someone did figure out who we were, I doubt they would want to fight a group of cappers."

I blinked, "Cappers?"

Althea looked at her hands, “Uh, you know, people that hit the level cap.”

I frowned, “Give me a second, I need to check my status.”

I opened my home screen, wanting to check out my perception. Before checking out my character sheet, I opened up my trees. I needed 27 more skill points before I could finish off immense.

I turned towards Torix and Kessiah,

“Hey, do either of you have a few red dungeon cores?”

Torix scoffed, “I assure you, I’ve already used all of mine on myself.”

Kessiah frowned, “I’m not giving them to you for free. 600,000 credits apiece.”

I pursed my lips. I pointed at Torix, “Is that a fair price?”

He nodded, “It’s very near the galactic standard of 500,000 per core. Considering the convenience, it isn’t a bad price.”

I shrugged. I opened my status. I selected the trade menu, and I pressed on my Kessiah contact. After messing around with the interface, I began a trade of 1,700,000 credits for three red dungeon cores.

Kessiah frowned, “Its supposed to be 1.8 million not 1.7.”

I grinned, “It’s a bulk discount.”

She accepted the trade, “Cheapskate.”

I shook my head, “Nope. Just a conscientious shopper.”

The three cores appeared in my dimensional storage. I opened a portal for one of my rings, pulling them out. The dungeon hearts sunk into my armor, the energy absorbed. I used the thirty free skill points into Force of Nature. I tried putting them into my unknown skills first, but they wouldn't accept it.

It didn't take much to understand why. The skills were unknown because Schema, well, didn't know them. How are you going to develop someone's talent when you don't even know what the skill is? It's impossible. That's why I stuck with Force of Nature, my legendary ability.

With these extra points, I invested in the immense tree. I finished it.

For the Horizon shakes with your every step, and the ground cries out in anguish. A celestial bound to the earth beneath your heels, a bond inseparable. You are immovable. You are unshakable. You are a living star.

Immense(Tier 5) unlocked! 25% of your mass is converted into bonus physical damage. The more mass you have over your adversaries, the greater the effect of your diplomatic and intimidation skills. Unlocks a second legendary skill slot.

Clout and potency channeled into my blood and bones. I rolled my shoulders, grinning at the message. A secondary legendary skill slot was an amazing reward. Considering how ridiculous Force of Nature was, getting a second skill helped expand my horizons.

The tree menu popped up after a minute or two.

Breaker(Finish an S tier bounty, only one class can be chosen)(0/5,000) |
Legendary(Gain a legendary skill)(0/2,500) | Originator(Be the first to learn a skill)
(0/1,500) | Purger(Clear a quarantine)(0/250)

I crossed my arms, staring at them. Having the option for the breaker class was nice, but I decided against it. The Fringe Walker seemed much more fitting for me. My legendary skill helped me in many ways, and it may help me with the next one I get.

With that in mind, I put the rest of my points into the legendary tree. As I closed my status, Kessiah snapped at me, "What are you grinning about?"

I looked down at her, “Oh, I finished one of my trees. It gave me a second legendary skill slot.”

Torix snickered as Kessiah took a step back,

“What in the fuck are you?”

Althea chimed in, “I got a legendary skill too.”

Kessiah looked at her, her jaw slack, “What? I get the meathead having one, but you? No...no way. Bullshit. They’re supposed to be rumors for Schema’s sake.”

Althea opened her status, “Can you see it? It’s called Slayer of the Celestial.”

Sure enough, Althea had the skill active. What tipped it off as a legendary skill was the underlining and white on black font. Torix put his hand over his face, exaggerating a snorting laugh,

“Oh, you don’t have a legendary skill like these younglings?”

Kessiah narrowed her eyes at him, “Yeah, I bet you don’t either.”

Torix froze up. He looked down, and Kessiah continued, “Yeah, that’s what I thought. Not so funny now.”

Althea patted Torix’s back, “It’s ok. You’re more of our generalist. You help glue the team together. Like earlier when Daniel asked you for the price of dungeon hearts.” Althea snapped her fingers,

“You knew it in a flash.”

We reached the teleportation room, and Torix held his head up high,

“I suppose there isn’t any true reason to be ashamed. My knowledge is valuable in its own right.”

After stepping inside the room covered in runic carvings, Torix cast magic. He raised a doorway of earth, sealing us inside the space. Before leaving, we rechecked our belongings. Using the free time, I finished looking at my status, taking a gander at my character sheet.

Dimension-C138(Level 5,564)

Strength – 5,514 | Constitution – 9,677 | Endurance – 42,104

Dexterity – 2,160 | Willpower – 24,006 | Intelligence – 8,659

Charisma – 799 | Luck – 2,905 | Perception – 852

Health: 7.05 Million/7.05 Million | Health Regen: 16.6 Million/min or 276,913/sec

Stamina: 4.54 Million/ 4.54 Million | Stamina Regen: 66,141/sec

Living Dimension: 1.02 Trillion/4.30 Trillion

Mass: 441,867 pounds(200,427.5 kilos~) | Height: 12’3(3.73 meters)

Damage Res – 98.5% | Dimensional Res – 49.25%

Phys Dam Bonus – 491,001% | Damage Bonus – 40%

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

I turned the status towards Kessiah, and I gloated,

“Read it and weep.”

She stared at it as I made it visible to her with a thought. She tilted her head at Torix, “I thought you said it was only 9 mill Torix.”

Torix walked over, glancing at the status. He shook his head, “Absurd. Those stats make no sense whatsoever.”

He walked over towards a wall, channeling mana into a gemstone, “42,000 endurance...He’s not even level 6,000.” He turned to me, “You weren’t joking when you said that was all you put your points into.”

Althea pressed her head against my arm, “Don’t worry about them. They’re just jealous. Mine’s a lot like yours.”

She opened her status.

Althea Tolstoy(Level 5,000)

Strength – 24,246 | Constitution – 334 | Endurance – 456

Dexterity – 13,905 | Willpower – 450 | Intelligence – 450

Charisma – 4,397 | Luck – 201 | Perception – 9,678

Health: 910,098/910,098 | Health Regen: 15% of total health every 30 seconds

Stamina: 143,098/143,098 | Stamina Regen: 2,347/sec

Mass: 894 pounds(405) | Height: 6’7(2.01 meters)

Damage Res – 95% | Phys Dam Bonus – 874,032% | Critical Damage Bonus – 135% |
Damage Bonus: 55%

Immaterial: Ignores rigidity of matter. Grants 100% armor penetration.

Etorhma's Sorrow: Health regen continues for 30 seconds after death. If health is above zero, revive with 50% of maximum health.

I raised an eyebrow at her bonus physical damage, "Damn. You're over twice as strong as me. How did you get so much health?"

She rolled her eyes, "I have a tree that gives me one health for every percent I get in bonus physical damage. I wouldn't fuss too much about it either. You're only, like, what? Maybe a thousand times tankier than me?"

I shrugged, "Ah yeah, you do rely on passives for most of your survivability. They work pretty well though. You should show me that tree. I can show you a few of mine too."

She pursed her lips, "Yeah, sure. Just keep in mind that those ice grenades would've done me in easily if it wasn't for you getting rid of the fire."

I weighed my hands back and forth, "Eh, you do more damage than me. Tradeoffs."

Kessiah turned her eyes at Althea's status. She didn't say anything, but she crossed her arms, and her eyes dilated. It shocked her seeing Althea's strength and other stats. I wasn't the only one that got bonuses from trees after all.

We finished with the dick swinging contest before Torix turned to us. He looked between everyone, "Do you all have what you need?"

We nodded. Torix clapped his hands together, sparks tracing between each palm, "Then to Giess we go."

Torix placed grasped his fingers together, the mana collapsing. It dispersed through the room in a wave of darkened mana. As it passed through me, vertigo sent me off balance. I looked around, noticing my vision close in at the sides.

I entered a state of mind like tunnel vision. I stretched right after, and time slowed down. This lasted many minutes. How long exactly, I couldn't tell you. It could've been an eternity or a single moment. I couldn't tell the difference.

A coldness raced up my back. My hair stood on end. Stuck in place, a crack in space-time appeared in front of me. A familiar eye bored its gaze into my head. I wanted to wince, but I was frozen in place. It wrapped a formless arm around me, and it pulled my massive bulk with ease.

It was a servant of Etorhma.

I fell through a dark haze. I remember the deep cold from last time. Now it was a light chill against my skin. I stayed awake during the travel, my body more resilient than before. I couldn't move, however. Frozen in place, I wondered if Ajax felt this way before his execution.

After several minutes, the mist faded. I hovered in space, my body weightless. All around me, asteroids circled around a series of planets. Two nearby stars cast a glare over a portion of my vision. Covering part of those red suns, Etorhma hovered.

Alien and bizarre, he chose a different form this time. Like a giant arachnid, he had eight legs and eight eyes. They took no definite place on his body, instead deciding to move on his skin. Plates and scales moved as he shifted, unable to make a pure form.

The eyes floated down, glancing at me. As they set on me, life returned to my limbs. I could move and breath, though there was no air here. As I adjusted to movement, Etorhma spoke. His voice was gentle yet undeniable,

"You...he is gone. I see no timelines of his return either...You slew him, as was determined by fate."

I shook my head, "I got lucky."

The limbs on him moved and shifted as his voice radiated across the vast cosmos, "You think of your victory as a product of chance? Humble, but misguided. It makes no difference. You have done as I asked. You followed your destiny, and so you deserve a reward fitting."

I shook my hands, “You know what? I’m good. I don’t really want anything.”

The eyes on the body of scales and plates scattered out, “You wish for nothing then?”

I nodded, “Yes. I just want everything to go on like it was before you grabbed me out of wherever I was.”

An invisible force pulled me towards Etorhma. He was bigger than I thought. Much, much bigger. He grew in my vision like I was falling towards a planet. The eight eyes broadened until a single eye consumed my entire view. Once I was close enough to touch him, I hovered over his pupil.

It was like a vast ocean of darkness below me.

His voice transmitted into my ears,

“You...you are different.”

I turned at a slow pace like jewelry in a display case,

“You are no longer mortal. You are neither living nor dead. You are matter given a mind...No, a real space given purpose...I cannot comprehend you. You are the first creature to elude my understanding.”

I crossed my arms while floating around, “Alright, that’s cool. Can you stop spinning me around?”

I snapped into place, facing his pupil, “And you are the first to deny my gifts. Do you not wish for the powers that Yawm obtained? They would suit you well.”

I pressed my hands together, “Your runes put him in a tight spot. That’s why I don’t want them. Please don’t do anything like that.”

Etorhma pulled me away. I fell back from his eye, the speed unbelievable. His planetary sized body shrunk back into my view. His eyes squinted at me, “I do not leave those that serve me without rewards.”

He reached out with one of his legs. It neared me, becoming the size of a mountain. With precision he should lack at his size, he tapped my forehead. It was like an endless wall thumping me.

“I’ll give you a gift.”

A rush of knowledge poured into my head. The dimensional cipher became clearer as if pieces of a puzzle were clinking together. I looked at the cipher on my arm. The precise lines altered into messy scribbles. Well not quite, but they seemed mediocre by comparison.

I looked up at Etorhma, “What did you do?”

His formless minion wrapped an arm around me, pulling me backward. Etorhma chuckled then spoke,

“You wish for nothing at this very moment. I gave you the knowledge to create what you desire when the time comes.”

I made an X with my arms, “Please no.”

The stars behind Etorhma dampened as Etorhma’s voice shook space, “There is no reason to fear me. I do not lead any astray. I guide those that enact change. You decide the change you commit. Goodbye, Harbinger.”

He pointed at me with one of his spider legs, “May fortune favor you.”

His formless minion pulled me through the haze. Minutes later and I returned to the runic room. The others waited in place, stunned by Torix’s magic. I idled with them, frozen in place. Within a few seconds, space minimized. It no longer magnified.

The room thudded against something, dust falling from the ceiling. The crystals embedded in the walls drained, no longer glowing. I lightened, but the air grew heavy and pressured. I grasped my hands looking around,

“What the fuck just happened?”

Torix gasped, “Finally it’s over...We’re here. We’re at Giess.”

Chapter 150: Giess

I breathed in, trying out the new air. The smell of oil and smog filled my lungs. A gray light leaked in from cracks in the walls. A muggy, thick atmosphere crept its way in. Rain pattered against the roof of the room we were still in. Everything smelled sterile, almost like a hospital. I turned to Torix,

“Where did you warp us on Giess?”

He frowned, “Somewhere I knew would be uninhabited.”

I walked forward, putting my hand on the doorway. I pushed the wall of dirt. It crumbled to dust revealing my first view of Giess. A murky rain fell, tapping against me. A thick mist obscured my vision in the distance. The droplets plopped against my helm. An acrid, nigh toxic smell soaked in.

I clasped a fist, creating an aura of antigravity around me. The rain fell onto it, sliding off the sides of the generated force. It was like I coated myself with a panel of glass. I squinted, taking my first step. My feet clanked against the hard ground. Cold, lifeless, and abyssal, Giess wasn’t looking so good.

Everything around me looked odd. We were in what used to be a city no doubt. At the same time, omens scattered about on the remnants of the old society. Cars with no windows connected with the metal ground. Some tiny insects ran on their surface, their movements robotic.

They ran along the surface of the car, fiddling with it. As they ran past spots on the car, they left it polished to perfection. Some places reflected light like a mirror. Varieties of these insects covered every surface, turning the world into an angular, hygienic wasteland. All the buildings shared this same effect.

These strange creatures plated skyscrapers with the same material. A whistling wind blew between the buildings. This constant breeze never relented, staying steady at all times. It carried bits of ash, spores, and a chemical stench. This was like a robot dystopia of some kind, and we were right in the middle of it.

I turned towards Torix, "Giess looks like shit guys."

Althea snickered a little. When she stepped out, her grin turned upside down. She glanced around, taking the bleak landscape in, "By Schema...this is the new world we were supposed to go to?"

Torix waved away our concerns, "Are there not barren spots on Earth? Giess is no different."

I pulled back my judgments for now. I stepped forward, my feet leaving impressions in the metal. A thin film of water poured down the hill between two buildings. Althea and I walked forward, finding this water forming streams. Tiny flows of murky water pooled into disgusting streams of noxious, purple water. Ashen spores clumped into bubbled blots of yellow at its surface.

At least it had some color.

Althea and I walked along the river, exploring further out. The pollution seeped into every square inch of the scenery. Tiny rodents ran over the surface of this lake. Metal coated their backs, and their red eyes bulged out of their heads. With pouches on their bellies, their bulbous hind legs shot them across the water.

They grasped the yellow bubbles into their arms, sliding it into their pouches. Once on land, they sprinted into concrete coves. A set of metal teeth grabbed onto a slower metal rat, crunching its ribs and spine. Plum colored mush gushed from the broken rat, a foul odor festering out of it. The fish pulled it into the water, no doubt feasting on the filth.

Everything ate the pollution. Several pelican creatures planted themselves on the side of buildings. With beaks of steel, they opened their mouths and caught the foul rain. One of these birds with a bulging neck and black feathers dived towards the lake. The fish with jaws of steel snapped out of the air at a rat. The bird squirted a stream of boiling water at it, the liquid hissing.

It shocked the fish, causing it to seize up. The bird flew down and gulped it into its steel beak, swallowing it whole. I looked at Althea. She looked up at me. We sighed together.

So far, Giess churned up one word in my mind – filth.

I scratched the side of my head, looking back at our teleported room. Torix and Kessiah scuffled through bags, getting ready to head out. Torix teleported the entire room, the dirt and stone singed at its edges. I raised my eyebrow at him, “So uh, why’d you teleport us here again?”

Torix pulled out a pack from a portal. He opened it, and tossed me a circular piece of metal,

“Because this area is closed off from the rest of Geiss.” I caught the piece of steel, and Torix continued,

“While I agree this is a rather unagreeable first view, I knew no one would find us here. The reason for that should be self-evident. It gives us time to prepare ourselves for what is to come.”

Kessiah put a circular tablet of metal onto her shoulder, “Well, what is to come?”

Pieces of metal clicked into place, expanding over her skin. Within a few seconds, power armor covered her from head to toe. She walked up to Torix who hummed away at a spell. His mana came together, casting a white forcefield over her that lost all color a moment later. I couldn’t analyze her status after the magic took place.

He cloaked her in some spell. Torix walked over towards me, “In the beginning, I believe we should scope out the common culture here on Giess. After discovering the comings and goings of this place, we’ll position ourselves around someone of knowledge. After learning what is going on, we’ll make our move.”

Althea placed a piece of carbon fiber mesh on her shoulder, “Then we’ll learn what we need to know?”

The fibers traced outwards, covering her from head to toe. A panel of tinted glass covered her face, showing her curvaceous figure. I took note, admiring her for a

second. I focused on myself, placing the dark gray metal disc onto my own shoulder. It tried forming over me, but it struggled around the spikes of my armor.

I helped it out, molding my armor into the shape of the expanding suit. After a few finicky seconds, it formed over me. The inside was soft and air-conditioned. The mugginess disappeared, a dehumidifier humming lightly. I cracked my neck, the armor moving with me. I expected it to restrict my motions, but it didn't.

Of course, it wouldn't hold up against my sheer strength. It was perfect for a disguise though. As I glanced at my hands, Torix walked up and cast his disguising spell on me. The invisible shield formed around me like Kessiah before. Torix looked up,

"Based on the perception of your status, you should be disguised up till level 4,000 people appear. Considering the highest level person on this planet isn't even 7,000, we should be fine."

I nodded, "Alright chief, where to?"

He pointed towards the stream of gunk Althea and I just left behind, "Follow this river. Based on my maps, any river here should lead towards a reservoir."

Kessiah jogged up towards the stream. Torix cast over Althea as Kessiah put her hand in the water. She pulled it out, the water sticking a bit like thin slime. She slung her hand, the purple muck flinging off,

"By Baldowah...you really know how to pick em, don't you professor bones?"

Torix rolled his fire eyes, "Have faith in the process. Come on, let's get away from this rank place."

Althea leaped over the smooth steel. With agility and grace, she maneuvered with ease. Torix floated over everything, having his arms crossed behind him. A blackened circle of mana held him up, carrying him over it all.

I extended the armor on one of my fingers. I sliced out a chunk of steel coated concrete beneath me. With a gravity well, I pulled myself and the platform up with me. Kessiah

dashed behind us as she jumped around obstacles. Torix shouted at me, “We can’t have her pulling us down, now can we? Could you assist her, perhaps?”

I rolled my eyes. I raised a hand, pulling Kessiah up with gravity. She fell through the air, confused as hell. After reaching beside me, a pool of filth raised up with her. I flicked away bits of trash and dirt with telekinesis. Kessiah wiped some muck off her armored face. She squinted her eyes at Torix,

“Thanks for suggesting the ride. Really thoughtful.”

A subtle grin ran up Torix’s lips, “Oh anytime for you.”

We raced through the broken city, the muck river growing in size as smaller streams fused with it. After a few minutes, the tall buildings gave way to grasslands. Grass mimicked a million scissors planted with the blades facing up. Light refracted off the shining edges, the grass deadly.

Trees of the same sort lined the horizon, expanding in our sight as we got near them. We passed geometric hills, combed and pruned by these strange creatures. More of them rummaged through the wastes, eating the pollution and each other.

One large creature rolled around, a fattened ball covered in metal. It opened up by uncurling its legs. It opened a hippo-like mouth, munching on rock and metal. These rolling blobs of clumpy steel raced over injured or immobilized creatures. In groups, the scavengers ate anything alive. It was hellish.

So far, this looked like a fringe world. After an hour of following the giant river of muck, we reached a wall of old bronze. Hundreds of feet tall, the wall towered over the horizon. Each of us passed over it. I lifted Althea with a gravity well like Kessiah, not wanting her to walk around the disgusting lake.

Oh boy, disgusting it was. We floated over a thick, gunky mess. Islands of Yellow eggs wafting on the purple abyss. Slow waves rolled across the surface, shifting the eggs. One cluster of them hatched, revealing a four-armed, gray humanoid. It lacked eyes, and a thin tongue jutted from its face.

It jumped into the deep purple surrounding it, dashing through the water with a black shadow showing on the surface. We passed over it, other shadows showing under the

disgusting water. Some dwarfed us, leviathans coasting beneath the surface. At times they swam up and swallowed entire islands of the yellow eggs.

The water and wall stretched on like this for miles. Some massive, hulking beasts floated on the water with ecosystems on their backs. Other times swarms of insects fought for scraps on the surface of the ocean. After an hour of hovering, we passed the endless lavender pool.

As we passed it, fields of gray returned. A blip of green popped into the horizon afterwards. The blip spread out, turning into a green spot in the distance. At this point, Althea rode on my shoulders. She pointed at it,

“Do you see it? There’s a forest or something.”

Torix gasped, “By Schema I beleived this realm of gray would never end.”

Kessiah closed out her status. She chewed on some gum, rolling herself around in the gravity well, “So you didn’t take us to a trash world after all.”

Torix rolled his eyes. The changing scenery neared us, coming into focus. On the other side of it, I gaped at the sight before me.

The metallic, angular wasteland gave way to greenery. Like night and day, a span of twenty feet separated the lush forest and hellish blade trees. At the border of these two distinct environments, animals and insects alike fought fiercely. They stabbed. They bit. They crushed. They cracked. They tore at each other in a standstill.

Creatures out of fantasy hacked away at each other. Chimeras of mixed beasts fought hulks of steel. We passed by the battle, reaching into the lush forests. Within the greenery, the environment changed. Soft, cuddly squirrels jumped from tree to tree. If a bird swooped down at them, they shouted out ear-splitting cries.

Armored hawks fumbled through the air at this, sent into disarray. They crashed through branches, protected by thick plates of keratin. Once on the forest floor, they... channeled mana. They lifted the branches then shot them at the squirrels. Some squirrels evaded this unusual tactic. Others didn’t. Before they even hit the ground, the hawks dashed and gulped them down.

They were caught up in other creature's battles, however. Large, glowing salamanders walked through the forest like dinosaurs. When they ate, they lit their whip-like tails ablaze. With a shattering smack of their tail, they whipped through tree trunks. The trees fell, and these fire salamanders expanded their jaws over the wood like huge anacondas.

I blinked at the sight, "Jesus. This is like a nature documentary for another world."

Torix shrugged, "This is far more normal than what we saw earlier." Torix pointed at the giant salamanders, "They are creatures that use mana. This whole planet is rich with species that utilize it. The native espens even have religions around it."

I raised an eyebrow, "Espens?"

Torix nodded, "I dug up some knowledge of this place. Espens are the primary, sentient species. They and the gialgathens."

Althea pursed her lips, "Gialgathans?"

Torix shrugged, "I know the name, nothing more. This planet didn't have modern technology until 30 years ago. They've rapidly integrated Schema's technology since the Culling over 20 years ago. Outside of that, there's little information on Giess."

Torix rubbed his hands together, "Isn't it exciting?"

I grinned, a bit of happy anticipation rising up, "Hell yeah. This is infinitely better than that other place."

Kessiah snored, asleep after the first hour of landing here. Honestly, I couldn't blame her. Outside of the grotesque creatures and landscape, the lands of metal had little to offer. This place was different though. Tiny wooden villages dotted the landscape. At first, I thought it was the espens. Torix corrected me,

"They aren't quite that primitive. These are...well I don't really know. They aren't espens however."

I squinted, getting a better look at the villages. In them, six armed beasts climbed through crude tree houses. Covered in white fur and red plates on their hands and face, they appeared fearsome. The largest of them even grew over the height of a tall man, making their sturdy frames all the more impressive.

The red plates on their faces looked like tiki masks, and their claws were more for stabbing into trees than living things. They ate fruit at the top of trees, enjoying a simple life surrounded by nature. It didn't look like the worst way to live.

Kessiah glanced at them, having awoken. She laid flat on my gravity well, kicking her legs,

“Boring.”

I clasped a fist, “What? Come on. They're nothing like anything on earth. It's awesome.”

Kessiah rolled her eyes, “Yeah, ok. You sound like backwater bumpkin.”

Althea cupped her mouth, pretending like she was whispering, “The bumpkin that's carrying you instead of letting you run hundreds of miles.”

I released the gravity well under Kessiah. She flipped through the air for a second before I pulled her back up. I tapped my face, “Oh man, what a lapse in my attention. Sorry about that Kessiah. 24,000 willpower only goes so far after all.”

Kessiah's expression went flat, “Ah...fair point. He's backwater with skills.”

I rolled my eyes, orienting them back at the lush expanse of nature. The mana warped everything, solidified crystals of it poking out of rocky clusters. Animals hoarded around these clusters, feeding chips of the gems to their young. The larger the animal, the more mana gems embroidered their skin.

The creatures were much stronger than Earth's own ecosystem. At times, a few of them even walked out of eldritch dungeons alive. They were covered in scars and wounds,

but they survived. Nothing on Earth shared that kind of tenacity outside of humans. Some of these creatures gave even stronger eldritch a run for their money.

Scaled hydras made of metal, horses with glowing hooves and antlers that shot azure lightning, even shining wolves that darted around like wisps, this planet had it all. The vibrancy contrasted the dull, lifeless fields of metal. I'll admit though, the fields of gray had there fair share of monsters too.

After another hour of green forests, plains, and mountain, we reached a sudden blot on the horizon. Torix murmured,

"If the maps are correct, this should be a teleportation center for Schema. It's a small border town, nothing large. We'll observe the natives here, blending in with the foreigners. Feel free to explore here and talk with other factions."

Torix grinned at me, "Perhaps you can make some allies with the more prevalent factions near Earth?"

I grabbed my chin, glancing up, "That's not a half bad idea."

Kessiah murmured, "Knowing Daniel, we'll have even more enemies than before by the time he's done."

Althea shrugged, "Then he'll do to them what he did to Yawm."

Torix tapped his chin, "Let's pray that these border town hasn't expanded too much regardless. I'd rather us keep our heads low. Our long term success on Giess depends on it."

As we neared the town, ultra modern buildings cropped up. Sheets of steel covered most of these spaces, various emblems embroidered on them. Flags waved in the wind like symbols of pride. I remembered one of them for the steel legion. Other factions planted onto the town too, expanding their influence outwards.

They built compounds and facilities for whatever they needed. For the first time in years, I saw cars riding on roads. They carried supplies that went in and out of these hubs of activity. Power armor-clad fighters fired shots from rifles in firing ranges.

Magicians taught spellcraft in open spots of the town. Merchants and caravaners sold old tech that was no doubt new here on Giess.

All this contrasted with the local espens. The locals molded their houses out of nature, the trees warped into living spaces. They molded clouds of mist that hovered near their living spaces. Vines altered into rough stairs wrapping around trees. Bridges of branch extended from treehouse to treehouse. It all flowed together, creating a picturesque image.

The flowing aesthetic hit a harsh contrast with all the imported metal, creating a surreal feel to the town. Torix turned towards us,

“We’ll be taking a forest path into the city to avoid any unwanted attention. Try and avoid making a scene. That is especially true for you, Daniel.”

I spread out my arms, “What did I do?”

Kessiah faked a laugh, covering her mouth, “You’re taller than Yawm. What else do you need to know?”

I bit my lip, “Ok...That’s fair.”

Althea snickered under her breath as we landed into the woods. Torix renewed his cloaking spell on us. As he did, I explored. A few glowing mushrooms expanded from a cluster of roots. I grabbed one, sensing mana in it.

With my armor, I sapped it out. The mushroom squealed as it shriveled and died. I frowned at the gray mush, tossing it aside. It reeked. I shook the gunk off as Torix called, “One more casting. Let’s get this over with.”

I walked up, and Torix directed a black shell of mana over me. The transparent shield generated. He pointed in the distance, “To Icosa.”

Althea scratched her nose, “Uh, Icosa?”

Torix waved his hand, “It’s the border town’s name.”

Althea and I nodded, “Ahhhh.”

We hiked through the dense shrubbery, making sure not to run. Running everywhere was weird apparently. After a few minutes of walking, I turned towards Torix. As I spoke, my voice muffled under the effect of my intercom,

“Why didn’t we just use the teleporter to get here?”

Kessiah pushed away a branch,

“We’re unknowns. We don’t have access to them.”

I flicked a vine out of my way, “Well of course.”

We passed onto a path through the jungle. A minute later, the far off sounds of cars and people ebbed into the forest. We stopped at a line of trees separating civilization and wilderness. Torix spoke on an insulated intercom,

“There’s a mental activation for closed link intercoms inside each of your suits. Use them when discussing details we’d rather not share. Act casual, as if we’re mercenaries passing through.”

Althea and I nodded. Kessiah rubbed her hands together, “Please please please have something good to eat and drink. Earth was so bland.”

We walked out through the path of the jungle, several of the treehouses hanging overhead. I clicked my intercom on,

“We just had an apocalypse. Cut us some slack.”

Althea spoke into the intercom system right after, “You made some good stuff, but the rations were just...bleck.”

We kept the conversation casual, pacing right up under several buildings. I glanced around,

“Where are the espens?”

Torix shrugged, “Eh, I don’t know.”

We passed by several homes before reaching some sort of shop on curve of the road. The area reminded me of a mom and pop shop in a suburb.

On this shop’s sign, a series of flowing characters covered it. Normally I couldn’t read them, but Schema’s system made it clear.

Welcome to Selesha’s Herb Shop.

Clear panes glistened underneath the sign. The wood crossed around the panels of glass, growing with it. The greenery was gardenized into the side of the building. Mana ebbed from flowers blooming on the side of this tree shop. The clusters of petals rose from earth plotted in the basins of bark.

The others walked right past it, looking for something more exciting. I stopped at the door, pointing at it, “I’m checking this place out first. I’ll see you guys in the city once I’m finished.”

Althea waved, “Cya. I hope you find something interesting.”

I opening the door. As I ducked inside, two plants over the doorway sprayed a wave of mist over me. Imbued with mana, it didn’t dissipate. I shrugged, looking around.

Thank god the ceilings were high.

The moment I stepped foot inside, I was glad I chose to explore here. Indescribable scents poured into my suit. Aromas reminiscent of cedar, lavender, rosemary, lotus, and roses came into my suit. They were different, changed in a way that made them distinctly different yet all too familiar.

It gave me a sense of déjà vu and nostalgia all at once. Majestic flowers glowed in the gentle hum of phosphorescent butterflies. They sat on the roof, acting as lighting for the entire room. The sheer abundance of visual delight struck me like a sledgehammer. I felt like a kid in a candy shop. No, like Disneyland.

Unlike earth, every flower held a different color and texture. Every living thing glowed a different shade. As I observed everything in a trance, I bumped into someone. They fell, a high pitched voice yelling. Before they hit the ground, I snapped them up with a bit of gravity magic. They floated back onto their feet as I turned around.

Two amber eyes met mine, along with a look of fear. It was an espen, probably the shop's owner. I scratched the back of my head,

“Uh, sorry about that.” I reached out with a hand, “The name’s Daniel.”