

New World 341

Chapter 341: An Isolating Invasion

Those questions and a dozen others piled on in tandem, and as always, I rushed to fix them. As primordial mana oozed over me, droplets of the mana funneled upward. They rained into a surging, semitranslucent ooze of navy blue. It piled up at the end of navy blue fire that burned on my skin. I clapped my hands together, the mana coursing into my body until I almost burst.

Clarity infused into my mind, and I smiled at all that was to be done. It was time to get to work.

-Daniel-

I brushed my hands together, metallic rings resonating from the clanging claps of my palms. The echoes radiated through another city's barrier, the swirling field of blue strata no less beautiful than the first time I built one. Anytime I crafted anything, I wanted peace, quiet, and beautiful scenery. My cities on Leviathan-7 fit the bill.

Taking a deep breath, I put my hands on my hips. This would be my fourth attempt at making one of these, and I hoped it would work. Implanting a blue core into the golem's body, I inspected the next model of my primordial core golems. They proved more challenging to get right than the ascendant and quintessence models.

Those assault and constructor models fit into their mana types well, everything syncing up. On the other hand, primordials had a bad habit of going haywire. Given the motivations I gave them, the mishaps weren't mutinies exactly, but they came close at times. That chaos stemmed from the primordial golems being the most independent of any golem type.

These golems, directors as I called them, could think for themselves, and while that let them manage cities, it also meant the golems could go against me if they wanted to. Not directly, but in a roundabout way. For that reason, I had to get specific with the wording behind the motivations I put in them.

I tried out a variety of directives with each dungeon heart, but few made it past my initial prototype phase. Most primordial cores carried a sinister air I didn't like, so I never put suspicious ones in an actual golem body. I probed each and every finished heart, ensuring some quality control. Despite that caution, my three previous attempts blew up in my face.

My first attempt worked wonders for my first city. Under the primordial's management, the blue cores and rainbow bones rained in. It was all roses and sunshine until I placed another primordial over a different city. Like two ticking time bombs, both golems met, disagreed, and waged war with each other.

They wanted the other golem's territory so they could help me more. It turned out that 'help Daniel' was too vague a motivation for them. After that, I started the quality controls and added some constraints. My next director ended up trying to gather more dungeon hearts instead of the bones. That was fine until it tried dismantling my cored golems to get more blue cores.

The third test ended up the worst of them all. By then, I piled up a lot of motivations and constraints, the complexity of the code mounting. With an advanced mind, the last director tried changing their internal code to help facilitate their goals. Once again, I applauded the initiative, but tampering with the cipher was a dangerous game. They paid the price for it.

Without the know-how, the director ended up turning themselves into an endlessly growing pile of flesh. It was both grotesque and remarkably unhelpful. This last set of changes would either work, or I'd scrap the idea altogether.

The first adjustment added self-satisfaction, so these golems carried a solid amount of pride. This stopped them from morphing their own code. The second shift involved a heap of humility. Having the primordials understand their limitations prevented them from doing too much, which had been the main problem prior.

Though a bit contradictory, I hoped the two contrasting traits would stabilize the golem. As the primordial soldier clicked on, I telepathically linked to it with my breath held. It radiated back,

"Ah, it's very good to see you, creator. How are you?"

I raised an eyebrow, always impressed by their verbal skills,

“I’m doing well. What’s your goal?”

“Well, firstly, it’s to not make a mess of things. Secondly, it’s to manage the others as best as I’m able. That’s honestly about it...Ah, and to follow your orders, creator. That goes without saying, however.”

I gave him a nod, assigning two assault golems as his guards. They’d keep him in line and report any issues to me if the situation went haywire. Crossing my fingers, I put some faith in this golem. He sounded sane, and I needed the help. Running twenty-four cities by myself was weighing on me.

Reminding me of all those places, another assault golem landed beside me. A waft of wind blew past me as I turned to it, the dark metal of the golem sheening under Leviathan’s light. In its palms, dozens of blue cores crackled like orbs of lightning. Good, today’s harvest was alright. I raised an arm, the spheres whirling into my pocket dimension.

They funneled into the vast pile I amassed, well over two hundred of them clanking around in my storage. The dungeon hearts radiated out in that void, a testament to what I accomplished here. Staring down at another cityscape dotting the distant horizon, I took note of my progress.

I finished twenty-four cities with connecting road systems, made hundreds of core golems, and progressed in time magic. Despite everything, it didn’t feel like enough, and it seemed as though the three-month deadline should’ve already arrived. It hadn’t.

In all honesty, I was getting worried that Schema sent us here to raid our empires while we were gone. If that was the case, I’d ensure the AI regretted that dearly when I returned. Despite that unease, I trusted Schema. It wasn’t based on blind faith, however. It was based on a hunch.

Closing my eyes, I reached out and released the hastening of time around me. The broken minds in my wake flowed in, every Daniel numb to it by now. The standard dimensional rules rushed in around me, and that ‘other’ coursed thick as tar. Getting a feel for it, I couldn’t help but trust this feeling.

In the last weeks, I gained the ability to sense time's flow. At least I think I did. Here on Leviathan-7, time thickened to an absurd extent, far more than I could ever hope to match. My hastening only added to my temporal compression, and I couldn't accomplish this same feat without Leviathan's temporal warp.

If this black hole worked like a normal one, time's flow would be thin and wispy. From what I could tell, that's how time worked. The more present, the faster stuff went, and the less present, the slower stuff went. I could've been messing up my terminology and presenting a complete and utter oversimplification. However, this understanding worked had for me so far. It wasn't like I was an armchair astrophysicist with access to the internet.

That would make poking holes in my theory easy, after all.

Anyways, I used this normal state of time to gauge the progress of my time manipulation. From many trials, I found my temporal acceleration increased time's flow by about 25% while moving. When standing still, my time coursed several times faster for me than usual. This skewed my priorities big time.

At first, I hoped to multiply my own time's pace, but that would require years of training which I didn't have here. Instead of a brute force approach, I focused more on mastering my application of temporal manipulation. When brainstorming, devising runes, or thinking up improvements, I always stood still. I paired that compression with my Mass Manipulation skill, a simple ability that shrunk my physical size.

While seemingly small, every millimeter I crunched inward was another my wake could compress.

It gave me a temporal dilation that left the world crawling in slow motion when standing still. The slowed worldly pace made cipher rewrites or brainstorming trivial investments since each minute of thinking equated to only seconds spent moving. This warped how I handled everything, and I contemplated every minute decision until it radiated with efficiency.

Those incremental improvements resulted in a streamlined city-building process. Despite those advancements, I failed at building a city twice. The first defeat stemmed from the rainbow bones. We bothered them too much, and they kept erupting gamma bursts. After several hours, we moved on to greener pastures while the bones settled down. Our second loss came from an underground pocket of primevals.

Thirty of them rested under the opal bones, so we retreated to avoid losses. Over the last couple of hours, we picked them off one by one when it was convenient, but we stopped the orbital bombardments after that. If we hadn't faced the primevals all at once, I could've planted two cities in the time it took to make one.

Speaking of cities, we finished this one a few hours before I got to crafting. At this point, I owned many settlements surrounding my first settlement. This web of cities gave me over hundreds of guards golems and about a hundred assault golems to improve my assaults with. They darkened Leviathan-7's sky with their numbers, surging into each new zone like a volley of arrows.

But these arrows learned fast and loved war. The assault golems waged it at all moments, each one a spiral of violence and hate. Their ferocity would imbed fear in our enemies, the packs like hungry sharks when facing a weakened foe. The apex of those opponents, the primevals, no longer slowed me down when I established cities. Well, outside of freak occurrences like the thirty primeval blow-ups.

Without worrying about fighting, I put all of my efforts towards the rune carving and city building. Each hub I planted gained me another piece of Leviathan-7 as my own. The roads stretched for dozens of miles between these hubs, and we continued the expansion each day. By now, I ran while making the tunnel structures between the cities.

Those tunnels expanded outwards in circles from my initial building point, creating a ring of settlements. The first ring of cities numbered six, making a hexagon around the alpha settlement. The second ring rounded the first one, the twelve cities maintaining a hexagonal shape. I positioned the towns in that same ratio, keeping everything roughly equidistant from each other.

While it sounded complicated, it was essentially just a controlled expansion. It prevented me from creating a line of cities that defended itself poorly. This denser, symmetrical frontier made the maintenance of new cities less of a hassle, something I came to dread. If I had a quarter for each time I managed a city's defense against some primevals, I'd probably have, like, thirty bucks.

Terribly analogies aside, I kept hopes high that this new primordial golem wouldn't be an abject failure like the last one. For now, I poured my efforts back into expansion. As I did, I frowned. I dragged my hands down my face, wanting to see Althea again. Or Torix. Or anyone, for that matter. Althea led the loneliness front, though.

At this point, the isolation sank its teeth into me, and I detested being on this planet. No matter what I thought up, I couldn't reason those emotions away anymore. The golems helped, and so did having a Manifold Mind. At the same time, those all came from me. In a way, I spoke to myself, about myself, and for myself.

In other words, I was in a complex conversation with just me, and it drove me insane. At times, I questioned whether all of this was real or not, mainly because of how alien and strange everything was. Having all of my life ripped away for so long left me wondering if I died and this was hell. But it couldn't be. Because I couldn't die.

Snapping me out of my nihilistic stupor, a scouting golem landed beside me. They were just normal golems sent out to explore, but I liked calling them by their roles. It helped keep everything organized, something I wished I could offload to Torix.

Poor lich had to take a lot of offloading. Damn, I missed the guy.

I linked to the scouting golem, and it radiated back to me,

"Hello, creator. We have found an oddity in the deserts of this planet."

I frowned, "What is it?"

"The bone piles spread through the dunes are missing through vast swaths of land."

I tapped my chin, a dozen minds thinking back at once, "Something's collecting the bones then, so there are several possibilities." I smiled, "It sounds like some rulers were harvesting the easiest to grab bone sources. Either that or...something else is taking them." I peered down, giving the rainbow bones a few stomps,

"Like this big bone thing."

The scout spoke out, "Do you wish for us to find the source of the oddities?"

My brow crinkled, my mind drifting off to the idea of talking to someone. I shook my head, “No, I’ve got this. Let me handle it.”

The scout gave a bow while raising its hands, “Of course, creator. We shall continue surveying the continent, and I shall lead you there.”

It pressed its feet into the ground, darting away. I followed, putting a hand on its shoulder. Mana siphoned from me into it, and the golem picked up the pace. In minutes, we passed the wafting forests of kelp, the algae thinning. The desert came in force, pockets of kelp spawning behemoths here still.

I gazed at the red dunes, the light of Leviathan forever beaming down its brilliance here. It cast a permanent mid-morning shine onto the dunes, lighting piles of sand into majestic, glowing pyramids. I gawked at the beauty, glad to be out of the damn ossuary for once. The madness there felt like it was crawling under my skin, and I enjoyed the peace here.

A behemoth dropped down from above. I raised a hand, several singularities goring it apart. As its blue blood rained onto the scout and me in a vile downpour, I kept my eyes on the shining dunes. I centered on those beaming hills. Ah, the beautiful dunes. Peace, tranquility, and serenity.

Another behemoth barreled down from above, interrupting the moment. I glowered at it before sending a psionic wave through its mind. Ten Daniels stuffed its psyche until the creature’s ego burst, its spirit exploding into fragmented mush. The corpse flopped against the sand, its body still living but its mind dead.

Watching it fall, I heard each beat of its heart, all its organs in perfect order. I took deep breaths of the toxic air here, and I put a hand on the side of my head. Closing my eyes, I settled my anger. From beside me, the scouting golem trembled for a moment. Its fear worked like a whip, and it lashed me with shame. I had to get the hell out of here.

This place was changing me, and not for the better.

Changing my attention, I peered down. Sharp spires of rainbow bone pooled at the bottom of the dunes here, but we found swaths of the desert where the bone orbs went missing. Rulers may have intended on donating the opal shards to avoid conscription. If so, I gave them props; it was a good idea.

It wouldn't be enough to take the number one spot, though.

Several other scouting golems met up with me, having different reports. I got a picture of the situation from them. They found several underground tunnels in the desert along the ossuary where the rainbow bone piles began. From those burrows, strange creatures gathered the rainbow bones piling here, and they brought them back to some hidden ruler.

A few culprits popped into my head, not least of which being the colossal rainbow bone pile. However, I hoped it was Valgus Uuriyah. The ruler held many captured eldritch on him, and he had the potential to control even primevals based on our fight. It kind of felt desperate for me to hope for an enemy, but being in battle was better than being alone.

Exploring further, I darted towards one of the tunnels, the opal bones stretching out of the side of a desert's dune. I walked into the expanse of opal before my scout followed behind me. Before it entered, I raised my hand,

"Don't. This entity could destroy you down to the atom."

The scout raised a hand, "But it is the same for you, creator."

I gave it a hollow smile, "The difference is, I won't die. You will."

"But--"

I waved my hand, "Thanks, but I've got this. Go back to your post."

The scout's hand lowered, and it turned to explore Leviathan-7 once more. My smile turned genuine as I walked off, a sense of surprise popping up in my chest. It wasn't from the golem's concern but from the golem objecting to my command. Even if it was only a slight challenge, it stood out from the monotonous, 'Yes, creator' that I usually got.

Pacing into the opal tunnel, I scowled at the shining opals. The short-lived flight out of this hellhole ended faster than one fight with a primeval. Darting into the depths, I raced through the winding tunnel, and I became a whirlwind of motion. A dozen twists and turns blurred in my eyes, no branches or divets present in the shiny, smooth surface. A few minutes of this passed, and I slammed into a patch of flattened bone. It popped up out of nowhere, being almost invisible from the other angles of opal.

And so, my heels collided into the radiant floor, cracks in the rainbowed remains forming underfoot. A burst of powdered bone splashed into the air like electrified glitter. I chose not to breathe, the sparkling dust worse than broken glass. Walking through the shining cloud, I gazed around. The sleek surface of opals pooled into a sort of bubble that branched off into several other tunnels.

Raising a brow, my eyes set onto a fountain at the center of this room. It bubbled and frothed, the lurching of the liquid like living light. It almost squealed out in pain as the bubbles burst along the surface, and it whispered for me to drink in its delicacy. Stepping up, those whispers strengthened into silent wails that rebounded in my head.

I smiled at the cute fountain, the subtle psionic attack almost laughable. After dipping my hand into the mixture, it coated my hand in light, energy coursing from it. My armor assimilated the fluid, the power becoming my own. Scooping up more with my hands, I drank from the water, and it burned in my belly like fire and ash.

And vitality.

I reached out my hands, grasping them with confusion spreading over my face. While this wouldn't grant me an incredible boost, the fact I even noticed it bewildered me. Before taking it all in, I waited a moment to see the other impacts of the mixture. The side effects took hold like I swallowed hornets.

Rainbow needles expanded from my stomach, throat, and mouth. They drilled through the skin and injected some kind of pain-inducing poison. Barely noticing it, I tilted my head at the fountain. It seemed like it was made to both tempt and kill. Interesting. Moments passed before the rainbow needles oozed out a psionic poison and attack all at once.

Once again, I stumbled back in astonishment. The mental whiplash tore one Daniel apart, the mind in tatters. It regenerated before noting how this reminded it of time magic. I agreed before scooping up the rest of this, er, stuff. It was difficult to even give

it a name based on its hodgepodge of abilities, but there it was, existing whether I named it or not.

Taking the ossuary juice, I scooped in the entire fountain at once with my dimensional shield. It fell into the abyss of my pocket dimension before I gained complete awareness of it. My eyes widened as I found five blue cores at the bottom of the mixture, bits and pieces of primordials dribbling out of the cleaved fountain.

I pocketed the rest of the demonic sluice before heading deeper into the tunnel system. Minutes later, I found another of these fountains. Unlike before, I didn't attempt drinking the stuff, and I shoved it into my dimensional storage for later. After taking seven more fountains, the psionic beast I walked within roared out in rage.

Understanding its frustration, I put a hand on a wall and set out to calm it. We warred for a moment, its wrath facing my serenity. Placing all of my minds on the task, the behemoth tore through one of my minds after the other. The entity destroyed each Daniel in a row like a charging animal. It gouged and ripped and gored while I disintegrated into psionic shreds.

I died many times before giving it a sad smile. This was what I did to myself every waking moment. How could an attack like this stop me? It couldn't, and it didn't. In time, the bone beast calmed, its surging flows of energy becoming tame. Pacing further into this large trap, I sensed a primeval below.

After flowing through the tunnel, I surged towards the monster as a glowing liquid. As I reached it, the primeval turned to me, having drunk one of the shining reservoirs. Unlike me, it gorged on the entire fountain.

So to did the fountain gorge on it.

A writhing mass of shining spines erupted out of its back, the stone beast twitching with random movements. It gurgled at me, and I raised my hands. While I locked eyes with it, I shouted, "Come on. My fists itch, and your face looks like a backscratcher."

I winced at what I just said before watching it rush at me. It kept going forward before dashing past me. Lowering my hands, I watched the primeval go out into the distance and up the tunnels. Following it, we both ran through this chasm in the colossal bone pit. A few minutes later, we bolted back into the dunes of sand.

The red dunes burned in the overwhelming light of Leviathan. In that sweltering heat, we crushed through dune after dune. A sandstorm whirled behind us before we reached the bottom of several dunes. The converted primeval grabbed a big ball of rainbow bones, picked it up, and ran off back to the ossuary.

Of course. It was the giant consciousness all along.

I fell onto my knees, not because I had to but because I wanted to. Several sandworm behemoths popped out of the ground, trying to eat me. I splashed the bone fluid over the monsters, watching them suffer. I thought to add to that suffering, but I stopped myself. Gazing at my hands, I wondered what was wrong with me.

The minds and I came to a consensus – we lost our sense of normalcy. It wasn't something I was ever aware of, yet it remained with me most of the time. Even if I lost most of what made up my life sometimes, I held onto something from before it changed. However, I lost everything here.

Schema's lacking presence eliminated Torix's books to read. I could reread ones through my memory, but that was it. My emptied dimensional storage meant none of the other trinkets existed outside of what I put in my pocket dimension. Unless I wanted to chat with Lehesion's lopped-off tail, that wasn't exactly a bonus.

Scratching my hair, I closed my eyes, trying to swim through my memories. Once more, behemoths interrupted my train of thought. I killed them, keeping a fit of explosive anger in check. Laying back on the side of a sand dune, I made a few sand angels in the dust. It gave me a nostalgic feeling as if I were a child in the snow again. In my ears, a low, droning voice ebbed in,

"And fate has decided we meet again, I see. It's good to see you again."

I looked up, and Shalahora gazed back down at me. My eyes widened as he tilted his shadowy face at me,

"You...appear troubled."

Chapter 342: What Bumps in the Night

Scratching my hair, I closed my eyes, trying to swim through my memories. Once more, behemoths interrupted my train of thought. I killed them, keeping a fit of explosive anger in check. Laying back on the side of a sand dune, I made a few sand angels in the dust. It gave me a nostalgic feeling as if I were a child in the snow again. In my ears, a low, droning voice ebbed in,

“And fate has decided we meet again, I see. It’s good to see you again.”

I looked up, and Shalahora gazed back down at me. My eyes widened as he tilted his shadowy face at me,

“You...appear troubled.”

I flopped myself up off the sand before stabilizing in the air. Coughing into one hand, I murmured, “Just, you know, enjoying the scenery.”

Shalahora peered at one of the glowing dunes in the distance. His voice droned in, “It is beautiful here.”

A silent moment passed, something I’d been hoping for but never received since arriving on this damn planet. Pulling my time magic back, I blinked, “What’s going on? Why aren’t the behemoths attacking us?”

Sounds returned to normal, including Shalahora’s voice. The Sovereign tilted his head at me, his bright blue eyes piercing, “They cannot see nor sense us. I have camouflaged us both.”

I let out a sigh, “What I wouldn’t have given to have something like that since coming here.”

Shalahora let out a gentle laugh, “It is easy to cherish what we were never given, but it is difficult to appreciate what we have.”

I smiled back, “Good point. I’ll keep it in mind.” I scratched my cheek, “So, how have things been?”

Shalahora peered away from the ossuary and towards the shady side of the planet, “I’ve done well, so I’ve gained enough resources that I’m now comfortable with my position in this lottery. However, I know only a little of what the other rulers are doing now. My information is outdated. In particular, Valgus and his faction are a mystery I’ve yet to unravel.”

I nodded, “Same here. I’ve been trying to establish myself around this area.”

Shalahora gazed around, seeing only sand dunes in every direction. He looked down before putting a hand on my shoulder, umbral energy dolloping up off of him. He spoke with a gentle tone,

“You... You have done well to be alive, given where we are. I understand that asking for help is difficult. It is to accept your weakness and make it known. I want you to know that the first step onto the path of strength involves acknowledgment. Only then-“

I furrowed my brow, “What’s with the condolence?”

Shalahora lowered his hand, “Hm, ahem...I’ve gazed around at your established territory and...Uhm.”

A sandworm burst from the ground, destroying a dune. My sand angels remained in the red grains below, and Shalahora gestured to them, “It seems as though collecting resources has been difficult. While I am not overtly wealthy, I can share a portion of my spoils if only to prevent your guild from being dismantled by Schema.”

I shook my head, “Woah, I’m totally fine on resources.”

Shalahora leaned back, “Oh...Then why do you appear so troubled?”

I grabbed the back of my head, “It’s that obvious?”

Shalahora peered away and pressed his hand to his cheek as if scratching it, “Of course not...It was merely my skill of observance.”

The guy walked up to me while I made sand angels in the middle of the desert by myself. My struggle couldn't have been more obvious, but he still spared my feelings. I burst out laughing, "I get it. I really do." I peered towards the ossuary,

"Honestly, it's been rough. Really rough."

Shalahora stared through me while lowering his hands, "Your species must require social contact. This isolation must weigh on you heavily. I am different, as my kind was made to be alone."

My eyes widened, "Oh man, that's convenient. While it sucks to admit, being alone has taken its toll on me. You already saw."

Shalahora put a fist to his chest, "I am here now, so you drift alone no longer."

I gave him a nod and a smile, "Hell yeah."

Shalahora's eyes turned to slits, and he zoned in on a golem flying towards us. The umbral shade lifted his dark claws, "Something approaches us. Be wary."

I lifted a hand, "It's not an enemy."

The scouting golem stopped before me, unable to see Shalahora but knowing I was there. My soldier bowed, "It's good to see you, creator."

I raised a brow, "Report?"

"Shades have been spotted nearby. They come from an unknown source. We haven't attacked them yet, as they've been non-hostile."

I tilted a hand to Shalahora, and the Sovereign appeared. The shady ruler's eyes widened, "You serve Daniel?" He turned to me, "I thought you were alone?"

The scout answered for me, “We are his flesh and blood. He gave us life, and now we live to continue his purpose. Our creator feels alone because we act like one, though we despise our inability to deplete our maker’s loneliness.”

Shalahora blinked, “We? There are more of your kind?”

The scout omened, “We are legion. We are many.”

Shalahora gave the scout a nod, “Then I am as well.” The writhing shadow lifted a massive arm, and several shades appeared. Shalahora murmured,

“These are my incarnations. They exist outside of me but retain a semblance of my mind. They are like my children, so please, be kind to them. They, in turn, will be kind to you.”

The scout turned to me, waiting for an answer. I pointed a thumb at Shalahora while I said, “You heard the man. Play nice.”

The scout bowed to the shades, “It is good to meet you, children of Shalahora. We shall work together with kindness in the future, and may our legions prosper.”

Shalahora bowed to the golem, “You are very polite, and so, we shall ally with ease. Know that my children will offer what you’ve offered them in turn, and may our alliance prosper.” Shalahora stood up, “Daniel. Would you mind if I see the others?”

I tapped my chin, thinking. After a moment, I shrugged, “Eh, sure. Why not.” I pointed to the ossuary, “It’s this way.”

We darted towards the multi-tiered hell cake that was the ossuary. Keeping a leisurely pace, we pierced the heated air and waves of gravitation. No behemoths attacked us, something that I appreciated about Shalahora’s presence already. After a while, the edge of the ossuary appeared.

From there, Shalahora stopped, so I did as well. I raised my brow, “What’s with the holdup?”

He narrowed his eyes, “That’s the shining hell. Why are we going there?”

I peered back and forth, “Uh...Because that’s where the golems are?”

Shalahora brandished his claws, “You mean to tell me you drifted towards that place on purpose? Forgive my skepticism, but I find that hard to believe.”

“That’s where all the good stuff is, and I wanted some privacy.”

Shalahora widened one eye and narrowed another as if raising a brow, “What resources lie in that ruin, aside from death and the shining shards?”

I smiled, “Hah, it’s good you don’t know since I’ll have plenty to show you.”

We reached the cusp of the ossuary before I pointed at the line where shining bone met gleaming sand, “So I’ll be honest, the shining hell isn’t a bad name by any means, but I call it the ossuary because of how it’s made.”

Shalahora landed on the living bones, placing a palm on them, “Ossuary: where the bones of the dead are laid to rest. Why name this place that?”

I raised a finger, “We’ll talk where it’s safe. Come on.”

We darted through the ossuary, the kelp layers getting denser over time. Each layer compounded on the other, the writhing movements of behemoths masked by the kelp layers above. As the light of Leviathan dimmed to disparate rays, the primevals came out to play. They warred in the distance, and Shalahora kept away from them. With his expert cloaking ability, he evaded their presence.

But I didn’t because I never even imagined using a cloaking ability of any kind. Several primevals ended up disrupting our voyage but not for long. My scouts communicated with the network of cities, and the vast legion I amassed arrived in a swarm. A hundred core golems raced overhead. They tore through the kelp forest, destroying expanses of kelp. A dozen dogpiled each behemoth, goring them apart in seconds.

More war golems piled onto the primevals, our tactics like frenzied sharks. Shalahora gawked at the metal soldiers, the vast armada becoming a sight to behold. They shattered the horizon that led to my cities, and that path gave us a view of Leviathan as we passed over the shining bones below.

I dashed ahead of Shalahora, peering back at him, “You coming?”

Shalahora watched a primeval facing thirty golems, its body rent into slithers. Shalahora kept his gaze on that sight as we passed,

“I...Of course. Of course.”

We reached one of my border cities, the vast dome reaching up to the lowest layer of algae. The blue core shield rotated over the city, an impassable expanse of energy. The roads connecting the city to the others crackled with mana. Two guardsmen golems flew up to greet us, the bulky soldiers eyeing Shalahora with suspicion.

I pointed at my umbral friend, “We’re good. He’s my ally.”

The guardsmen bowed, “Yes, creator.”

I never programmed the whole bowing thing into them. It was something they began by themselves. Either way, a rupture in the city’s barrier split open before we flew into the protective bulwark. Elegant buildings rose up to the top of the blue bubble, the constructors building this place from the ground up.

Those skyscrapers fitted into the dome efficiently, and the different kinds of stones slotted onto the rainbow bone accents well. Compared to every other part of this forsaken planet, the niceties stuck out like a festering wound on someone’s face. Shalahora murmured, “This is beyond anything I expected of you.”

I eyed everything with a critical eye, “It’s better than I expected too. I didn’t make this city that long ago, so it looks like the golems have been working overtime.”

We landed in the tallest of the sleek spires, the windows made large enough for me to enter. The empty room served no purpose, so I made us two chairs by lifting a hand. Another mind saturated each seat with an antigravity well, so we didn’t snap the chairs

to bits. Another of my psyches activated the quintessence light above, the crystal brightening the room.

Another ego made a table for us, and another mind made water with ice cubes in it. Two other consciousnesses created dirt and plants in contained areas in the corners of the room. One of those plants ended up being some kind of fruit tree. Taking several of the fruits, we squished them into juice while a final psyche generated two glasses onto the table.

Plopping into the chair, I pooled the juice and ice into the glasses. Everything happened with my time dilation in effect, so it took about ten seconds. To Shalahora, that was about seven. The Sovereign watched it all happen before flowing into the chair I made for him. He lifted the glass of fruit juice, lifting it over his head. While inspecting the bottom of it, he mouthed,

“To be frank, none of this feels real to my eyes.”

I scowled, picking up my glass. I leaned onto one hand while sipping on the lifeless juice, “Yeah, it’s the same here. Nothing on this planet feels real to me anymore by now.”

Tossing the whole cup into my mouth, I crunched on the glass, noting how soft it felt. Shalahora’s words sauntered in a slow drawl, “I’ve never seen an origin mage craft life from nothing.”

After canceling my time magic, I frowned at the random fruit juice. It tasted like sour cotton and dirt. I grimaced, “Well, let’s just say this doesn’t match the real thing. This is all a shade of its real self.” I raised a hand at the umbral Sovereign, “No offense against shades.”

The shadow lifted a hand, “None taken.” Shalahora poured the juice onto his palm, and it soaked into a thin film over his skin. The liquid split like veins coursing over him, all of them reaching his center. He turned his head to me,

“It is the first liquid I’ve had since arriving, so regardless of the origin, it’s quite refreshing. Thank you.”

I wafted Event Horizon over the fruit tree, the entire plant disintegrating into mana outside of a dozen of the fruits. I spiraled them onto the table in front of Shalahora while crafting a stone bowl in front of him. They landed in a neat pile, and I gestured to them, “Go ham, man. They’re yours.”

Shalahora peered at me, “Considering the brevity of your world’s existence in Schema’s universe, you must be worshipped as a god in your homeworld.”

I shook my head, “No one really knows me. Well, anyone that watches streams do, but that’s not many yet. Anyways, let’s get down to business. We’ll get this alliance started off right.”

Shalahora leaned back, watching primevals fighting far in the distance, “Then I am here to listen as long as you’re here to speak.”

I relayed what I’d done since coming, excluding the mental struggle of the time magic. That felt too personal to share for some reason, so I kept it to myself. Shalahora listened with his arms gripping the side of his marble chair. As I finished, Shalahora nodded,

“Then this is why you wished for our alliance to delay until the latter half of our stay here. This was a pursuit done in a lonely light without any other alternative.”

He loosened his grip on his armrests, “It must’ve been difficult to fight for so long here, and that temporal dilation of yours only accentuates that issue. I feel for your journey. It was a difficult one, but you demonstrate the fruits of will and the harvest of hardship. Bear this city with pride, for it stands tall in the face of hell, a beacon to any that sees it.”

The acknowledgment felt sincere, and I peered off. I covered a grin while saying, “Well, you know, I did what I had to...How about you?”

Shalahora peered up, “If only my journey carried the same yield. I started near the other rulers, my shades finding them within the first few days of our arrival.”

I raised a hand, “Wait a minute, you really mean that?”

Shalahora raised a hand, a shade spawning, “Yes. My shades are beneficial for scouting purposes.”

I shook my hands, “I’m talking about when you said within a few days. You can actually tell the time here?”

Shalahora tilted his head in confusion, “Oh, that...My shades live for almost three standard galactic days. I used their duration to determine how long we’ve lived here.”

I blinked, “Genius. Just genius.”

Shalahora leaned back, “Are...Are impressed by that?”

I lifted my hands, “Well yeah. I have noidea how long we’ve been here.”

Shalahora answered my unspoken question, “We’re just over half the way through Schema’s guideline of three months. For that reason, tensions are mounting.”

I leaned back, “What, no way. It’s been way longer than three months.”

Shalahora’s eyes narrowed, “What are you talking about? Hm...Wait.” He leaned forward in his chair, contemplating my words, “You’re the newest ruler. Hm, you mustn’t be measuring in standard galactic time. Your confusion stems from that cause, surely.”

I leaned back into my chair, my soul leaving my body. I facepalmed, “What? Oh... Duh.”

I massaged my temples, “It’s not my sense of time. It’s Schema’s. Oof.”

Shalahora peered at my city as he shrugged, “By my measure, wealth and ignorance are better than knowledge and poverty. One is fixed with a few words while the other requires many actions.”

I raised a hand, “Thanks for the compliment, but I’m taking that loss on the chin. Anyways, sorry for interrupting you.”

Shalahora’s blinked a few times before interlocking his hands, “It’s no issue. I’d imagine that would be a rather maddening conundrum given the lack of days here, and you lacked perspective. As for what I’ve said, I created a temporary alliance with the survivors here after arriving. The planet’s hostility seemed endless, so I chose the pertinent path.”

I shrugged, “Makes sense.”

Shalahora’s eyes narrowed, “Since coming here, the survivor’s caution saved many, and their wariness proved wise. Many rulers chose to plunder the planet at will, however. Many have died from the elements, but that was merely the beginning.”

Shalahora sighed, “Many rulers are elected after their ancestral creators have died. Some carry little combat ability, and as you may imagine, that fared poorly here.”

I nodded, “This planet is a hellhole, that’s for sure.” A look of disgust came over my face, “So they all died, just like Schema wanted.” Many of my minds jumped into action, “Even better, it was a targeted genocide. The richest empires are the ones most likely to have elected weak rulers based on actual ruling ability rather than raw strength.”

I grimaced, “So Schema will assimilate the guilds with the most resources and the least chance of actually stopping the takeover. A bit psychopathic, but well played.” I clapped nice and slow, “Good one, Schema. You really got one on us.”

Shalahora’s gaze turned sad, “That’s a brutal cynicism you carry. I could not bear it.”

I frowned, “You’ve focused mostly on fringewalking, so you might not be as aware. To me, I’ve tried pulling my planet from the dark ages for a while now-” I whirled my hand in a circle, “But situations like this keep stopping me. Apparently, it’s stopping everybody else too.”

Shalahora peered off, “Hm...Perhaps. We’d never of survived the eldritch without Schema, however. He gave us magic, the system, and our means of communication. That alone offsets these plots.”

I took a breath, “Hah...Maybe. From the way I see it, my planet already had an infrastructure, defenses, and decent technology. Schema destroyed our communications, scrambled everybody all over the place, and put us back into the stone ages. We’re still licking our wounds from that initial scrambling.”

I shook my head, “So Schema took all of that away then pretended like we only gained it in the first place because of him. He used a hypothetical situation to indebt us. The thing is, I was born before the system was on my planet, so I remember a time before he arrived. Those days were better than the endless war we’ve joined.”

My hand crushed the armrest of my chair, “And Schema’s mass murder of peaceful factions doesn’t exactly build up my opinion of him. It has a habit of rubbing me the wrong way.”

A prolonged silence passed over us. Shalahora murmured, “I’ve never dwelled on Schema’s actions this deeply, but I shall reflect on them more in the future.”

I calmed myself down, remaking the armrest, “I’m just being salty. I don’t know why.” Gazing at the shining sea of bones, I nodded, “I take that back. It’s this planet.”

Shalahora gazed at the bones with me, and he said,

“This planet isn’t the only reason rulers died here. Valgus Uuriyah and his followers have killed many of the wanderers that lingered and wandered from the beginning.”

My eyes turned to slits, “He killed other rulers? Why?”

“To eliminate competition.”

I pulled my hair back while disgust spread onto my face again, “He’s an idiot. It would’ve been so easy to leverage his combat strength into economic gain. He acts as the other faction’s guardian. From that position, he controls the flow of resources and leaves this place a hero. And number one in the lottery’s rankings.”

I threw my hand out, "Instead, he chose to be a villain because he's working with one brain cell."

Shalahora laughed before shaking his head, "You seem so different from when we talked before."

I raised my eyebrows, my primordial wake stretching over us both. I pursed my lips, "Huh. It's, er, a part of my abilities. This mindset lets me think a bit sharper than normal." I opened my eyes wide, "Though, I'm a bit sharper too, so it's a give and take."

Shalahora stood up, "Ah, then that explains it." He walked to the window, interlocking his arms behind himself,

"My last bit of relevant information revolves around Valgus. He chose not to attack the survivor's faction. I am certain that passivity came about because the survivors assimilated the pro-Schema faction within the first two weeks. That swelled their numbers to over two hundred, a number Valgus couldn't eclipse."

A hollow, cynical smile traced my lips, "Ah, Schema's supporting faction didn't last too long. I wonder how pro Schema they are now that everything's settled down?"

I recoiled, noticing my scathing tone, and I straightened up in my chair, "I keep interrupting you. Again, I'm sorry."

"No one may be kind at all times, just as no one may look towards the brighter side of every situation. At times, life forces us to show our barbs as if we were thorned willows. These are your thorns, so wear them with pride."

"Hm...Thanks."

Shalahora nodded, "While I have no more factual information on Valgus, I carry my suspicions. I've searched this planet for a while now, both for treasure and your presence. Fate played a large part in finding you, but it was no accident I was wafting through these dunes near the shining hell."

"You're looking for him?"

Shalahora seethed, his claws brandished, “I believe Valgus intends to do something with the bones here.”

Shades rushed our direction from outside the city, and Shalahora turned to them,

“And I shall uncover exactly what that something is.”

Chapter 343: Hell Hath Opportunities

Scratching my hair, I closed my eyes, trying to swim through my memories. Once more, behemoths interrupted my train of thought. I killed them, keeping a fit of explosive anger in check. Laying back on the side of a sand dune, I made a few sand angels in the dust. It gave me a nostalgic feeling as if I were a child in the snow again. In my ears, a low, droning voice ebbed in,

“And fate has decided we meet again, I see. It’s good to see you again.”

I looked up, and Shalahora gazed back down at me. My eyes widened as he tilted his shadowy face at me,

“You...appear troubled.”

I flopped myself up off the sand before stabilizing in the air. Coughing into one hand, I murmured, “Just, you know, enjoying the scenery.”

Shalahora peered at one of the glowing dunes in the distance. His voice droned in, “It is beautiful here.”

A silent moment passed, something I’d been hoping for but never received since arriving on this damn planet. Pulling my time magic back, I blinked, “What’s going on? Why aren’t the behemoths attacking us?”

Sounds returned to normal, including Shalahora's voice. The Sovereign tilted his head at me, his bright blue eyes piercing, "They cannot see nor sense us. I have camouflaged us both."

I let out a sigh, "What I wouldn't have given to have something like that since coming here."

Shalahora let out a gentle laugh, "It is easy to cherish what we were never given, but it is difficult to appreciate what we have."

I smiled back, "Good point. I'll keep it in mind." I scratched my cheek, "So, how have things been?"

Shalahora peered away from the ossuary and towards the shady side of the planet, "I've done well, so I've gained enough resources that I'm now comfortable with my position in this lottery. However, I know only a little of what the other rulers are doing now. My information is outdated. In particular, Valgus and his faction are a mystery I've yet to unravel."

I nodded, "Same here. I've been trying to establish myself around this area."

Shalahora gazed around, seeing only sand dunes in every direction. He looked down before putting a hand on my shoulder, umbral energy dolloping up off of him. He spoke with a gentle tone,

"You... You have done well to be alive, given where we are. I understand that asking for help is difficult. It is to accept your weakness and make it known. I want you to know that the first step onto the path of strength involves acknowledgment. Only then--"

I furrowed my brow, "What's with the condolence?"

Shalahora lowered his hand, "Hm, ahem...I've gazed around at your established territory and...Uhm."

A sandworm burst from the ground, destroying a dune. My sand angels remained in the red grains below, and Shalahora gestured to them, "It seems as though collecting

resources has been difficult. While I am not overtly wealthy, I can share a portion of my spoils if only to prevent your guild from being dismantled by Schema.”

I shook my head, “Woah, I’m totally fine on resources.”

Shalahora leaned back, “Oh...Then why do you appear so troubled?”

I grabbed the back of my head, “It’s that obvious?”

Shalahora peered away and pressed his hand to his cheek as if scratching it, “Of course not...It was merely my skill of observance.”

The guy walked up to me while I made sand angels in the middle of the desert by myself. My struggle couldn’t have been more obvious, but he still spared my feelings. I burst out laughing, “I get it. I really do.” I peered towards the ossuary,

“Honestly, it’s been rough. Really rough.”

Shalahora stared through me while lowering his hands, “Your species must require social contact. This isolation must weigh on you heavily. I am different, as my kind was made to be alone.”

My eyes widened, “Oh man, that’s convenient. While it sucks to admit, being alone has taken its toll on me. You already saw.”

Shalahora put a fist to his chest, “I am here now, so you drift alone no longer.”

I gave him a nod and a smile, “Hell yeah.”

Shalahora’s eyes turned to slits, and he zoned in on a golem flying towards us. The umbral shade lifted his dark claws, “Something approaches us. Be wary.”

I lifted a hand, “It’s not an enemy.”

The scouting golem stopped before me, unable to see Shalahora but knowing I was there. My soldier bowed, "It's good to see you, creator."

I raised a brow, "Report?"

"Shades have been spotted nearby. They come from an unknown source. We haven't attacked them yet, as they've been non-hostile."

I tilted a hand to Shalahora, and the Sovereign appeared. The shady ruler's eyes widened, "You serve Daniel?" He turned to me, "I thought you were alone?"

The scout answered for me, "We are his flesh and blood. He gave us life, and now we live to continue his purpose. Our creator feels alone because we act like one, though we despise our inability to deplete our maker's loneliness."

Shalahora blinked, "We? There are more of your kind?"

The scout omened, "We are legion. We are many."

Shalahora gave the scout a nod, "Then I am as well." The writhing shadow lifted a massive arm, and several shades appeared. Shalahora murmured,

"These are my incarnations. They exist outside of me but retain a semblance of my mind. They are like my children, so please, be kind to them. They, in turn, will be kind to you."

The scout turned to me, waiting for an answer. I pointed a thumb at Shalahora while I said, "You heard the man. Play nice."

The scout bowed to the shades, "It is good to meet you, children of Shalahora. We shall work together with kindness in the future, and may our legions prosper."

Shalahora bowed to the golem, "You are very polite, and so, we shall ally with ease. Know that my children will offer what you've offered them in turn, and may our alliance prosper." Shalahora stood up, "Daniel. Would you mind if I see the others?"

I tapped my chin, thinking. After a moment, I shrugged, “Eh, sure. Why not.” I pointed to the ossuary, “It’s this way.”

We darted towards the multi-tiered hell cake that was the ossuary. Keeping a leisurely pace, we pierced the heated air and waves of gravitation. No behemoths attacked us, something that I appreciated about Shalahora’s presence already. After a while, the edge of the ossuary appeared.

From there, Shalahora stopped, so I did as well. I raised my brow, “What’s with the holdup?”

He narrowed his eyes, “That’s the shining hell. Why are we going there?”

I peered back and forth, “Uh...Because that’s where the golems are?”

Shalahora brandished his claws, “You mean to tell me you drifted towards that place on purpose? Forgive my skepticism, but I find that hard to believe.”

“That’s where all the good stuff is, and I wanted some privacy.”

Shalahora widened one eye and narrowed another as if raising a brow, “What resources lie in that ruin, aside from death and the shining shards?”

I smiled, “Hah, it’s good you don’t know since I’ll have plenty to show you.”

We reached the cusp of the ossuary before I pointed at the line where shining bone met gleaming sand, “So I’ll be honest, the shining hell isn’t a bad name by any means, but I call it the ossuary because of how it’s made.”

Shalahora landed on the living bones, placing a palm on them, “Ossuary: where the bones of the dead are laid to rest. Why name this place that?”

I raised a finger, “We’ll talk where it’s safe. Come on.”

We darted through the ossuary, the kelp layers getting denser over time. Each layer compounded on the other, the writhing movements of behemoths masked by the kelp layers above. As the light of Leviathan dimmed to disparate rays, the primevals came out to play. They warred in the distance, and Shalahora kept away from them. With his expert cloaking ability, he evaded their presence.

But I didn't because I never even imagined using a cloaking ability of any kind. Several primevals ended up disrupting our voyage but not for long. My scouts communicated with the network of cities, and the vast legion I amassed arrived in a swarm. A hundred core golems raced overhead. They tore through the kelp forest, destroying expanses of kelp. A dozen dogpiled each behemoth, goring them apart in seconds.

More war golems piled onto the primevals, our tactics like frenzied sharks. Shalahora gawked at the metal soldiers, the vast armada becoming a sight to behold. They shattered the horizon that led to my cities, and that path gave us a view of Leviathan as we passed over the shining bones below.

I dashed ahead of Shalahora, peering back at him, "You coming?"

Shalahora watched a primeval facing thirty golems, its body rent into slithers. Shalahora kept his gaze on that sight as we passed,

"I...Of course. Of course."

We reached one of my border cities, the vast dome reaching up to the lowest layer of algae. The blue core shield rotated over the city, an impassable expanse of energy. The roads connecting the city to the others crackled with mana. Two guardsmen golems flew up to greet us, the bulky soldiers eyeing Shalahora with suspicion.

I pointed at my umbral friend, "We're good. He's my ally."

The guardsmen bowed, "Yes, creator."

I never programmed the whole bowing thing into them. It was something they began by themselves. Either way, a rupture in the city's barrier split open before we flew into the protective bulwark. Elegant buildings rose up to the top of the blue bubble, the constructors building this place from the ground up.

Those skyscrapers fitted into the dome efficiently, and the different kinds of stones slotted onto the rainbow bone accents well. Compared to every other part of this forsaken planet, the niceties stuck out like a festering wound on someone's face. Shalahora murmured, "This is beyond anything I expected of you."

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“My last bit of relevant information revolves around Valgus. He chose not to attack the survivor’s faction. I am certain that passivity came about because the survivors assimilated the pro-Schema faction within the first two weeks. That swelled their numbers to over two hundred, a number Valgus couldn’t eclipse.”

A hollow, cynical smile traced my lips, “Ah, Schema’s supporting faction didn’t last too long. I wonder how pro Schema they are now that everything’s settled down?”

I recoiled, noticing my scathing tone, and I straightened up in my chair, “I keep interrupting you. Again, I’m sorry.”

“No one may be kind at all times, just as no one may look towards the brighter side of every situation. At times, life forces us to show our barbs as if we were thorned willows. These are your thorns, so wear them with pride.”

“Hm...Thanks.”

Shalahora nodded, “While I have no more factual information on Valgus, I carry my suspicions. I’ve searched this planet for a while now, both for treasure and your presence. Fate played a large part in finding you, but it was no accident I was wafting through these dunes near the shining hell.”

“You’re looking for him?”

Shalahora seethed, his claws brandished, “I believe Valgus intends to do something with the bones here.”

Shades rushed our direction from outside the city, and Shalahora turned to them,

“And I shall uncover exactly what that something is.”

Chapter 344: Enmity

Interrupting my thoughts, Shalahora simmered, “What is this? You intend to fight us?”

Iona Joan walked out, her angel wings locked behind her. Several other rulers paced behind her, each looking like members of a council or guards. The bubbly ruler walked up and gazed at me, a smile on her lips and a twinkle in her eye,

“Calm down, Shalahora. We’re just making sure he’s trustworthy.” Her eyes narrowed,

“Well then...Tell us everything we want to know...Mmkay?”

I condensed my wake, time crawling by. While standing still, several minds considered how to approach the situation. Considering my abilities and the survivors’ lack of combat potential, I had many options. Several of my psyches wanted to mold out of my constraints, while others wanted to leave my body and regrow outside it.

Before doing any of that, a lone Daniel presented a more devious plan. The other Daniels enjoyed it, so we all chose to follow it. A series of debates and arguments

began about the plan's specifics, each of us iterating on the others' approaches. After a few minutes of discussion, Iona frowned at us. She ebbed out in a slow drone,

"What's wrong? Has an eldritch filled your throat, or are you just stupid?"

I pitied her for a moment, her lack of awareness setting her up for a slam dunk. Unfortunately for her, I was playing ball, metaphorically speaking, of course. I unloaded my wake and kept it unactivated yet extended. I frowned at her, my face covered with my helmet. I said,

"What's with the capture? I haven't done anything to any of you."

Iona jeered, "You're a newer ruler, so I'll cut you some slack here. We've talked with other rulers, and many of them are allied with Valgus. You and that Baldowah maniac talked before arriving here, so we're not going to welcome you back with open arms."

Shalahora deadpanned, "Valgus crushed his body fifty times over. That's talking to you?"

Iona narrowed her eyes and pouted towards Shalahora, "Hey now, I'm the one interrogating him, not you. Stay out of this, honey."

I mentally recoiled at her attempts to be 'cute.' It contrasted with any other approach I'd ever seen by a ruler, and it carried the opposite effect she intended on me. It was a blatant attempt at lowbrow manipulation, both an insult and an exploitation. I kept that to myself as I frowned,

"Regardless whether I said it or Shalahora said it, that's still my defense. Valgus and I are not friends."

Iona locked her hands behind herself, "I'll be the judge of that." She pointed her finger and gestured to all of me, "Now, tell me this. You've survived on this planet for this long, correct?"

I blinked,

“Duh.”

She frowned, “You don’t have to be so mean about it.”

I peered down at my restraints, the cords burning my skin. Peering between the burn marks and her, I sneered, “Oh, I’m the one being mean? Ok, just making sure.”

She sighed, “Hm...Either way, you got through all of this. I’m wondering if you joined Valgus’s faction. Do you have any proof you didn’t?”

Shalahora stated, “Aside from the fact he was attacked by him on sight?”

She did a playful huff before snapping, “Hey now.” She put a finger over her lips and winked at Shalahora, “Shush.”

The cute shenanigans repulsed me. I snapped, “I’m with Shalahora, and we know what Valgus is up to. I’m also offering you all protection here, but you’re getting in my way.” I narrowed the eye slit of my helmet, “It’s almost like you don’t want me to give the rulers here what they need...Is that true?”

The other rulers peered down at her. She struck a pose, and I slowly blinked in astonishment. She murmured, “Come on now, everyone, you know I’m not like that.”

To my complete, utter, and absolute amazement, the other rulers blushed. I couldn’t even fathom what the hell was going on, but I was losing my patience for it. I locked eyes with the other rulers,

“Are you all poisoned or something? Otherwise, this is...This is disappointing. I expected more from the rulers of worlds.”

Iona Joan’s tone changed on a dime once more, “Look, I’m trying to be kind here. Now either you’re going to answer my questions, or else-” She snapped her fingers, and my restraints tightened, “The situation will get nasty, mmkay?”

The restraints tightened, burrowing inches into my skin and flesh. I glared down, unphased and adamant, while my eyes locked onto Iona. I remained silent, the

atmosphere of the room changing in an instant. She twitched and looked away, unable to hold my gaze. I kept the room in that silence before murmuring,

“You think you have control here?”

Shalahora took a few steps back, giving me room. The other rulers, not trusting their own magic, did the same. I tilted my head to Iona, and I stayed in my restraints,

“People like you try to set up ‘rules’ in a conversation. They’re unspoken restrictions, but they are always felt. It’s a game people buy into without even being aware they’ve joined in. Negotiators always set up the rules to compensate for what they can and cannot accomplish...Just like this, and just like you.”

Iona frowned, “Ok, well, I’m not the one in chains, am I?”

I held the room in quiet. It lingered before I stated,

“No. You’re wrong. The chains I wear are physical, and they can be removed, snapped, or broken. Your chains are ones of ability, and they require the passage of years, the trials of pain, and the resolve of patience to overcome. That is no simple task... However-“

I stepped forward, my body hissing while the energy cords stretched. I kept stating my words,

“What if your chains were more tangible than my own?”

I took another step, the mana cables humming from the effort to restrain me,

“What if your lies are like glass, both brittle and waiting to be shattered?”

With one more step, I stood before her, twice her height and countless times her size. The energy cords squealed out in pain as they held me, but I was silent. I regenerated faster than the chains could burn through me. I stood taller than she could stand.

I leaned towards her,

“Your domain is built upon the ethereal. It is a castle of sand. It is a fortress of mirrors. It cannot move. It cannot breathe. My kingdom is different. It is moved with each of my steps. It heeds my call, every part awake and in motion.”

I extended Event Horizon over her and the room, and I quaked the dimension they stood on. I simmered,

“My kingdom cannot be taken from me. It is the mastery of my mind and the body I’ve built. That is why you convince others while I resolve myself. That’s why you rely on lies while I establish truth...Now-“

The mana cables ruptured, and I reached out my hand. Iona gazed up at me, fear and awe mixing in her expression before I shifted her with a gravity well. I moved a single finger as I did, emphasizing the ease of it. Iona Joan blinked before I spread my arms to the others,

“Let’s discuss some deals.”

I smiled,

“Mmkay?”

Chapter 345: The Elements of Disaster

The mana cables ruptured, and I reached out my hand. Iona gazed up at me, fear and awe mixing in her expression before I shifted her with a gravity well. I moved a single finger as I did, emphasizing the ease of it. Iona Joan blinked before I spread my arms to the others,

“Let’s discuss some deals.”

I smiled,

“Mmkay?”

Behind Iona, the two rulers in diplomatic robes peered at one another. Mana streams ceased flowing from them, their magic muted. Behind them, the two guards wore graphene plating while they fiddled with their weapons. With a casual inspection of their gravities, I uncovered the guards’ armors weighed more than they did. They wore some kind of lead under shielding for the rays of Leviathan. The warriors crippled themselves to stop radiation’s rampancy.

On the other hand, the diplomats never left this place, each member showing no wear or tear from the elements. The humanoids kept slender forms with low densities throughout, owing to their lifestyles. They sat in chairs and talked a lot, so they fit the mold they made for themselves.

All of them besides Iona that is.

Her bones mirrored the density of graphene, and her muscles carried a similar density as well. Molds of metal in her arms and head exposed the presence of cybernetics along with silicone. She surgically replaced her bones and laced her musculature with graphene or something similar, and she owned expensive augments.

She went under a surgeon’s scalpel many times; that much was certain. Feeling a bit icky about looking under everyone’s skin, I lowered my hands, “Alright everyone, I can guarantee a habitable zone that’s perfectly safeguarded here. That’s my initial offer.”

Iona wanted to say something, but she quieted after our confrontation. Good. A different ruler stepped up, its body like a short and squat catfish. Around its maroon skin, it channeled water magic that flowed through its gills and misted over its exposed, slimy skin. Its jewelry showed wealth, but its eyes expressed little emotion as it garbled out,

“You’re certain of that? It would appear your body is the only reason you’ve survived. After all, that metal shell’s robustness can’t be shared, now can it?”

I pointed at him, “Fortunately, you’re wrong about that. Anyways, where is everybody? There should be hundreds of you, not five.”

Iona slid into the conversation, “Not every ruler is present each time someone arrives.”

Peering around at the pyramid's underground entrance, various humidifiers aimed towards us from several directions. We talked in a decontamination center, so I nodded, "Makes sense. Come on, let's see how everyone else is doing. I want to see what I can offer and where I can help out."

The rulers stepped out of my way as I walked forward. Iona snarked, "Hah, help us. You're here to make some quick credits. And anyway, do you even know where to go?"

I kept walking, "Yeah. I do."

While we stepped towards a doorway, echoes reverberated off every surface. Throughout the building, the heat from plasma tubes ebbed in, but the rooms kept comfortable temperatures. The gravitation only lessened slightly by comparison. Using the tactile info like pieces of a puzzle, I constructed a map of this place in my head.

Considering the simplicity of the building, it wasn't hard to use the map in real-time. When I reached the first doorway, two pieces of graphene-reinforced steel stared back at me. I turned to the rulers, "How do you open these? Well, besides breaking them."

Iona frowned, but she stepped up to the panel and surged her mana into the device. It opened while I furrowed my brow in confusion. She answered my questioning glance,

"My mana signature is used to open doors, and the tech here doesn't respond to anything else." She pointed up at me, "And before you go calling everyone lunatics for relying on me like that, I gave everybody mana crystals already. Everyone stored them in their personal storage rings, and each crystal's plenty of mana for our stay here. It was for security, and I just so happened to be someone with a lot of mana. I mean it when I say that's all there is to it."

I raised my brow, "That's a solid defense...It sounds like it's not your first time making it."

Iona peered off, "It's not like I'm trying to make life more complicated here. I'm the only healer left, and everyone else does something useless. It's a real pain."

The four other rulers stared at her before she coughed into a hand. Iona stammered, “You know, for this world and, uh, at this time. Everyone’s talents shine in different ways.”

They gave a few nods, accepting the awkward apology. Soaking in her mana, the doorway opened, revealing more reinforced steel walkways lined with plasma power couplings. This single hallway composed the entire bottom piece of the diamond base. It led up to stairwells that went all the way up to the upper floors.

My head nearly scraped the roof here, so I bent down and tapped one of the top panels while raising a brow, “You all walk up the stairs in this place? For real?”

The red catfish ruler spoke up, “It’s not that simple. We’ve been forced to use them because of power concerns. Aside from that, establishing a warp isn’t possible given the mathematical complexity of Leviathan-7’s orbit.”

Iona sighed, “Yeah...Lots of the people here can’t sustain the gravity and radiation. A few were poisoned by the atmosphere too, and some are still recovering from when Valgus destroyed my faction. It was a dark day...Here, we’re dealing with people who had their metabolism’s destroyed, so they require constant medical attention. Dialysis, tissue regeneration, etcetera.”

The catfish gave her a knowing nod, “Don’t forget the others experiencing organ draining and blood pressure issues from the enhanced gravity. It’s a complex situation, and every solution requires power to fix it.”

With my arm down, mana sparked in my palm, “Give me some space for a second.”

I generated a panel of ice between the others and me. Simultaneously, I lifted my arm. Temporally accelerated and visceral, my mana coursed with violence, the conversion of the energy creating a hazard. After a few seconds, a shockwave unleashed from my fingertips. Leviathan-7’s levity lessened over the entire base as I saturated an antigravity well over the whole building.

While I lowered my arm, my palm glowed white. The metal hummed before I flash froze the heated dimensional fabric. The icy shield melted into a warm mist, the catfish ruler garbling out,

“Well, I must say, this is quite refreshing even without considering the pressure you’ve taken off. It reminds me of the marshes of my homeworld. Ah, beautiful just to remember them.”

His whiskers bounced all over the place as he moved in the mist. The other rulers let out sighs of relief, mainly from gravity lessening. Their ears popped from the pressure change while I looked up. I eyed the ceiling,

“Think of that as a diplomatic gift. Now, let’s remodel the place.”

Pacing over towards the center of this structure, I snapped my fingers.

A steel plate above me splintered, the wall panels lacking graphene reinforcement. Without the gray material, the metal sheared like peanut brittle. The sound rippled through us like a hailstorm of bullets, and the rulers cringed in pain.

I gazed down at them, “Oh, sorry about that. I should’ve softened the sounds, but I can only do that with runes. Hm.”

I remembered how I quietened my cities in the ossuary. I used a premade inscription that Torix lent me for just such a purpose. Another pang of loneliness shot through me, but I quelled it. It wasn’t the time for that. Instead of wallowing, I inspected the opened structure. Nothing traced through it, two plates composing a thick floor supported by struts.

I pierced the rest of the floor, this time with heat instead of force. The molten steel rained down and pooled into a gravity well as I split open the center of the survivor’s fortress. After liquefying a hole in the roof, I pressed a hand down. Dispersing my shove’s force into four telekinetic blades, I cleaved the steel plate beneath us. Lifting my lowered arm, I raised us through the place using a gravity well.

The third diplomat, a cerulean and thin lizard, shouted, “Did you even check to see if there was wiring or insulation first?”

I rolled my eyes while lifting us off the floor, “Of course. That’s why I went with physical force in the first place. The energy’s easier for me to control.”

While speaking, I composed runes onto the cut panel, crystallized a thin sheet of mana under it for power, and replaced the floor panel I took. I waved at all of it,

“This will be an elevator for you all to use. These runes will solidify the gravity wells of this structure, and I’ve replaced the struts used here. It isn’t as if steel is in short supply anyway. I’ll make sure to give back any I take.”

The blue lizard hissed, “Powering this device will be difficult, and we already struggle to frame the electronics to respond to everyone given the language constraints here.”

I leaned back, his concerns valid, “Huh...I’ll make it a psionic control then. Either that or we can default to Iona’s mana signature like everything else. Anything else?”

The blue lizard’s eyes narrowed, “As of now...No.”

We rose to the second floor of the base’s foundation, and I peered around at a medical bay. Many rulers of different shapes and sizes laid out in pain, most of them suffering grievous wounds or illnesses. They gasped and sputtered out in agony, many wanting an end to their suffering. I muttered, “These are the victims of the radiation and gravitation?”

Iona looked with sadness, “Yes. The radiation here’s caused DNA damage to everyone who isn’t resistant to it. This is the best facility we can offer them, and if you couldn’t tell, this isn’t enough. Restoring shredded DNA is taking everything we have. Power systems are run by manual mana instead of electricity or something else. Ugh, it’s hard to work with.”

I tapped my side, “I can stop further radiation exposure and remove what they have in them, but I can’t fix the damage that’s already done. Also, there will be plenty of power for everything. That much I know I can fix.”

I pointed at everyone, “Can someone write this down for the other survivors? I don’t want to have to repeat myself over and over.”

The rulers stared at each other, wondering who’d do it first. Iona sighed before pulling out a pen made of mana. Elegant, refined lines of quintessence constructed a sheet of silky paper in her palms, and in gorgeous prose, she wrote down what I said. I couldn’t read it, but damn, it was pretty.

She sighed, “Ok big guy, I’ll do it.”

I gazed at the other hallways, finding resources buried here. Rainbow bones, four hundred blue cores, and rare treasures piled up in several storage compartments. I gave a nod of approval, “Huh, you guys have more stuff than I expected.”

Iona frowned, “It’s split up between the survivors here, so it’s not as much as you’d think.” Her eyes narrowed, “But, uh, you’re not going to take our artifacts and resources...Are you?”

I shook my head, “Stealing from the poor isn’t my thing. I prefer earning my awards.”

The blue lizard raised his brow, “Thank you for calling us poor. We appreciate it.”

Shalahora condensed an arm and raised it, “Ah, Daniel likely meant pitiful or weak.”

I held down a laugh before Shalahora raised two condensed arms, “Oh, I didn’t mean pitiful. It’s, uhm, more like pathetic and cowardly. Wait, I mean useless and muted. That’s not quite right, hm, think of it like this-“

The other rulers gawked at Shalahora before I put my arm over the rough approximation of his shoulders, “Shalahora, I meant that some of these rulers are down on their luck. Seeing that, I want to help them so they can help me.”

A thoughtful glance passed over Shalahora, “It is like a donation to the dying. I didn’t realize you enjoyed charity.”

Iona scoffed, “Ok, we all understand what you guys think of us. Can we move on?”

Before Shalahora offended the rulers further, I lifted us up another level. Metal pooled over me, and greenery came into view. Many plants filtered the base’s atmosphere, pools of algae oxidizing the air. A few captured creatures from the surface roamed around, pollenizing and pruning the shrubs on their own. Three rulers processed the food in the meantime. They butchered animals, peeled fruits, and cut veggies.

My mouth watered at the sight, not having enjoyed any food in a long time. Those rulers must've kept the base fed, their positions secure. Regardless of their jobs, they gawked at our group melting through their floor. Before they panicked, I raised a hand,

“Hey, I’m new, and I’m helping remodel the place. Continue as you were.”

Iona rolled her eyes, “He’s not lying. I’ll vouch for him.”

They ignored me but listened to Iona, the three rulers getting back to their botanical work. I looked at the massive room before mouthing,

“You know, this is a lot of space for air purifying and food. Does this place serve a different purpose? Like a park or something?”

Iona put her hands on her hips, “What? No. Breathing and eating are pretty important, and it isn’t like we’re making this place take up three floors or anything. It’s necessary to reduce mana costs.”

I waved my hands at the terrarium, “I can turn this into a small room, and it will supply more of what you actually need. You’ll save some space and food, something you’re probably all lacking in.”

Shalahora oozed out his words like liquid dark, “He speaks the truth. He may bring life from nothing more than mana. I’ve seen it.”

The blue lizard peered at a bubbling pit of algae, “Food and space are the least of our concerns, but we can exchange something for the base adjustment. It frees these three to handle other work at the minimum.”

I shook my head, “Right now, they’re focused on getting everyone baseline nutrition. They’ll be able to focus on making the food taste good by the time I finish, and that should bolster morale at a minimum.”

The catfish ruler patted his robed belly, “You speak a language I quite like to hear, from the tone to the inflections.”

I walked back to the center of the room, my hand saturated with mana, “Then let’s see what else is going haywire.”

After lifting everyone up, I gazed at the third floor. At this point, we neared the middle of the pyramid. Scientists experimented in a lab, many rulers studying the various fauna and wildlife of Leviathan-7. This included a few unique capsules holding the behemoths and piles of rainbow bone they investigated.

A few enigmatta roamed in the ranks, their pressurized suits having their settings on low. The gravity and atmosphere did a lot of heavy lifting in that regard already. A few golemites also hovered and floated around, their airy forms shimmering. They carried and helped control different creatures, flowing in and out of the beasts.

I wasn’t the only one looking around. Several scientists gawked at me, and one shouted, “Have you had that building project ratified yet?”

I gave him a confident smile, “Absolutely. I’ll show everyone the paperwork later.”

The scientist nodded before getting back to work. I pointed at the golemites, “I’m guessing they’re the scouts?”

Iona raised her brow while thinning her lips, “That’s what they’re good for...That and mind magic, but you can only control so many of these giant eldritch at a time. Even they struggle with that, but I know a few rulers who’d handle it easily.”

Wondering if she knew the extent of my mind magic, I said, “Who’s able to control the behemoths?”

Iona furrowed her brow, “Behemoths?”

I waved away her question, “It’s an easy name to differentiate that sub-class of eldritch.”

The catfish ruler burbled, “Hm, it is fitting given their large stature...But if you’re wanting to classify eldritch by titles, you must have seen other eldritch here as well...What else is out there?”

Shalahora seethed his words like dense smoke, “The others are what we call the primevals. They are walking calamities, bringers of death and destruction. You will find none in this land, but the bounty you reap suffers from the lack of their presence.”

Iona blinked, taking that in, “Uhm...We’ll take this one step at a time, mmkay?”

I gave her a look, and she frowned. She crossed her arms, “What? I like the word...Or are you saying I can’t use it anymore?”

My eyes widened, “Well, it’s a pretty obnoxious catchphrase, so I guess it fits.”

She feigned distress, putting a hand over her forehead, “Oh my, could anyone come to my defense.”

The blue lizard hissed at me, “You do understand that the definition of annoying is relative. It’s a matter of opinion, something that can’t be proven. By labeling her, you’re reducing her agency which-“

I scoffed, “Come on now. Surely you know what she’s doing there? It’s obvious to everyone, right? You’re like some puppet on strings, and you’re dancing in her palm.”

The blue lizard’s voice rose, “If you’d been here from the start, you wouldn’t make such rash accusations. Iona has done miracles for setting up and establishing this place. We’d be lost without her, and her medical knowledge is second to none.”

Iona beamed, “Thanks, honey. I won’t forget you said that.”

I peered up and slowed time, giving myself a minute to think and for my minds to discuss. In about a minute, I came up with what I’d say next. I decompressed time, and I locked eyes with Iona,

“Is that why you didn’t want me here? I mean, you wouldn’t want the rulers here to be sick, weak, and helpless, now would you? I know that’s how you gained your influence and power after all; you treat the symptom to a problem, meaning that the problem’s solution invalidates you.”

I glared down, “It’s just a conflict of motives I’d like to bring up.”

The nearby scientists quit their chatter, and Iona flushed red with rage. Her fists tightened by her side before she menaced, “You have a lot to say for someone who hasn’t done a damn thing to help anyone here.”

I raised a brow, “Besides for the elevator and fixing the whole gravitation issue.”

Iona’s eyes narrowed, “But unlike me, you’re going to leave, and once you’re gone, your magic will leave with you. I’ll still be here, helping the sick and dying while you throw out criticism for it.”

I put my hands on my hips, “You’re ignoring my point. I’m not arguing that saving people is bad. I’m arguing you’re little introduction for me was because you didn’t want solutions here, and that’s a valid point you haven’t explained to me. Also, even after I leave, my magic won’t be coming with me. Everything I make will be here to stay.”

Shalahora peered at Iona, and she met his eye. A second passed, and she winced. She crossed her arms and stared at the ground, “Then I’ll take your word for it, Harbinger.”

I peered between them, and a tense air passed. Shalahora tilted his shadowy head at me, “I’ve settled it with her. She means well, so give her the grace so that she may loosen this noose you’ve tied around her neck.”

Confused by Shalahora, I let it go for now,

“Huh... Yeah. Alright.”

Iona looked up, and her eyes met the other rulers who stared at her with suspicion. She sighed before striking another pose, this time with a peace sign to match,

“Hey everyone, you know how this guy is. He says anything and everything, am I right?”

The other rules laughed, Iona somehow changing the topic and avoiding my argument entirely. I shook my head while walking across the lab, but my uppermost helmet spike scraped the ceiling. To stop the outflow of sparks, I condensed my body some. In my more diminutive form, I leaned over towards several scientists' studies. They continued toiling away, and I gave it a thumbs up,

"This is the perfect fuel for an exchange. I'd like everything you guys know about this planet."

The blue lizard snapped, "You want our information? That's one of the only resources we've piled up for Schema, so that's going to be hard to give up. You'd better be ready to pay us handsomely for it."

I pulled several blue cores out of my storage, the spacial warp rippling as they came out. Spiraling the humming spheres around me, I gave the lizard a knowing look, "I think I can make it worth the survivor's while."

One of the guards in the back of the group spoke up, her tone gruff like sandpaper. I recognized her voice since it was the one that interrupted Iona when we first spoke to the base.

The guard's muscled arms rippled as she banged an energized spear against the floor. She reminded me of a standing, scaled rhino as she grunted, "You need hired muscle? Pay me, and I'll do it."

I locked eyes with her, the previous ruler reduced to mercenary work. I put my hands on my hips, "You're fine with just being a guard now?"

She shrugged, "You know, I learned from ruling that there's a time and place for everything. In my case, it's not my time to lead. It's my time to follow, and there's honor in knowing my place. It's the reason I rose through the ranks of my homeworld, and it's why I survived thus far."

I blinked, "By following orders?"

She gave her chest plate a bang, "No. It's by listening, not by speaking. I try to lead through my actions, and I hope everyone has eyes enough to see what I've done."

I pointed at Iona, “Like saving her when she dives into boiling water?”

The guard’s gray skin crinkled as she smiled. Several large teeth flashed in her giant maw, “She is important, so I do what must be done. She’s saved several of my friends, and I am returning the favor.”

Hearing the guard’s words reminded me that every person here carried a high status at some point. Given the extreme constraints of this planet, most of their talents ended up being pointless. That made forgetting their histories easy since they lacked relevance on Leviathan-7. However, once we escaped, those talents would come back in full force.

That realization sparked an idea in my mind, and I smiled at the guard,

“What’s your name? Mine’s Daniel Hillside.”

The guard stood up straight, “Goragonahna-Jakolivitch. You may call me Ragonah if you wish.”

Her lips moved strangely as if she growled out instead of speaking. Still, I understood her. Peering down, I remembered that we lacked Schema’s language system here. I gestured to everyone, “How do I understand you all right now?”

The catfish ruler chimed, “That was my own doing. I constructed a language cipher that works throughout this facility, and I’ve maintained it since our arrival. It’s facilitated the exchange of ideas, information, and the unity of the survivor factions.”

I tilted my head at him, newfound respect forming for the talking catfish, “That’s very useful.”

He puffed out his chest, his luxurious robes waving about, “Indeed. I was a prodigious linguist, and even Schema noted my abilities. I worked with him, assisting The AI in constructing and maintaining its own language cipher. My specialty revolved around strange, alien languages, and over the ensuing centuries, I bought a few planets. I must say, I’ve done quite well for myself.”

I pointed my finger at the blue lizard, “What about you?”

The lizard narrowed its red eyes and hissed, “Why should I tell you anything?”

Iona pulled on his sleeve, and she looked up at him with puppy dog eyes as she said, “Hey...Can you do it for me?”

I held down vomit as the blue lizard’s attitude changed. It wheezed out, “I worked with various wiring firms that assisted Schema. We enabled galactic communication networks, and the maintenance of the projects Schema carried out. Intergalactic connections are complex, and we allow the long-distance transference of messages, resources, and the like.”

The blue lizard gestured a clawed limb to the catfish man, “Drelex and I have worked together before this accursed lottery, his linguistic skills being top-notch. We probably own ten times your brutish empire’s wealth and then some.” The blue lizard simmered, “But...That’s meaningless here, isn’t it?”

The catfish Drelex put a webbed hand on the blue lizard’s shoulder, “It’ll be fine.”

The blue lizard hacked, “It won’t. We’ll all die here soon.”

Drelex’s whiskers wiggled, “You’re probably just feeling depressed. You should go and sunbathe. Your kind most certainly loves that.”

The blue lizard sighed, “That’s a good idea. Excuse me, everyone.”

He got on all fours and slithered away in a jerky, twitching fashion. I got whiplashed by how alien it was, but he was a lizard. That’s kind of what lizards did.

I watched where the lizard crawled to for a moment. Iona scratched her cheek and murmured, “Aren’t we going up?”

I lifted the platform, “Ah, yeah. Sorry, I got distracted.”

She gave me a smirk, “Apology accepted.”

I leaned back, “Huh. I take it back.”

She locked her hands behind herself, grinning at me, “No take backsies. Hah. Gotcha.”

I furrowed my brow, confused at what she was playing at. I shook my head while looking forward, “Oookay. Anyways-“

We reached the next area, finding the weaponry and barracks. Here, only a few rulers lingered, but they showed more mettle than the others so far. A few looked up at Shalahora and me, each warrior wearing old scars and fresh wounds. Pacing past them, I murmured, “You guys look capable. What’s the issue with the behemoths?”

A series of keratinous plates walked up, the beast having no visible face or features. Between its natural armor, its flesh glowed with mana, and many tentacles sprawled over the floor. The creature telepathically spoke up in a gruff voice,

“You’re a new ruler? Hmph, you survived this long, so you can’t be as useless as you look.”

I tapped the side of my head, “I added the antigravity well, and I’m adding an elevator too. Looking at what you guys have, I’ll probably be adding some weapons and armor to the pile of fixes you guys need.”

The alien squirmed, “Yeah, I’ll wait until it actually happens.”

A few rulers kept staring down, each of them exhausted deep to their bones. The keratinous monstrosity thought over, “Besides, we don’t have the leeway to concern ourselves with a little interior redecorating.”

I swirled molten metal over my head, “You should, and why is everyone so tired?”

The shambling series of plates thought over, “This is a killing field. Schema sent us here to die, and the elements do just that. If it were just the eldritch, we’d be fine.” The

plate creature clicked and clacked its way towards a ruler sitting deep in meditation. The plate beast shivered as it thought,

“You see this? This is why everyone’s exhausted – we’re living mana batteries. When you become a walking power plant, you can snap at us about being exhausted.”

I held down a smirk, nodding, “Of course.”

The Cthulian monstrosity squirmed, “We’ve been putting every bit of our mental energy into making this place habitable for the weakest among us. They’re dragging us down, and we’re choking on the weight of it all.”

I frowned, “Powering this place is that much of a problem? Why not use solar panels or windmills?”

The plate monster spread its limbs, the body underneath grotesque like a bunch of exposed human gums and teeth, “Nothing holds up in the gravity here. That technology is exclusive to normal or low G planets. Hydrostatic powering methods work well, but Leviathan-7 is too hot for normal liquids.”

Shalahora’s words spilled like cold water, “Then what of the blue cores or the opals shards? You all exist as rulers that stand above others. Harnessing the energies present should be child’s play for so many of you unless you are all children yourselves.”

The plate thing stunk as it radiated out,

“Have you tried using the blue cores here? The energy’s too unstable. Every material disintegrates upon contact, and several have died trying to harness their energy. Even the bones of the behemoths can take over the minds of people, so only psionics can control them. Our best fighting force relies on the golemites...And relying on them requires sacrifice. Everyone knows that.”

I raised a hand, “I don’t. What’s up with the golemites?”

The plate thing got near me, fluids leaking from its body, “They create abyssals. Enough said.”

I'd ask someone else about it later, so I pointed at the putrid fluids, "Do you need that, or can I get rid of it?"

The plate thing retracted its many shells, its tone skittish, "Ah...I'm so sorry. I get like this when I'm angry. I ooze."

With Event Horizon, I converted the material to mana, sterilizing the area. I turned to the others, "What did you guys do before arriving here?"

A gray insectoid turned to me, its body like a hornet and mantis fused together. The green and yellow carapace contrasted its orange eyes, giving it an exotic appearance, and its mandibles squirmed in its mouth as it hissed over,

"I own mercenary group for centuries. After long time group expand. Much wealth, so I buy planet. I get class, teleport here. Bad decision. Regret it. Life pain now."

Simple, straightforward, and reminiscent of Hod, the gray insect stared at me with a predator's eyes. I liked him. Her. It. Whatever it was. I turned to the plate thing, "What about you? How did you become a ruler?"

It writhed about, "I worked my way up in a defense contract company. After I routinely proved my worth, I was put onto the board of directors. After centuries, I bought a beach planet, set up a few businesses there, and retired."

I furrowed my brow, "So none of you were active warriors before arriving here? Where's all the fighters?"

Iona stepped up and grimaced, "With Valgus. Who else?"

Putting my hands on my hips, I shook my head, "I can't wait to hear what that guy has to say because nothing he's done makes any sense. Either way, this is his loss. I can eliminate all mana constraints within the next few hours, so don't worry about that. Mana will be the least of your concerns."

The keratinous set of plates expanded, "Words are cheap."

The gray insect stood up, tilting its head at me, “You lie or tell truth?”

I shrugged, “Before long, my actions will speak for me.”

The gray insect spread its wings and arms, “Good. We need more of people like you. Valgus take all people like you to different place. Life pain now.”

I walked over towards the elevator platform, “We can hope so.”

Iona walked over, and the gray insect snapped itself over towards us in a violent jerk. Extraordinarily fast, it flashed over, and I raised my eyebrow at it. It hissed, “I want see too.”

I smiled, “Then let’s go.”

On the succeeding floor, we neared the place’s peak. This floor held an artificer’s den and a magician’s lair. Quite a few rulers set up shop here, nearly a hundred in this room alone. Most of them sat down while holding a cord in their hands, claws, or teeth. They channeled mana directly through the building, powering the systems. The plate thing wasn’t lying about power being a primary concern.

While lined up, the variety of the species stunned me. Not carrying any single shape or form, insects with hundreds of legs sprawled out besides fluffy, cloud-shaped forest critters. The sheer variety of people reminded me of posters showing many characters in a story, but the difference arrived in my others senses.

This place reeked.

It stunk so bad I wanted to get rid of my nose, so I did. Pacing around, Iona’s eyes watered as she coughed, “Sanitation and everything else is being maintained, so it’s not hazardous here. It’s...It’s tough if you just walk in. You, uh, you get used to it, though.”

Wielding Event Horizon, I sterilized the air, ground, and areas near the rulers. Raising a palm, I burst out a wave of fresh, cool air, and it replaced the musty moisture. Reforming my nose, I shook my head, “Damn, this place is disgusting.”

Iona narrowed her eyes, and she spoke through tears, “Look, there’s nothing that can be done about it. We need the artificers working full time or else this place will fall apart. That requires a ton of mana, and the artificers end up needing a lot of heat. We put them in the same room for conversion purposes. We can’t afford to lose any energy from long cords.”

She gasped, “So, ughhhk...We put everything close together. This is all a part of the process.”

I saturated a cooling aura over the rulers holding the mana cables. Iona’s eyes widened, “That antigravity well hasn’t faded yet, and you’ve been using plenty of high-level incantations for a while. How much mana do you have anyway?”

I walked towards the artificers, “A lot.”

The two crafters peered at their work, each of them using different tools. One wielded a hailstorm overhead, and the other swirled a maelstrom of magma. They created one portion of the room bathed in a cerulean glow and the other smattered with a crimson sheen. The majority of the mana cables ran into the icy ruler’s back, but quite a few traced into a lava wielder as well.

Each crafter worked with different tools, the ice wielder handling intricate electronics while the other maintained a pit of heated acid.

Working together, they alternated their heating or cooling methods to build a complex piece of machinery. I pointed at it, “What’s this for?”

Iona adjusted one of her wings, “It’s, gimme a second. That’s better. It’s a part I need to help with gravitation or the pressure. Or maybe some kind of machine. You know, I really don’t know which, honestly.”

I waved a hand, “That’s very helpful.” I eyed their speed and precision, “They’re unbelievably technical compared to what I do.”

They finished before I stepped up and raised a hand to them, “Hey guys, I’m Daniel Hillside. You both are the crafters here?”

Short and stocky, the fire wielder wore an advanced apparatus over his entire body. Many glowing mana cords lead to his back, feeding and converting the manas of the wizards nearby. Pulling off a heavy-duty tinkerer's helmet, a magma imp growled up at me, "You interrupt us. Are you new or just stupid?"

Unphased, I raised a brow, "I'm the guy that'll be making this job obsolete soon."

A smirk grew on the imp's rocky face, its teeth glowing red, "Hah, good one. You'll fit in with the useless rulers below us."

I turned to the ice-wielder, "We'll see. What do you guys need here the most?"

The ice-wielder was a blue lizard like the ruler that went off to sunbathe, but she was a woman. It wasn't in a humanoid sense either. She just carried a sleeker, more feminine form, and her higher tone of voice solidified that impression,

"Teraz, you let him know we can't be interrupted, right?"

The magma imp smiled, his rocky skin pulsing with a heated glow, "He's an idiot. What else can be said?"

She peered at me, pulling a set of furred goggles off, "Ok, we don't have time for this."

I gave them a tight smile, "Neither do I. Name the three most important things you need, and I'll leave."

The fire imp chided, "Wouldn't you like to know--"

The ice lizard raised a hand and announced, "Mana, first and foremost, lightweight shielding for the radiation, and some materials that can withstand the gravity here. We're beginning to wear thin. Is that enough to work off of?"

My thin smile widened, "Actually, yeah. That's perfect. Good luck."

The lizard peered toward the elevator I made before she nodded at me,

“You too. We need helpful people here, and by the looks of it, you might be a good fit.”

The fire imp snapped, “Alctua...We have plenty of good people here already. They’re either wasting time or dying downstairs.”

The ice lizard rolled her eyes and put her furred goggles back on, “Enough talk. Let’s get back to work.”

Teraz grumbled, but the fire imp put back on his tinkerer’s helmet. They synced back into their impressive flow, each movement matching the other. Reminding me of my many psyches coordinating, I marveled at the efficiency of them both.

Teraz and Alctua, I put those names down as ones to remember.

Back at my elevator, I lifted everyone up while stating, “None of those problems will be issues soon. I’ll be relieving a lot of pressure here soon.”

Drelex flopped his catfish whiskers around as he stated, “If you can give us mana, we’ll be plenty happy with it.”

I frowned, “Tell me about it. How many more floors do we have?”

Iona wrote with beautiful handwriting as she murmured, “One. The next one’s the last. It’s for the leaders of us all, and I bet they’re up there shouting like always.”

While I pulled us up, I dove into thought. I imagined most rulers would be these unstoppable beings that rode through hell and back to establish themselves. My assumptions fell flat when faced with the real thing. So far, the vast majority of rulers seemed like diligent wage workers that eventually owned a planet after centuries of skilled labor.

While impressive in its own right, I expected more. Thinking back to Obolis, he retained some semblance of my first impressions, but like many situations in life, reality dimmed when compared to what I assumed it would be. It made me wonder

about life in general. It was like every time I jumped to a conclusion, I ended up destroying my expectations soon after.

In a way, it made me wonder about people who were delusional. Maybe they weren't as misguided as I imagined? I mean, I fell victim to setting unrealistic expectations, and really, anyone could. Delusion could be the line that's crossed when someone disconnects from the mundane, therefore living their lives off their expectations rather than their reality.

And in a way, everyone lived a delusion. The measure of someone's deception might just correlate to how connected someone was with their actual world. So many factors could feed into someone's misbeliefs as well. Refection. Fear. Bias. They all played into how someone perceived the world.

While making these deals, I needed to make sure I connected to what was actual and not what I wanted to be real. Those thoughts swarmed in my mind as we reached the pyramid's peak. In this section, pinned charts, hovering maps, and holographic magic floated around. It gave the room a variety of colors as if someone sliced the planet apart and plastered it across the place.

The gem at the center of it all was a miniature approximation of Leviathan-7, showing the ossuary, dessert, and other extraterrestrial terrains. After slotting the elevator in place, I walked past the globe, the room echoing with shouts. A dozen rulers spoke and discussed their next course of action, voices and tensions high.

Turning to Shalahora, I sent out a telepathic message, "Hey, can you shroud us?"

Shalahora nodded, and we walked in. The diplomats wore robes similar to Drelex and the blue lizard accompanying Iona. Each member here discussed timelines for resources and a few specifics about the fortress. Another one of the monstrous plate-things writhed about as it spoke,

"We must level with one another. We have only a few more weeks worth of energy left. Most of our resources are being put to maintain the struggling rulers. Seconds tick by, and they are moments we no longer have."

A familiar voice spoke up, his white fur bristled, "And that's why we need to consider my proposition: cutting our losses and focusing on the remaining survivors. It is

inevitable that sacrifices will be made. I offer that we make them now when they are minimal rather than later when they are maximal.”

It was Obolis speaking, the Emperor’s graphene armor looking commonplace here. His scars differed from the others here, him being the only combat-worthy ruler present. The others stood half his height, but that didn’t stop a short, chubby alien from shouting over him. The green and yellow alien reminded me of an overweight poison dart frog with a squealing voice to match,

“Yet you’re ignoring that those you wish to sacrifice are the only reason we’ve made it this far. They’re bedridden because they took on the harrowing missions required to build this facility, to build this refuge. They offered their bodies, minds, and souls as the foundation to our current prosperity, regardless of how limited that affluence maybe.”

Obolis peered down at the alien in disgust as the Emperor seethed, “Are you asking us to all die here so that we may hold up your moral ideals? Perhaps death is one of them?”

The round poison dart frog slammed its hand into the table, “No. It’s about honoring the sacrifices of those that paved this road for us. Will anyone else be our next heroes if we treat our old warriors with such cruelty? No. We are ending any chance of rising above our situation by snuffling out any future heroes.”

Obolis leaned to the frog, and the Emperor’s teeth flashed, “It is better to live for today than to die for tomorrow.”

The frog simmered, “You speak that because no matter the outcome, your false empire will be helped more by their deaths. You’re trying to kill them to fuel this death game Schema placed us in. Their armies will, in essence, become yours.”

I stepped up, several feet taller than Obolis. Shalahora’s shroud dispersed while I spread my hands,

“Hey Obolis, it’s good to see you again. I hope I’m not interrupting anything important.”

Chapter 346: Quick Deals and Equal Exploits

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“Hey Obolis, it’s good to see you again. I hope I’m not interrupting anything important.”

The Emperor’s eyes opened wide, and he leaned back, “You survived? Hah, why would I expect anything else? You’re like eldritch in a sewer; there’s no killing all of you.”

I leaned over the other rulers, “I do try to make it a habit to not die.”

After inspecting a few of the numbers the rulers analyzed, I stood back upright, “You all sound busy, but what about making some time for a deal? Just know I can’t stay for that long, and I’d really like to handle this quickly if that’s possible.”

Obolis tilted his head, “What kind of deal, exactly?”

I gestured at everything, “One where I fix what’s broken here. I have already inspected the place and installed an elevator for everyone. I also put the gravity well in place, but no one seems to have noticed. What gives?”

Obolis tapped his side, “We suspected a ripple in the gravitation of Leviathan to be the cause of it. As that suspending force has lingered, questions arose over its source. Your arrival acts as an obvious answer to the enigma.”

The other rulers peered up at me, wondering who I was until the chubby frog ruler pointed up at me, “You’re that fool that spoke to Schema directly, aren’t you? Hah, it’s a miracle you’re still alive, given you defied him so openly. I expected you to be sheared to pieces, yet here you are, alive and well.”

The beginnings of a frown formed on my lips. This ruler argued with Obolis, so the frog ruler didn't like me since I knew the Emperor already. Taking the aggression with a grain of salt, I mused, "You were trying to keep people alive, right?"

"I was. My name is Malos. Malos Srika. I'm here as part of the Srikan Empire. I've been ruling it since I turned seven, and even at that age, I learned long ago to know my place. That's obviously a lesson you never learned, considering how you spoke to Schema."

Obolis glared at the ruler, the Emperor's fangs flashing once more, "You shouldn't slap at the mouth that feeds you, lest it takes your hand from your arm. In that same vein, speak accordingly in my presence, lest I rob you of your ability to do so."

The frog gave him a wide grin, "Go ahead and expose what you are."

Ignoring the taunt, the Emperor's eyes flicked over to me, "It's good to see you well, Harbinger. This planet's harshness likely left you comfortable, given your unique constitution. Just as well, the golems you've conscripted have handled their work admirably on my planets. They've left a region on one of my worlds far more secure, and after we've survived this ordeal, I'd love to talk about hiring more of them."

I shrugged, "As long as you have credits to pay, I have golems to give."

Iona Joan crossed her arms, "Can we talk the terms for our factions first...Please?"

Once again, the rulers listened to her. Obolis said, "Let's make the terms clear. What are you offering?"

I gestured to everything, "I can make the antigravity well permanent, and I can add quite a few other additions you guys desperately need. Food, water, air, depressurization, golems as guardians, etcetera. It will completely flip this faction's current position."

Obolis steepled his claws, "Wait a moment...You've already investigated this place?"

With a knowing glint in my eye, I smiled, "I have. And thoroughly."

The other rulers gave me skeptical looks while Obolis dove deep into thought. He paced back and forth before raising a finger, “You wish to resolve our issues...Hm, that can be arranged. Given your skillset, I believe you when you promise to solve our logistical concerns. The golems and barriers will also be welcomed. However-“

He narrowed his eyes at me, “I’m left wondering what you want from us?”

I shrugged, “Nothing much, just half of everything.”

The other rulers burst into an uproar of squabbling, and Obolis sighed while pinching the bridge of his nose. The chubbier frog alien’s throat swelled at it gurgled out, “And what could you possibly offer us in exchange for so many resources? Do you even have proof of your abilities?”

I tilted my head at the frog, “Do you have any proof in mind?”

The frog crossed his arms, “Simple. You enact the changes you said you could handle.”

I raised my brow, “Ah, you want free labor. I see where this ‘deal’ is going.”

Obolis stepped forward, dwarfing the others present. The Emperor clapped his hand shut, a wicked pop echoing out. The noise silenced everyone in all directions, our area muted by a wave of magic. Obolis glared at the other rulers, and he menaced,

“Did you all ignore me when I mentioned his skillset, or do you lack ears perhaps? Know this: I don’t lie when I speak. My words may carry many meanings, but the most obvious of them point to undeniable reality. In this case, I can assure you that Daniel isn’t boasting without cause. He is a dimensional construct, and as such, he defies certain laws of nature.”

Obolis turned to me, “And, given those abilities, I’m more than willing to offer you a comparable compensation to what you’re offering. However, when you mention ‘half’ without context, I’m left wondering where and what you’re asking for. Could you clarify for everyone present, so all is understood?”

The rulers watched on while I peered around. I spread my arms, “Sure. I want half of the resources you have along with half of what you make after I fix everything here.”

If the rulers uproared before, they outraged now. Hissing, howling, and squealing, they aimed their ire at Obolis, but the Emperor gazed at them with disdain. The screams bounced off of him before Obolis murmured,

“Are all of you finished?”

No one replied, the room turning into a quiet lecture hall in an instant. Obolis stated like an announcement, “Remember our situation. We’ve lost many to Valgus and this planet. Daniel knows this, and he understands his worth.” Obolis gave me a knowing look, “Unfortunately for us, but it was inevitable that he’d uncover that value at some point.”

I remembered how he took advantage of me when we first met. Obolis didn’t seem to be trying to pull that same stunt again, and I appreciated it. Obolis raised a clawed hand, “Daniel, please ignore the rulers and their ignorance. You’re the youngest ruler present, holding no resources yet owning enviable talents. Forgive them and put little stock in their words.”

Obolis looked at the rulers and pinched his claws at them, “No stock in your words yet, rulers. You all own many skills and vast knowledge. Daniel’s raw resources will likely allow those abilities to flourish.”

Obolis pointed the pinched claws and his eyes at me, “Daniel. After the rulers understand the situation, then please, by all means, condemn them as you like.”

The Malos stammered, “We haven’t even decided what is to be done with the dying, and you’re dropping it as if this is more important. It shows what you truly value.”

Obolis loomed, “Our impasse resulted from how few options we had at our disposal. This is a change in our situation, so we should treat said change with care. I ask you all to silence yourselves for now and allow me to handle this meeting as I’ve worked with Daniel in the past. Just as well, he is credible. If the situation resolves to any of your dislikings, then I’ll grant my share of our resources to everyone and leave. Is that suitable?”

Obolis's words rang out, and the other rulers' grumbling ceased for the moment. Obolis turned back to me,

"Granting fifty percent of our total earnings will place us within a diminutive standard in the lottery's rankings. Is it possible to only give thirty percent? That leaves us in a far better position moving forward."

I considered their positions. From looking at their situation, the survivors struggled to do just that: survive. Considering everything I learned here, that made sense. Even from a cursory glance, the majority of rulers weren't battle-ready. They focused on economics or even inherited their ruler status.

Of the remaining fighters, a portion joined Valgus Uuriyah before anyone landed on Leviathan-7. Further reducing the survivor's numbers, a part of battle-ready rulers went out and wandered the planet. The nail in the survivor's coffin came from the pro-Schema faction getting slaughtered by Valgus. His attack left them crippled, and what I'd seen here were the remnants of several more influential groups.

Affirming my guesstimation was how much pressure Obolis put on this group. During the lottery's introduction, the Emperor wasn't a ruler that stood out in any way. However, now he ranked highly here, and that exposed how far these rulers had fallen from grace. Those titanic collisions between rulers already took place while I hid in the ossuary this entire time.

With my core golems and new know-how, I could pull these guys from the brink. My main issue revolved around getting them to understand that and getting a fair cut out of my input. 30% wasn't cutting it considering what I imparted and where they stood. I shook my head at Obolis,

"I can't accept 30%. Based on how everything is playing out here, very few of you will survive, let alone prosper. You're also misunderstanding just how much I'm offering each of you."

Obolis turned a clawed hand to me, "Do tell."

I waved my arm across the room, "I'm not giving everyone survival – I'm offering a chance for affluence, prestige, and wealth. I give stability. I give security. Most of all, you'll gain raw power, something you desperately need."

I pressed my fingertips together, emphasizing each point, “You will walk here without worrying about your bones breaking or your body falling. Powerful, unflinching guardians will tear down the enemies at your door. Even better, I will grant you limitless power, allowing you to accomplish your current goals with ease.”

I waved my hand, “This will change your positions completely. Your rate of resource accrual will exponentially multiply, and I’m asking for half because the half you make with me will dwarf the whole of what you make now.”

Not believing a word I said, the rulers gazed at Obolis, their aged eyes full of doubt, disorder, and hints of disdain. The primary source of that disdain, the frog ruler rolled his eyes from me to the Emperor,

“Obolis... You wanted everyone below murdered to conserve our resources, but now you want to give all of our resources away to this young upstart? He barely understands our situation, let alone the complexities of the planet.”

Obolis dragged his hands down his face, “You know, Malos, you remind me of my spoiled nieces and nephews. They were given positions of influence, never needing to earn them. My gifts changed their perspectives, and I regret how I handled them. I stifled their struggles, which stained them with entitlement. It is a failure I alone carry.”

Obolis glared at the frog in disgust, “Considering you inherited your own empire, I see you are much the same in that regard.”

Malos smiled at Obolis, his skin thick with slime, “You believe you’re the first to downplay my ascension? Continue doing so. I will prove with my words that I am more than what you make of me.”

The frog ruler gazed up at me, and he gurgled, “Besides that, we don’t even know if you’re lying about the gravity well either.”

I snapped my fingers, the saturated magic waning. The rulers present changed their looks, many of them unable to tolerate gravity’s intense pull. The chubby frog nodded, “Ah...It seems there’s some validity to what you’ve claimed. I...I was mistaken.”

I reactivated the gravity well, and the group gasped like pressure valves releasing. Having proven my legitimacy, no one interrupted the Emperor as he said to me,

“I’ve seen your cities, and I know how they were produced. Mostly, at least, and based on your confidence, it would seem they’ve improved. Am I right about that?”

Shalahora spoke up, “I have gazed upon them, and they dot the skies of the shining hell. He’s amassed a nation’s worth of territory. You all may share in that bounty should you accept what he offers. However, to do so, you must let go of what you think is true. Accept that you wallow in darkness. Only then may you step into the light.”

A bit peeved, Malos dabbed his cheek with an embroidered tissue, “If anything, I’d imagine you three conspired behind our backs. Yes, yes, I can see it now. You all intend to swindle our faction while we are desperate.”

Malos rallied the others, gazed at everyone present, “If we cave here, then we lose any chance at pulling ourselves out of the depths with our own two hands. We’re chaining our limbs to these rulers here and for nothing. Gravity well or not, he still hasn’t proven his other abilities.”

Shalahora dispersed back into his shadowy form, “You may all listen to his words, or you may listen to the howling desperation that pervades here. It echoes in the halls, and it oozes from the floors. The malice. The stink of death. This is no sanctuary. It is a prison that awaits the end of those it holds. I will say it only once more; the Harbinger offers much to you all. You may grasp it or let it go. That choice is yours.”

The rulers gazed at Shalahora, the Sovereign’s words worth more than mine and Obolis’s put together. Obolis gave a nod of approval to Shalahora, and the Emperor clapped,

“It would seem that validity has been established then. Daniel, is there any portion of this place you’d prefer to have? Perhaps the promised help of an individual or specific resource?”

I pointed down, “The lab is the most important part to me. I want every bit of information and some of the technology you’re using to record information in this place. It’s set it up so that I can avoid a lot of the leg work I’d otherwise have to handle.”

Malos's irises turned to slits, "And why is that? Information is a low-yield offering. The cores and bones are what is truly valuable given the stakes of the lottery."

Another diplomat coughed into his hand, and he spoke with an understanding tone to me,

"What Malos means to say is that we'd love to know why you want information specifically. I'm curious as well, but only because it allows us to better satisfy whatever it is you want from us all. I'm not the only one curious about you and what you're offering."

Finally, someone who knew how to negotiate spoke up. By comparison, Malos fell prey to his emotions, and at this rate, they'd destroy him. I shrugged at the diplomats,

"Honestly, I'd rather not say. Just know that I want the info."

The rulers stared at one another before discussing their dealings for a time. Malos shouted in the group, and his voice split the faction in two, one side with Obolis and the other with Malos. After about ten minutes of waiting, Obolis stepped up and raised a hand,

"Then may we reduce the offering to my mentioned thirty percent, but we'll exchange all information we attain about Leviathan-7, other rulers, etcetera? That should grant a greater percentage of offerings to us so that we may protect our empires from being conscripted. At the same time, you'll be granted the data you so desire. It's a win-win for both parties involved."

He stuck out a hand, remembering how my species handled deals, "Do we have an arrangement?"

I tapped my chin, "Even if I value the info more, that doesn't mean I don't want the resources. Let's make it forty percent, but I also want information sent to me after we come back from the lottery on top of what you guys have here. I want to know the outcomes for the other rulers, their rankings and rewards, hm, you know, all that good stuff."

They went back to arguing, the diplomats forming into the two camps. Malos peered at one another, whispering in low breaths,

“I can’t believe they’re taking him this seriously. He proved his gravity well but nothing else.”

“Yes, but Shalahora was over level 60,000. I know nothing about him, but you don’t get to level 60,000 by pushing papers. I don’t know for sure, but he could probably kill us all if he wanted to. Despite everything, he’s still arguing for this person’s validity. This Daniel might be telling the truth.”

The frog ruler’s throat bulged again as he raised a palm to Shalahora, “Ah, Sovereign, I was wondering if you would answer a question for me?”

Several rulers peered back and forth, an awkward tension forming in the room. Shalahora’s voice oozed, “I may answer. I may not.”

Malos raised his bony brow, “Fair enough...To level with you, a being such as yourself has many options. Even Valgus wished for your favor, and he assaulted the Pro-Schema faction right after we arrived. We still care for those dead and dying. His power was palpable, but despite sharing his position, you allied with this young upstart. Would you mind explaining yourself?”

I scratched the back of my head while Shalahora murmured, “We formed an alliance before arriving here.”

The frog rolled his hand in a circle, “Yes, yes, yes, but I’m more so left wondering as to why you would form that alliance? Does that make sense?”

Shalahora menaced,

“No.”

Several rulers dripped cold sweat, but Malos wasn’t one of them. Bold as always, the chubby frog puffed itself up and tilted its head at Shalahora, “I understand you don’t wish to say. I will allow this issue to slide, and of course, I meant no offense. Ah yes,

Harbinger, a word of advice-" The frog blinked with a smile, "Never ally with someone who's unclear of what they want. That's all I'll say."

When Shalahora tilted his head at Malos, several of the other rulers, including me, shook our heads. Malos was begging for it, and Shalahora gave it to him. The Sovereign froze the frog ruler in place before the living shadow scoffed,

"You'll allow this issue to slide?"

The Sovereign made the word sound like an ancient curse. The shadowy ruler hollowed out like a new moon while speaking to the frog,

"Your mind is an open book to me, yet you try to speak in riddles to mask your intentions and confound my own. It is the tactic of a politician, one who's never tasted blood on their lips or lived at death's door. Or basked at the end of madness."

Shalahora flowed closer to Malos,

"You mistake my mercy for your boldness. This is not so. I offered to let you live, yet you act as if I cannot rob you of life. Of thought. Of your soul, body, and being. It is all in my palm, and it rests perched upon bottomless cliffs. Despite my position, you tested me...Have I failed you?"

The frog stumbled, falling back, and Shalahora gazed down at him, "Let me unveil your motives. You wish to weaken my and the Harbinger's alliance, so our position isn't as strong. You fought for those dying below because you wish to establish moral superiority for your own gain. It does not stem from a central, core belief in their worth; it is a means to an end. Nothing more. Nothing less."

The frog ruler gasped, unable to speak. Shalahora murmured, "You may deny my words, but in doing so, I will cleave your mind asunder. There will be no doubt of your thoughts, for I shall share them all to those present. They will listen, and your lies will be known...But please, don't force my hand."

Shalahora encircled the ruler, "Do not make me the murderer of your mind, the source of your splintered soul."

Shalahora released his unseen grasp on the frog, and the ruler vomited up blended insects. Shalahora peered at the others, “Force isn’t something I prefer, but it is the tool I wield. It is blunt...Heavy...And hardened. That is all I know, and so you may think my weakness lies in how I speak. Perhaps, but by exploiting my weakness, know that I will exploit your weaknesses in kind.”

Shalahora flowed away from the frog, who fumbled around as if shell-shocked. The shadowy Sovereign murmured, “And unlike what you’ve said, what I’ve done will never leave you...Will it, Malos?”

The frog continued flailing before curling into a ball in the corner. The entire time he spoke, I slowed time and inspected the situation. Shalahora wielded an incredible psionic ability, one far more potent than my own. It felt alien, as if some cosmic being inhabited Shalahora’s body at that moment, one without limit. I held back a grimace, remembering a similar mental pressure from something else.

The Old Ones.

Keeping that to myself, I put on my best poker face. The other rulers gawked at the frog, all of them beside Obolis. A seasoned warrior, the Emperor pinched his brow while sighing,

“You know...I’ve wanted to do the same for the last while, but I’m far too civilized for carnage of that kind.” Obolis smiled, covering his grin with a clawed hand, “But I do relish when someone from society walks into the uncivilized world. Oftentimes, those from the darkest regions shed light on some of the simplest truths.”

Obolis put on a thoughtful gaze as he stared at Malos, “It would seem he needed humbling. Perhaps another ruler would wish to doubt a literal Sun Swallower?” Obolis gave them a tight grin, “Anyone? No? Excellent. It would seem the rest of you evolved past single-celled life. Commendable, truly.”

In stressful situations, Obolis reminded me of a different shade of Helios. The Emperor peered back to us, “Since I’m one of the few rulers present with a functioning brain, I’ll make the necessary arrangements. We’ll agree to the terms you’ve so graciously laid out, ones that are now concrete because one of our own angered you both. Think of this as a sincere apology for our indiscretion.”

Several of the rulers present still gawked at the display of violence, many put on edge. I pulled my hair back, “Look, everyone, I had nothing to do with that. I’m just here for the deal.” Letting my hair go, I stretched out my hand, and Obolis shook it. The Emperor gave me a wide grin before rubbing his clawed hands together,

“Then it’s settled. You may begin your work when ready.”

I shook my head, “It isn’t. That’s our verbal agreement. I’ll be binding you all with something far more permanent than words.”

I pulled out my grimoire and opened the pages. Book in hand, I temporally accelerated while brainstorming the cipheric markings to ensure these rulers stuck to my contract. Unlike how Yawm’s agreement kept everything vague, I provided absolute clarity. I wanted no misinterpretations of this, and I kept everything as simple as possible.

Once my minds finished churning the document out, I ceased my time compression. With heated telekinetic points, I traced our agreement onto the pages of my grimoire. After charging it with mana, the cipheric etchings floated off the page and onto a slab of my own skin, one made at the moment. They sizzled into the dark metal, and I turned the plate to Obolis,

“You know how to read this, so it should all make perfect sense to you. Let me know if you need any addendums, and we can work it out.”

Obolis grinned while grasping the plate, “Gladly. Do relax while I ensure everything is in order.”

As Obolis read through the document, I turned to Shalahora. He peered back at me, and his gaze was unwavering. Gawking at the shadowy figure, the other rulers gave the Sovereign distance. They feared him, and Shalahora didn’t mind being abhorred in the slightest. Trying to find some kind of tell in his posture, I watched closely.

The guy was a literal shadow, so I couldn’t read anything. Wanting to avoid a similar situation in the future, I opened a telepathic connection. From the edges of my mind, Shalahora whispered,

“Did the seed of doubt sprout in your mind, little one?”

“It did. It wasn’t from what the frog said. It was from how you handled the situation and that...That attack you’re using. I’ve seen and felt something similar before, and I won’t be able to trust you unless you tell me what it was.”

Shalahora spoke quietly yet with great force,

“I only showed him pain.”

I winced, “It looked as though you robbed him of reason. How in the hell could he experience pain like that without any wounds, not even psionic ones?”

Shalahora’s voice grew distant, “It was not his pain.”

My eyes widened as Shalahora seethed,

“It was my own.”

Chapter 347: Set Up

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“It was my own.”

I held myself in place, wanting to step back but choosing not to. In the corner, Malos lost his mind to the anguish Shalahora exposed him to. Curiosity burned in my chest, but I gave myself a moment to consider before I frowned,

“It seems like you wielded it like a weapon. Whose pain it is doesn’t change what was done or how effective the attack was either. It also doesn’t explain what the assault was.”

Shalahora’s words coursed out, “Is it not obvious? I shared my experiences with him, the ones I normally hide but unusually expose.”

I tapped my foot while considering how a psionic attack customarily operated. Torix and I battled it out with our willpowers, and by coordinating our assaults, we sent out slicing cuts at specific weaknesses. Shalahora’s attack mirrored my psionic drowning, but it operated on a far more insidious level. While I sent in random thoughts into a person’s head, Shalahora flooded their mind with a specific experience.

Depending on the person, they might shatter, and Malos’s ego death was an example of that. Shalahora condensed and tilted his head at me, “Listen. I understand you’re curious about the tools I wield. That isn’t a surprise, as curiosity is inevitable in developed species. I am not lying when I say my ‘attack’ was simple. I shared my experiences with him.”

Crossing my arms, my mind raced with possibilities, “Sharing experiences, huh? I guess it’s possible. Still, that doesn’t explain the Old One’s energy when you attacked.” An epiphany sparked in my mind as I widened my eyes, “Unless...Was the Old One the source of your terrible memory?”

Shalahora’s eyes widened, “Do you know of Mesmera as well?”

I winced, “I do know.”

Shalahora stared at the map of Leviathan-7, “It is a presence that lingers and spreads through memories and knowledge, and that Old One is a part of my suffering. It is not the cause, however.”

The idea of an entity existing through knowledge and memories alone reminded me of an autobiography that constantly changed. Wanting nothing to do with Mesmera, I frowned, “You speak in riddles.”

Shalahora cackled before expanding, “Yes, I suppose that’s true. You were curious of my past before, yet you chose the wise way of restraint... You are someone who understands the danger of knowledge and ambition, and that tempers the path you’ve chosen to take.”

Shalahora sifted around, “That’s why you’ve refused to view my memories – you worry that understanding my past will lead you towards madness. Or that perhaps madness has ingrained itself into me. In turn, it may ingrain itself into you.”

Shalahora condensed and raised an arm, “Worry not. The trauma I lived is simple yet profound. The memories bear down like mountains on my mind, but the story itself is no such burden. To Malos, I exposed the fullness of those experiences, and they ruptured his weak psyche. He is a cup overly full, one left shattered by what it tried to contain.”

I gazed down at Malos, “No, that’s not right. His mind didn’t drown. He simply couldn’t handle it.”

Shalahora spoke with a cynical edge, “He will return to himself, though changed in persona. I doubt it will be for the better. In that regard, it’s incredible how effective a tool one’s experiences may be at times, whether directly or indirectly.”

His tone turned hopeful, “And there exists no deeper directness than turning one’s pain into their sword and one’s grit into their shield.”

My mind raced as Shalahora spoke. In particular, a new Old One set me on edge. Eonoth melted my body the last time we spoke, and Etorhma pitted me against Yawm. In general, those esoteric, godlike creatures interacted with this universe without any care of how they affected people, ideas, or anything really.

And the torments the Old Ones wrought dwarfed my ability to comprehend them.

Despite all of that, knowing Shalahora's history was necessary since it let me trust him moving forward. Otherwise, I'd carry so many doubts that a long-term relationship wouldn't be feasible. I winced while biting my tongue,

"Hm...Alright. I can listen to the story but don't share the memories. Also, if you can, don't tell me about the Old One either."

Shalahora's sky blue eyes widened, "You know of it now, so it is too late to undo what has been done. It was only a matter of time before it found you, however. It finds all that it wishes to see."

As I remembered the name Mesmera, strange energy rippled out from around me. It touched on this dimension, so I condensed my own wake around me. The power bounced off my denser, dimensional space, and a slight laugh echoed into my ears. I closed my eyes, "Well...Dammit."

Shalahora tilted his head, "You believe that ignorance of them will mitigate their impact on you? Are you truly that naive?"

While I understood his viewpoint, I disagreed. I shook my head,

"I don't believe that. I know it's true. The Old Ones are heavily limited in our universe for some reason. Why, exactly? I have no clue, but I know talking to them won't help me find out. They only talk about what they can directly offer, and it's always tempting."

Shalahora peered away, "That...That is true."

I raised a hand, "But I've seen what happens to anyone or anything that engages with those monstrosities. Those that listen are turned inside out, but even worse, they are never allowed to die from it. They have shamle on, half alive and half dead. They turn immortality into a curse, and I'm not buying into their lies."

As I spoke, memories of Yawm and how he was twisted into an abomination flashed before my mind. Even more musings about Lehesion and his toxic codependence on Elysium sprung up in my head too. Even Eonoth's roaring and my melting body snapped into my head, and I recalled Etorhma shoving knowledge of the cipher into my psyche. A cold shiver raced up my spine, and I spit,

“Anything they touch turns into shambling monstrosities.”

Shalahora’s eyes slanted, “Ah... You must think this of me as well.”

I clasped my hand into a fist but said nothing. Shalahora nodded,

“You would be right on all accounts... And though I lived for centuries, my time with Mesmera is what’s defined me the most. It was a crossroad where I chose one path in place of another. I still don’t know if my choice was correct, but it was made. Now I walk that path.”

“And the trauma?”

Shalahora’s voice stuttered, “I... I watched my entire species die before I made my choice. It was no peaceful walk into the night. It was a slow, lonely march.”

I narrowed my eyes, “But you mentioned there being more of you? How can that be if everyone died?”

Shalahora scoffed, “There are more, and yet, there are not. To that question, there exists no simple answer, I’m afraid, and I will betray your requests if I answer your questions.”

I raised my palms, “You know what, I’m good then. I get it. Watching your race die is pretty horrific anyway, regardless of how it happens. I’m guessing if an Old One was involved, it was a particularly creative and horrific demise, so you have my sympathy. Well, what little I can give.”

Shalahora shook his head, “The fall of my kind was an inevitable and natural demise, but that made it no less haunting. You see, nature, like the Old Ones, is oftentimes cruel and unyielding. I’ve faced both their wraths first hand, and they have brought me to my knees... Now that cycle may have continued once more but to these rulers.”

I peered back around, Obolis explaining my cipher’s contract to the other rulers in excruciating detail. The faction supporting Malos died down their protests but not

because they agreed with me. They refused to speak out of fear, and that wasn't what I wanted. I lifted a hand to Shalahora,

"I'm still a little confused, but that's enough. I also don't want to pry. If I got this right, your race died before you made a choice with an Old One. You shared that experience with Malos, and he was too weak to handle it. Do I have it right?"

Shalahora gazed at the frog rulers whose mind was left shattered,

"To share is to give away a portion of. I have given nothing, only allowed him to scan over what I've faced. It was a common tactic of my species. Many would head into arduous situations to use the memories as weapons in their arsenals. I stand at the peak of that methodology. Though in my case, it was not by choice."

I peered off, wondering how that might work with my own mind magic. The worst of my experiences culminated with the psionic deaths my time magic demanded. Having someone else experience those sensations could crush them, but I had no idea how to share memories. If I did, it didn't have the same sting as the actual event, while Shalahora's did.

Either way, Obolis stepped up after speaking with the other rulers. Carrying the tablet I gave him, The Emperor had already signed the document, as had most of the other rulers. Obolis lifted the tablet up, "These are those that I could convince, though many chose not to sign the document."

I frowned, "Was it a majority?"

Obolis tilted his head to the other diplomats, "Somewhat, though most of the rulers lay below. If you show them anything well made, the remaining ruler's defiance shall cave."

I rolled my shoulders, "Then I'll build this place up while having people sign below."

The cipheric runes over my skin shimmered with glowing mana streams, the energy radiating out with quintessence. I paced up to a portion of the room between two other areas. I shooed everyone away,

“Stand back, everybody.”

The rulers looked at me before stepping back. I took nearby chairs and tables, floating them away. After a few seconds, my body stood still. Obolis’s eyes widened before he gasped, “Daniel...Are you dead?”

A new body regenerated outside of my dead one, metal and shining blood pouring from nothing. I scoffed, “What did you say? I can’t hear anything when I’m out of myself like that.”

Obolis murmured, “Did you just die?”

I waved my hands, “Of course not. My body did.”

Even with his experience with me, Obolis peered off at that one. He blinked a few times before shaking his head, “I...Well...If you’re healthy then, it’s fine.”

I gave him a thumbs-up before my next body died. A dozen Daniel statues littered the room before I pulled them along with gravity wells. I dragged a large pile of my corpses where I intended on working, and I stood on them. Thermal energy coursed through my palms, breaking the stack of me into a thick, molten metal.

Collecting into a large pool of sheening liquid, I coursed it towards an emptied portion of the room. The other rulers backed further away as I funneled the liquid dimensional fabric into a giant, hollowed block. From my dimensional storage, I pulled out a hundred blue cores. The flowing cerulean mass coursed into slots of my giant metal cube.

Simultaneously, I charged telepathic runes by standing in place and funneling mana into my grimoire. My surroundings melted even while I contained the energies. I gave myself a chastising thump on my forehead before sighing. I got used to my surroundings being tough, and that was a bad habit to get into.

Not wanting to destroy the entire base, I put my grimoire into my pocket dimension. Beside me, the cube of fabric and cores amassed a behemoth reserve of energy, turning the metal into a colossal, psionic battery. Testing a new theory, I applied time magic into my pocket dimension’s space.

In a small patch within, a temporal flow started, and it was enough to fill in the grimoire's energy needs. Having contained the devastation of my charging, I remained motionless for an hour. The rulers lost interest after a few minutes, many wondering what I needed but leaving me to my devices. A few studied the giant power cell I crafted while others developed their own ideas. Once charged, the eye slit of my helmet snapped open.

I pulled my grimoire from my dimensional space and slotted the glowing sigils onto the power battery. Coated in the markings, the giant cube enlivened, energy radiating out from the hundred blue cores. They rippled into the cipheric markings on the matrix of metal. Drelex walked up to me, and the giant catfish gestured to the metal hunk,

"Impressive. If you'd like, we can contact Entilla for his wiring expertise. He should be able to help you connect that power source to this building's infrastructure."

I shook my head, "We can't. There's too much energy."

Drelex waved his hands, "You misunderstand our wiring infrastructure. Graphene is an incredible conductor, and it can transfer a near limitless amount of energy."

I frowned, "I'm no professional, but I think it's different with mana. No matter the process you take, mana is will and intelligence converted into physical energy. The fact of the matter is, this energy is alive, and we need something alive to tame it."

I shrugged, "Otherwise, this will be utterly unusable outside of anyone with a solid psionic ability. And speaking of which, I'll need to prevent anyone from manipulating this energy source for their own gain, too."

The catfish's whiskers writhed, "Interestingly enough, I may be able to help with embedding a language cipher to help with communication efforts between this, erm, psionic entity you're creating. If you'd like, that is."

My eyes widened, "That would be great, actually."

Drelex waved a hand, "And just as well, I do think Entilla may help restructure the wiring to suit this, ahem, machine's needs."

I tapped my side, “Hm, the last thing I want to do is all that detailed work. I definitely want his help then.”

Drelex raised a webbed hand, “Ah yes, may I use your grimoire? It shall help with creating my own schema-based runes and for showing Entilla.”

I floated the book over to him, and he perused some of my runic works. A wry smile came over Drelex’s face,

“There’s no wonder you let me see this. Without your specific abilities, no one can even use these incantations.”

I shrugged, “They’re a big part of how I made it this far. Oh yeah, can you actually use the pages? I’ve always wondered if anyone else could besides me.”

Drelex raised a finger, “I definitely can, and thank you. It’s been difficult to develop my own grimoire given the mana constraints here.”

I leaned back, “You don’t have a grimoire? How in the hell do you work with runes?”

Drelex gazed at me in confusion before he tapped his forehead, “What are you even... Oh. I understand. I do own a grimoire, but it’s not here on Leviathan-7. Schema stripped us of what we held in our dimensional storages, and he gave us little time to prepare for this journey. In fact, few own a grimoire except for you.”

He pointed at me, “While you may think I’m odd, I’m actually the norm, and you’re the exception. In this instance, at least.”

I eyed my grimoire, “Ah, then you’d better bring that back.”

Drelex bowed, “I most certainly shall.”

I turned back to my work, planting lines of runes onto the power battery. Drelex paced off, giving me some time to handle most of the work involved. By the time he returned

with the blue lizard ruler, I had finalized a terminal for the psionic battery. It would be the place for Drelex's language cipher and Entilla's wiring adjustments.

Entilla cheered up, the blue lizard standing taller and with a brighter look on his face. He inspected my workflow before nodding, "You weren't lying, Drelex...He has gotten his feet wet with this kind of endeavor before. Color me surprised."

Though still sarcastic, Entilla's lightened tone gave him an affable air rather than his scornful banter. a Drelex swung a webbed hand, "Can you handle the installation of the wires here?"

Entilla sighed, "I...I suppose, but it looks like the energy within would blow the fuses and burn out every device here. We need many transfusers in place."

I turned and raised a brow, "Transfusers?"

Entilla waved a hand, "They control the flow of power so that no machine ends up with more power than it needs. It prevents short-circuiting."

I frowned, "You just call for however much energy you need at once."

Entilla spread his arms, "What about machines that need power all the time? Do you need a worker for them to monitor energy intake? We don't have a labor force of that size here."

I stood and put my hands on my hips, "Well, usually I just use golem cores for that."

Entilla rubbed his temples, his broad skull giving space for his long jaw, "How exactly does a golem core handle energy transfusion? Aren't they simple war machines?"

Drelex waved his hands, "This is obviously an issue with communication and terms. Daniel's likely referring to AI automation."

Entilla nodded, "Ah, that makes perfect sense then. He should just say so."

I spread my hands, “But it’s not artificial intelligence. It’s perfectly natural.”

The two rulers stared at me before Shalahora murmured, “Are you certain of that?”

I shook my head, “At this point, no. Anyways, I can handle the energy, er, transfusion on my own. Besides that, you guys are making this way more complicated than it has to be.”

Entilla raised a palm, “Excuse me, I was just curious how you managed the problems. This, hm, system you’ve devised is unlike anything I’ve ever used before. It’s very... Raw.”

I tapped my side, “I think it’s that I don’t have as many problems to manage as you guys do.”

Entilla raised a scaled brow, “We’ll see.”

At this point, I was done having to justify myself every two seconds to every ruler here. While frustrating, I kept myself calm while continuing the job. Shifting the conversation, Drelex used quintessent mana to carve into the metal sheets of my grimoire as he said,

“Well, does anyone have thoughts about Schema’s purpose here?”

Entilla shrugged, “Personally, I think Schema intended on making a statement to the universe here: fight with me or die alone. I heard it loud and clear, and I intend to support him after this is over.”

Drelex’s whiskers pulled down, “I shall be doing the same if only to reduce the chance of these kinds of tragedies occurring once more.”

I shook my head, “I wouldn’t if I were you guys.”

Drelex’s eyes narrowed, “Wait a moment, you’re the one that was pulled into the initial stages of the war with Elysium, aren’t you?”

I sighed, “Yeah...It wasn’t easy to get out.”

Entilla scoffed, “Schema does have a way of wringing out his sentients, doesn’t he?”

Drelex’s eyes went distant, “First, he wrings until sweat pours. Then he keeps squeezing until oil oozes from his victim’s pores. Then the hair is ripped out. Skin tears. Blood pours. And lastly, the bones break.”

Entilla leaned back from Drelex, “Yeesh, it looks like I’m not the only one needing a sunbath.”

Drelex gave a hollow smile, the bones on the edges of his mouth made for it, “Perhaps some time in a pool would help me. I know Schema is no kind master, but he does face an unyielding enemy. Just as well, the eldritch aren’t the only beasts he’s gone against.”

I shook my head, “Poor excuses. Most of what we’re talking about doesn’t even require killing us. Schema’s working around limited parameters, and that’s why he pulls stunts like this. Our deaths are the result of his inability to change, and worse still, these are only the sacrifices we know about.”

Remembering Hod’s people being eldritchified, I contemned, “Schema isn’t testing anyone here. He’s killing as many as he can, and unfortunately, he’s been more than just successful.”

Iona stepped up to us, and she crossed her arms, “I wouldn’t go that far. Valgus had a massive part in this, and he’s the reason we’re so inept overall.”

I connected blue cores to the mass of fabric while I mused, “Really now? Does anyone have any idea why Valgus is so hellbent on killing every survivor he meets?”

Drelex’s eyes widened as he etched into a blank page, “That’s one of the largest mysteries present. He’s been targeting the Schema-led faction almost exclusively, and he’s picked off the survivor’s scouts one by one when they left this place.”

I pulled my hair back in my helmet using a strand of armor, “Huh...He’s on a mission. Knowing who he follows, it’s Baldowah.”

Iona raised her brow, “But Baldowah works with Schema. That doesn’t make sense.”

I deadpanned, “It makes perfect sense. I just told you the answer: Schema wants everyone dead. Assuming that, everything fits in place quite well, I think.”

The rulers in watching our conversation blinked a few times, a sort of realization clicking on in their minds. Drelex closed his eyes while shutting my grimoire. He handed it over while murmuring, “It’s finished. I’m going to the terrarium. I need to spend some time in the algae pits.”

Entilla’s wry sarcasm fizzled, “Yeah. You should do that.”

An awkward silence passed over us before Iona reached out a hand to testify in Schema’s defense. No words left her lips at first. Lowering her arm, she stammered,

“No one’s fought for Schema’s defense against Elysium. Even 1% of Schema-owned space could easily destroy Elysium if they united against them. But no one did, and it’s forced drastic measures.”

I sighed, “I was the prime example of why you shouldn’t follow Schema. He took advantage of me, which put my home planet in an awful situation. We’re still dealing with the culling, and after having faced Yawm, I had to get rid of our unknown statuses on Giess.” I spread my arms, “And wouldn’t you know it, I ended up wrapped up in a galactic rebellion right after. Now I’m trapped here in a death game all before I can establish rule over my homeworld.”

Obolis stepped up, interested in the conversation, “Ah, would any of you mind me joining in this conversation?”

I raised my brow, “That depends on your goals.”

Obolis smiled at me, “Then I’ll keep my conversation contained. I’ll merely listen.”

Entilla flashed his sharp teeth as he spoke, “Culling? You’re struggling with that stage of development still? That doesn’t make any sense.”

Obolis leaned over, “It’s true. His planet has yet to finish its culling.”

Entilla blinked over a transparent covering on his eyes, “Well, you never mentioned just how young you really were. I thought Schema mentioned something twenty-five years in the system. The culling doesn’t even last a decade.”

Obolis smiled, and I glared at him. The Emperor leaned over to Entilla, “That is his actual age, not his time in the system.”

Entilla tapped his side, “Ah... You’re an avatar for an Old One, then. A freak.”

I raised my brow, and Entilla raised his hands, “I mean it in a good way.”

Finishing my work, I deadpanned, “Good to know.”

Obolis stared at his claws, sliding into the conversation, “You must understand his perspective, Daniel. This stems from a difference in expectations. Most rulers assume your age is a number since birth, but they also assume it isn’t your true age. Your circumstances mirror the byproduct of reincarnation, rebirth, etc. You simply exceed conventional scaling patterns.”

I blinked, “Reincarnation? Rebirth? Does it happen often or something?”

Obolis kept looking at his hands, “Certainly not, but it’s more common than your current predicament. You also mentioned facing many hardships brought on by Schema’s quests. That, too, is unusual. I existed at the beginning of the albony’s Schemafication. That took place centuries ago. In those times, many bonuses helped propel us to prominence...Along with a healthy and due amount of force, of course.”

Obolis lowered his hands, “We were never confronted with an enemy of Yawm’s caliber, and neither were we expected to visit other planets before establishing our own.”

I moved my hands back and forth, “It’s not that simple. I didn’t have to, per se. Well, I definitely had to versus Yawm, but that was because of a quarantine. And then going to Giess was to get rid of me and my friends’ unknown statuses.”

Entilla clicked his tongue, “Oof, Schema still hadn’t rid you of your Unknown status after finishing an S- tier bounty? Wow. Your life sucks.”

I sneered, “Do we have to keep talking about this?”

Obolis spread his hands, “Absolutely not-“

Iona interjected, “I’d like to know. It sounds like you’ve been put in a poor position by Schema. Did you ever think of why Schema would do that?”

Peeved by the constant interruptions, I dropped my work, gawking at her in disgust,

“No. I didn’t.”

She shrugged, “I think that’s the issue. He put you in poor positions because he believed in your ability to get out of them. He saw potential in you, and obviously, he’s awarded you in equal measure.”

Almost forgotten from his silence, the gray insect ruler stepped up. Its head writhed as it hissed, “Schema saw potential in me. My life far worse now. I listen to metal man’s words. His life made hard from Schema as well. Even I understand, and I am not smart...Iona...Are you stupid?”

I bust out laughing before I put a hand over the gray insect’s shoulders, “What’s your name?”

“Jaieex.”

I gave him a thumbs-up, “You’re cool, Jaieex. You’re welcome to come by my place if you get tired of being here.”

He spread his wings, “Why not?”

Iona narrowed her eyes, “Jaieex, huh? I’ll make sure to remember you the next time I talk to Schema.”

I tilted my head at the matrix of fabric, “You bring petty to a whole other level. It’s impressive how small you can be.”

I snapped my fingers, a bolt of mana surging through the power battery. As it came to life, I zipped wires of my fabric out, collecting and placing them into bundled coils. After setting several bundles down, I pointed at Entilla,

“You mentioned wiring expertise. Will these supplies work?”

Glad to change the conversation, Entilla shook his head, “I’ll need insulation for the wires, the AI automation systems you mentioned, and interfaces for all of the places you’ll need.”

I shrugged, “You won’t need insulation. This amount of power won’t leech out of the wires. I’ll be putting someone over this device and managing the power here, and they’ll be handling any interface needs psionically.”

A few rulers heard that, and they stepped up. A different fire imp stepped up, his glowing cinders for hair releasing sparks as he spoke,

“If you need someone to manage it, I can?”

Entilla frowned, “I can as well. I promise to be impartial.”

Iona raised her hands, “I know we aren’t on the best of terms, but-“

I shouted over them, “Shush.” I grimaced, “You think this will be handled by someone I don’t know? What do you take me for? An idiot?”

Jaieex raised one of his insect arms, “I don’t.”

I smiled at him, “I know.”

Iona sneered, “You don’t even know anyone else. How are you going to assign someone else to this?”

Shalahora whispered, “I wish to not manage this power system. To do so would bore me to death.”

I put my extra-dimensional fabric into my dimensional storage, “Don’t worry. I have someone else in mind.”

I molded myself into a director golem’s shape and pulled my mind out of my body. Reconstructing from the ether, I hovered over the body, and I inspected it. Finding no flaws, I landed on the floor before channeling mana into my grimoire. Using my pocket dimension to contain the energies involved, I created the primordial golem core for this golem body.

The sizzling core leaked out of my starry shield, and I slotted it into the golem’s body. The director came online, everything connecting in a violent snap. The primordial golem popped a fist against his chest plate, standing tall and upright. He telepathically synced and announced,

“It is so good to see you, creator. This whole ‘coming into being’ thing is rather pleasant, actually. From the void and into the veritable, as they say.”

I pointed at everything, “Who’s they? Anyways, your job is to manage this place for these individuals. If they don’t go against me or my allies, then do everything in your power to achieve their goals. I included those in the cipher documents. Is that understood?”

The director’s navy blue eyes dolloped primordial mana as the golem clapped his hands together, “In all ways, creator. In all ways.”

The rulers ogled at the process, and I smiled at them,

“He’s the manager, and good luck replicating that engineering process. It’s one of a kind.”

A few rulers laughed at that, which was surprising since I didn’t really think that was funny. One thing I appreciated was how everyone stopped gawking in amazement. Most of these people accustomed themselves to the unusual because of their station. It made me stand out less compared to home. Either way, I cracked my knuckles and got to making guardsmen golems next.

It was time to turn this place around.

Chapter 348: Reconnected

A few rulers laughed at that, which was surprising since I didn’t really think that was funny. One thing I appreciated was how everyone stopped gawking in amazement. Most of these people accustomed themselves to the unusual because of their station. It made me stand out less compared to home. Either way, I cracked my knuckles and got to making guardsmen golems next.

It was time to turn this place around.

I clapped my hands, having created a dozen guards to protect the director here along with the giant mana battery. They gazed at me, shields on their arms and spears in their other hands. Quintessence coursed through them, keeping aggression low but combat ability high. These soldiers gazed forward while saluting me, and I appreciated the loyalty.

Beside us, Entilla created connection points throughout the leader’s room, and the director golem operated the terminal I made for him. The battery manager distributed power across the facility, lessening the need for a constant power supply. The other rulers gawked at what and how I handled everything, from the storm cores to the shapeshifting production methods.

It all culminated with a changed mood across the rulers. Instead of doubt or disdain, a burgeoning hope grew in everyone present, including those that resented me at first. A clear sign of that mental shift, the rulers walked over without any jabs or comments when I called them. No one argued with me. Instead, they listened when I pointed them over to Entilla and commanded,

“You four, help him with that. Get others on the job if you can.”

The ensemble of aliens and diplomats did so, hurrying over to Entilla, who stripped the floor and installed the new wiring in the building. Adding structure to the room, I pooled a thick slab of my dimensional fabric over the upper portion of the ruler’s base. At the same time, I generated an elementary golem core to give the walls life. It managed a singular directive: eat radiation.

It did so, the walls moving and shivering a bit while devouring the ambient rays. The effervescent warmth faded into a radiant cool, and the walls soaked in unseen rays. At this point, a few rulers marveled at my building material, and one of them murmured,

“How does he keep creating more of it?”

Having heard, I raised a hand, “It’s actually mana converted into a physical form. I’m using blood magic...And before you ask, no, I’m not giving you any of it for research. That goes for everybody.”

A collective sigh oozed through the collective, but they silenced when my guardians slammed their spears down, each of them reminding me of a Sentinel in Schema’s universe. They shouted psionically and in unison, “They will obey, creator. As you will it, it will be so.”

Walking around, a wave of gravitation sifted through the building, weighing everyone down. A few rulers groaned, though my antigravity well helped take the edge off. Wanting to further facilitate the comfort, I walked over towards the mana battery. Two hours later, I constructed four constructor cores. A quick snap, pop, and runic adjustment later, and the mana battery contained four constructors obedient to the director.

The guardians lacked that obedience, and they held their own prerogative. This prevented any actual weak points in this system of golems. They’d need to take on the director and the guardians as separate forces, which contained a chokepoint in my system’s operation.

That handled the top floor, so I used my elevator to move downward. Entilla’s ensemble followed me, everyone putting in solid work. Before we headed down,

Shalahora floated over towards the elevator. As he did, the rulers gave him a wide berth, several of them even dripping with cold sweat.

Before heading down, I waved the shadow Sovereign over. I raised a hand to him, “I think you’ll have to sit this one out. After what you did to Malos, everyone’s on edge. They won’t be able to work while you’re around.”

Shalahora murmured, “Then I shall leave, though I’ll still watch from a distance.”

“Sounds good. We can come up with a plan for Valgus after I finish crafting.”

While I headed over to the elevator, Shalahora dispersed. When he disappeared, a collective sigh rippled through everyone present, and I couldn’t blame them. Shalahora seemed more volatile than I expected, but he was still a powerhouse with useful skills. Having him on my side versus Valgus was important at the moment.

Regardless, we lowered to the next floor, and I tested the terminal I left behind on the elevator. The terminal operated for me, but it still needed some kind of language augments. Otherwise, the controls might confuse a nonstandard race.

Despite those constraints, we shuttled down with the gray insect. After stepping onto the artificing floor, I peered around. This wasn’t the best place for a building center, and in general, this base lacked any affordable housing. Before handling that, I reached up a hand, tearing through the wall and sliding a thickened cable of dimensional fabric it.

With Entilla’s help, we connected the colossal mana battery to the primary power source of the mages. As the psionic flow began, I reached up a hand and sliced through their main power cable. Seamlessly, the director golem above managed the energy flow, ensuring the ice cloud and fiery furnace continued operation.

The many aliens here awakened from their deep, meditative states, many of them having sat there for days or longer. Many blinked out tears from the acrid stench engulfing them, and others threw up bile from their bellies. In a wicked wave, I sterilized the air around them with Event Horizon once more, and the others present gained some immediate relief.

Before anything else, I stepped over to the edges of the room. While I plated the outer portions with my dimensional fabric, the sorcerers recuperated. They stood, stretched

their legs, and regained their full faculties. In minutes, they cleared this place's reeking odor while cleaning themselves and handling their basic hygiene.

They still stumbled while I walked up to Alctua and Teraz. I waved an arm, and the artificers stopped their work. Teraz eyed me with suspicion, and the fire imp growled, "Are you the one that stopped the ambient radiation?"

I gave him a tight smile, "Yup."

"And you must've stopped the gravitation as well."

"Yup."

Teraz turned to the cable I installed into their primary battery. The small alien shrugged while simmering, "I admit I was wrong about you. Happy?"

I shook my head, "Naw. You were right to doubt me. I was a stranger arriving with big promises and a limited timeframe." My smile loosened into a wry grin, "But yeah, you'd be wrong to doubt me anymore."

The imp waved a hand at me, "I take it all back."

Alctua raised her scaled brow, "Hmm...This mana is much more volatile yet somehow...tainted and tamed? I can't even describe it."

I flicked the wires leading towards her, "They're full of pure quintessence from actual blue cores. A golem of mine is controlling distribution, so neither of you will have to struggle with all of this now. Go buck wild with it, but make sure you don't let the mana overwhelm you."

The fire imp crunched his brow, breaking the solid, stone surface of his skin. Magma dripped down like glowing, orange blood before solidifying. The imp snapped,

"Oh, is this a test?"

I put my hands on my hips, “Didn’t you just say you wouldn’t doubt me again? No, I’m not testing anyone.”

The fire imp smiled, “Remember, I took my words back.”

Alctua reached over and flicked him, breaking his skin once more. Teraz looked up, seeing his fresh wound. He grabbed the edges of his face and ripped his entire face off. The exposed magma solidified, the smooth portion turning into a sleek, black mask of stone.

The fire imp cracked it while opening his mouth. He devoured his peeled face before licking his fingers. He saw me staring, so he grumbled,

“What? You’ve never seen someone molt before?”

I shrugged, “Honestly? Not like that I haven’t.”

The icy lizard put her goggles back on, “Thank you very much. We’ll get back to work-“

I raised a hand, “When I finish, your workflows will change entirely. Until we know what you’ll need to handle, take off and rest. After I’m finished, you can continue handling what needs to be done, but it won’t be maintenance supplies anymore. Most likely, at least.”

Teraz fell back, spreading his arms wide. He groaned, “Gah, finally.”

Alctua pulled her goggles off and shivered before stepping up to the fire imp who snored already. She used his sleeping body like a campfire, warming herself up before she smiled at me,

“Thanks.”

I gave her a thumbs-up, “No problem.”

Behind me, Entilla stared at us. Well, more like he outright gawked at Alctua. He looked stricken with her, and instead of ignoring his plight, I considered it. If I helped him, he might help me further down the line. Entilla was one of the few rulers with some initiative, and modern tech would help my cities after people settled on them.

With all that in mind, I walked over and called him aside. Once at a distance from the others, I struck up a telepathic conversation,

“Hey, we get it. You like her, but you’re making it too obvious.”

Entilla stared at me with surprise before snapping, “What? No, I don’t, and no, I’m not.”

I raised my brow at him, “Ohhh, really now?”

His face wrinkled, “My feelings are my matters. Leave me be.”

“I’m not here to pour ice water over you or anything. I’m just letting you know I’m here to help if I can.”

Entilla pointed at a portion of the floor as if we talked about wiring specifics, “Is there any reason to trust you with anything?”

I raised my brow, “I want you to help install some tech in my settlements after this. This is supposed to be a gesture of goodwill, but if it isn’t helping, then I’ll leave.”

Entilla narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms. His mind toiled with thought before he scoffed, “Fine...I like her. So what? She seems pretty cold towards me. I’ve tried talking with her before, but she hasn’t even told me her name yet.”

I ruptured the floor, pointing at random parts to help fill in our cover for the conversation. I murmured, “She likes competence and being helpful. That’s all I know, but also, I’m no competition. You don’t have to worry about me.”

Entilla jeered, “As if she’d ever go for someone without any scales.”

I molded the surface texture of my skin to mirror a lizard's skin, a nice sheen glossing on the slick metal. Entilla saw Alctua peering over, and he waved his arms, "Ok, ok, point taken."

I normalized myself while laughing, "Hah. Anyways, good luck."

As I walked away, Entilla coughed into his hand, "Ahem, thank you. I'll probably need some luck to get a chance, and I'll see if I can help with your connection issues later."

Stepping away from him, he clapped his thin hands and got back to work. I walked past Entilla and Teraz. She still warmed herself while giving Entilla a second look. I gave her a gentle, telekinetic nudge, "Interested?"

She frowned, "I was just thinking how pathetic he was."

Ouch. Poor guy. I pulled down my helmet while scratching the back of my head, "He was one of the first volunteers to offer help with my remodeling. He's a big part of why I'm this far along already."

Entilla stood around a group of the wizards, rallying a team of helpers to hasten the wire installation. Alctua tilted her head, and she licked one of her eyes with a long, forked tongue. She shrugged, "Hm...At least he knows his place."

Not knowing if I was helping or hurting, I coughed into a hand, "Well then...Cya later."

She gave me a look, "I look forward to seeing what you'll do next, Harbinger.."

I got out of there before helping Entilla install wires. He stuck with smaller wires while I implanted thickened cords throughout the building in cardinal directions. These cables acted as thick branches that Entilla spread the thinner threads from. Once I saturated the floor's wiring, I worked my way towards the heating furnace and the icy blizzard over Alctua's head.

I worked with the stove for a few minutes, and I found many enchantments augmenting my handling of heat. Alctua let me borrow her ice storm, and it also gave me a better

grip on cold magic. Unlike the furnace, the blizzard leaked lots of energy out while I used it. That's why Alctua struggled with keeping herself warm.

Considering she was cold-blooded like Entilla, she pushed through a lot of hardship to keep everything up and running, so my respect for her leveled up. Having gained an understanding of the tools they used, I designed, wrote, and implemented a cipheric slab for a better furnace.

Unlike their current design, mine allowed either of them to operate in both frigid or sweltering conditions. Having used the blizzard myself, I kept the containment of the workstation as a top priority. These rulers lacked my durability, so their tools had to do a lot more than just help them work. They needed to protect them as well. Ensuring that shielding, I created a fine mesh of wire that acted as a tarp while they worked.

The nets used a weird, mana plume skill I made a while back, the webbing of the wires mirroring the leaves of a fern. These nets absorbed radiant heat and cold, working towards a moderate temperature at all times. As a final note for safety, I gave them enchanted gauntlets that distanced them from their tasks. Physically speaking, that is.

The gauntlets require some practice to use, but once mastered, they let anyone use the heated telekinetic points I used in my own crafting. It wouldn't match the specificity or power I wielded, but the gloves made a problematic task far less dangerous. After connecting those gauntlets and tarps to a mana siphon, I placed blue cores into each apparatus.

This served several purposes. It granted the furnace power even if someone broke the cables leading to it. It also stabilized the psionic flow, which was essential. These two would be wielding a lot of energy, and that mana carried with it a measure of will and intent. The blue cores stabilized that chaotic flow, letting them use more safely.

Lastly, the cores spawned a shield over their station, the writhing energy bubble insulating them from the rest of the Survivor's base. All of this gave the rulers much-needed space, something they didn't think they needed. They were wrong. These people required R&R more than they needed basic supplies.

Giving them that, I stepped out of the blue core shielding and spawned 'beds' where the sorcerers once channeled energy. I kept these beds simple, using steel grids covered with soft, lush plant life and soil. To keep the plants alive, I connected the beds to the

mana grid and put in simple water creation runes. These sigils converted mana to water, and they helped clean the air.

Finishing the effort, I erected steel walls around each bed, creating a framework of boxed-in cubicles. Sprucing them up, I connected a simple tube to each water sigil, letting someone shower in them. Testing it out, it operated, but the water came out cold as ice. I put in ambient warmth runes over the showerheads, and it came out nice and warm.

Getting caught up in the project, I put shelves along the walls, nightstands on the bed, and a desk in the open space left. In all honesty, those parts took seconds to add, and they made each place look far less like prison cells. Completing that idea, I gave each steel box a door with a gravity well lock.

The gravity well unlatched with a ring's mana signature, each one written with a unique series of Schema-based runes. While handing out the jewelry, I made each ring with a few extra augments for willpower, regeneration, etc. Considering how many rings I'd already made, the task took little time or effort. Despite the ease of making them, the difference those circlets made was palpable.

Aliens stood taller, crawled faster, and rested easier. Most of the wizards lacked the energy or wherewithal to thank me with gusto, but the little gusto they had left was used to display palpable emotion. Shock, tears, and disbelief, the rulers showed feeling with a vibrance akin to a rainbow, each shade as striking as the last.

At the center of it, I relished the sight. Even if I did this for my own gain, helping people felt good. It was a really underrated pastime, and more people should try it out. In many ways, assisting others offered meaning and purpose to life. In my case, it happened to give me money too.

Anyways, I gained plenty of rapport while turning the lives of the rulers around. Even if I enjoyed the process, I maintained a professional attitude. Before handing off the rings, rulers signed the cipheric contract I made. The circlets gave access to the power network as well, along with the means of contacting the director overseeing the entire base.

It made the whole process streamlined compared to a more traditional building scheme. Having finished a hundred rooms, I rode my elevator back up before handing the rulers their rooms and rings. Many followed me down, listening to my explanation of the

utilities within. This eroded the mountains of doubt they had for my abilities, and most of the holdout rulers signed the contract.

Those that sided against signing lacked access to the power network, the rooms, and all other utilities. It was their choice.

I rode down towards the barracks of this place, having many of the rulers enter their new living quarters above. Though the new layout distressed some, gaining privacy emboldened most. The mercenary leaders, military contractors, and royal guards entered the cipher contract without much resistance. Only the most die-hard rebels went against me, and once again, that was their choice.

Cracking my knuckles, I went about ensuring they regretted that decision.

Taking out blue cores, I constructed weapon after weapon made from my dimensional fabric. Simple swords and heavy hammers gained life from cipheric etchings and humming cores. These simple cipheric augments evolved the weapons into destructive forces, each weapon fitted for the one that wielded them.

I lost a few rulers because I constructed the weapons out of, well, me, but I was happy to see them refuse to sign. If all it took to stop them was an unordinary building process, then they lacked a mind open enough for what was to come. With willing subjects at my fingertips, I tested out my golem-based mechs.

All they needed to do was put themselves in a golem's body and deal with the psionic implanting process. Yeah, unpleasant, but it let them gain a titan's body without having to learn any fancy control scheme. It would be like a second body, one superior to their own.

And yeah, it stopped me from having to install fancy monitors and modern tech. I could do a lot, but that was beyond me.

Finishing twenty golem pilots, I rubbed my hand down my face. It was an attempt to wipe away my general fatigue, but to my chagrin, it didn't work. It never did. My time magic made everything much harder, the perpetual psionic dying turning into a tremendous burden over time. However, this all acted as a training exercise for me.

I'd be living in a temporally accelerated world for a long time. Adjusting to its eccentricities gave me options, and mastering simple, everyday tasks saved time. I repeated that to myself over and over because I turned what was supposed to be a rejuvenating break into another trial by fire.

But I needed to keep pushing. Exhaustion was no excuse to stop, and neither was the desire for comfort. The more comfortable I tended to be, the worse my life ended up becoming. In the trenches of hardship, I found meaning. On the battlefield of unease, I learned how to stand tall.

So I did so. Without taking a break, I armed this place with golem mechs, weapons, and basic armors. I kept the plate mails thin since my armor weighed most people down. Those that withstood the pressure were better for it, the additional resistance being an excellent training stimulus. The armors granted all the benefits my equipment always gave as well: mana, regeneration, and simple abilities.

The entire time, I talked with the rulers and discussed their preferences for their weaponry. This personalized creation meant each piece had a specific owner. Using my patented ring system, I made each cored weapon reliant on a ring's stimulus to activate. Otherwise, it would psionically attack whoever tried moving it.

They were like modified core golems but shaped like weaponry. Having living weaponry stopped rulers from stealing my stuff. It could still happen, of course, but the director above would take care of finding and hunting anyone who did so.

And I mention these precautions were for rulers stealing from rulers. No one, and I repeat, no one would steal anything I made here. I addressed all of that in my contract. Stealing of my property would lead to at least two deaths, and everything must be left behind on Leviathan-7 when the lottery ended, including the base itself.

This prevented people from turning in my hard work as their own. It also gave me more leeway in what I gave to the rulers. That's why I used just over two hundred blue cores for the remodel already. I'd get all of it back by the end. Getting ready to invest even more, I shuttled down towards the terrarium floor.

The blast of cool air from the plants refreshed me some as I reached the center of the room. To my left, Drelex sat in an algae pit, the humidity high and his catfish whiskers wilted. He leaned his head back, looking at peace with the world. He murmured as I walked nearby,

“You work fast...I’ll get to the language ciphers once I’ve recuperated fully.” He sank deeper into the pit, “Which, ahhh...Could take a while.”

I gave him a nod before getting to the task at hand. This floor required the most basic sigils yet. Air, water, and plant generation were all these people needed from here. Of course, my artificial creations lacked the flavor or texture of the real thing, but they acted as a reliable food source. Fruits and vegetables proved easy to make in mass. Meat was a different story since my origin mana made cancerous creatures.

People could eat it...Uhm, if they wanted to.

However, they weren’t this desperate, so I only made a few pens of the mutants before grabbing everyone’s signatures for the contracts. With the signs in tow, I rode up my elevator to help Entilla. He installed the wiring for lighting and for recharging stations. He even created obelisk charging ports, and many rulers lined up for them.

In fact, many rulers joined Entilla in his remodeling. With access to power and relief, the constructive might of these rulers bloomed. They constructed a network for the place, letting everyone connect to one another. They created psionic relays that conditioned the mana for their personal use. Hell, the rulers even made recreational stuff like spas, gameboards, etc.

While I installed wiring, several individuals implemented programs onto the new network. They automated problems with daily life. From holographic projectors to real-time maps of Leviathan-7, they gave everyone usable, practical utilities. They even created a behemoth tracking system. In hours, these people turned this hellhole into a bastion of technology, the fruits of their labor ripening all at once.

And I wanted some of it for my cities.

After we finished the terrarium, I stepped up to Entilla. The blue lizard ruler created a heating suit for himself, having traded favors with a tailor-based ruler. I admired the tech for a moment before raising a hand to him,

“Yo, Entilla. Do you mind talking after we finish here? I might have a job for you after this is done.”

Entilla raised his scaly brow, “Oh, really now? Do you need my help of all things? And here I thought you had a kingdom already.”

I waved an arm while rolling my eyes, “Pshh, come on now. I was just trying to make sure I wasn’t shaken down the moment I stepped into this place. It wasn’t like I was trying to make anyone else look bad.”

Entilla grabbed the edges of his tech-laden jumpsuit, “I suppose I can look past your transgression and help you...If I find the time.”

He coughed into a hand, “Ahem, but in all honesty, when would you like to talk about it?”

I shrugged, “A few hours from now. I have no idea how long it will take to handle the last floor.”

Entilla scratched the side of his neck spikes, “That’s where the most complex machinery is. I would’ve insisted we helped them first, but most of their immediate needs were handled by you up top, like gravitation or radiation. If I were giving you an estimate, a few hours seems about right.”

Entilla gave me a friendly shove on my shoulder, “Oh yeah, I was wrong about you. I, hm, I had a real chip on my shoulder, and you knocked it off. I figured I’ll say what everyone else is thinking-“

Entilla smiled with sharp teeth, “It’s good to be wrong sometimes.”

I reached out a fist, “Thanks, man. Let’s go clean up the last floor and get this over and done with.”

Entilla looked at my hand before trying to emulate my gesture. He couldn’t make a fist because his fingers ended with pointed claws. Doing the best he could, he made a loose fist and reached out. One of his claws caught between the plates of my gauntlet. When Entilla pulled his hand back, one of his nails pulled off.

Entilla reached his hand up to his face, his eyes wide. He stammered, “Agh, huck. Gahh.”

I pulled the missing claw out while holding down a laugh. He snatched his nail from me while snapping, “Every time I try to give you an inch, you make me regret it.”

A snicker escaped me before Entilla tossed his claw into an algae pit. He shrugged, “Anyways, let’s get back to work. I’d rather deal with wiring issues than that demonic gesture of yours any day.”

We rode the elevator down while other rulers followed behind us. In the medical bay, Iona walked around, panicking between patients. Several monitors buzzed and squealed out with high-pitched, panic-inducing sounds. I flung myself over with a localized gravity well, landing with a dull thud. I raised a hand to her, “What’s up?”

Iona raised her hands and wings in tandem, “They’re dying from barotrauma.”

Answering my confused expression, Iona snapped, “You depressurized everything too quickly. Their tissues were already weakened, and they ruptured when you fixed everything so fast.”

I tilted my head, and my eyes turned to slits, “Oh...Really now?”

Chapter 349: Uncertainty

End of the Last Chapter

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Iona simmered, “Yes. It’s the obvious aftermath from the rapid shifts in gravity and pressure.” She raised her hands, “I don’t have time to explain it.”

At this point, I questioned a lot about the situation, but as she explained, there wasn't time for that. Medical intervention was necessary, so I frowned, "How do you fix it?"

She closed her eyes before sighing, "We need...pressurization chambers, preferably with higher oxygen levels."

I furrowed my brow, "Uhm...What do they do, exactly?"

I was way out of my depth here. Iona waved a hand, "They put people back under pressure--"

I raised a hand, mana shifting through my palm in a coursing flux. In an instant, this floor's pressure rose. I pulled back on the rise, not wanting to reinjure everyone. I shrugged, "How much pressure do they need?"

She looked around, "Er, enough to match Leviathan-7's standard pressure, whatever that is."

I glided the compression of the ground floor up until it reached the normal pressure of Leviathan-7. Iona paced over towards a medical apparatus, a patient already in a dire state. The ruler reminded me of an archaeopteryx, a mix between a raptor and a bird. Sores covered the body of the dying ruler, and many tubes ran into her arms and throat.

Iona peered down at her while rubbing her temples. I pointed at her and raised a brow, "She's a ruler, so she must be systemized by Schema already. Why isn't she healing?"

Iona pinched the bridge of her nose, "You literally don't know anything. She's been exposed to radiation, and it's destroyed her metabolism. I don't have any method to establish functioning DNA here, so she's stuck with her baseline state. Cells can't multiply properly."

Iona glared at me, "She was stable while in stasis, but the damage from the barotrauma has compounded with her initial wounds." Iona bit her lips while peering away, "She's...She's not going to make it--"

I swooped the patient into my pocket dimension, machine and all. I put a hand on Iona's shoulder, "Show me anyone else who's unstable."

Iona hit my hand before gawking at the captured pod. Where I swiped my pocket dimension, a perfect, polished slice reflected back at us. It looked like someone scooped the person out of existence and the area around her.

And that was because I had.

Iona narrowed her eyes at me, “What did you just do?”

I raised a palm to her, “I don’t have time to explain. Let’s save the patients first.”

Iona squeezed a hand into a fist before pointing to a specific direction of the medical bay. She blew a strand of hair off her face while saying,

“All of those rulers are metabolically limited. They’ll need intervention, or they’ll die.”

I flung myself towards them, readying my pocket dimension. I bounced between each stasis pod before scooping fifteen rulers into true suspension. They all fit within the confines of the space, though a particular swollen sensation crossed over my sense of the area; the pocket dimension neared its limits of space.

I took note of that as Iona watched. She shook herself out of her stupor before turning to a different group of rulers, “These members are partially compromised, but they’re lower priority cases. Can you use that magic on them as well?”

I shook my head, “I could, but if it’s not urgent, I’d rather not.”

Iona gazed in disgust, “People’s lives are on the line.”

I waved off the insult, “You mentioned them being a lower priority, so I’ve done just that. Anyways, what can be done for them outside of that?”

She bit her tongue before waving an arm, “We need power, updated machinery, etcetera.”

“Then let’s get to work.”

Entilla worked with us to help power up the machines asap. Drelex got out of his algae pit, the situation’s severity calling him to action. The maroon catfish rode the elevator up to the actual mana battery, and he established the language cipher to smooth over general operations. That eased the situation while I supplied the mana and manpower on the bottom floor.

The complex machinery was well beyond my general crafting abilities. However, I constructed my own enchanted medical devices like I had for Kessiah and Althea. Several syringes, specialized scalpels, and resonating rings lined several overbed tables, all made from my dimensional fabric.

We got the rings on the patients, bolstering their regenerative abilities. Regaining consistent power stabilized their conditions further, and Entilla worked with another ruler to create some software. The developed app monitored people’s vitals and sent messages if anything was awry. Combine that with the boosted equipment, and we suffered no casualties.

Having the immediate situation handled, the other rulers took a break. Iona did the same, leaning against one of the old stairwells. I walked over towards her before crossing my arms, and I tilted my head,

“Why didn’t you mention the barotrauma when I depressurized the facility? You were there when I did that.”

Iona crossed her arms, “Look, a lot was going on, so I forgot about it.”

I tapped my arm with a fingertip, “Then why didn’t you mention it while I crafted upstairs?”

She raised a hand, “I got caught up with some other tasks. I ran down here with the machines going haywire because of your rapid fixes. Mmkay?”

I leaned over, “Isn’t it your job to handle the medical bay? What other tasks could be so consuming?”

She met my eye, “Look, macho man, I’m exhausted, and I don’t feel like being interrogated. Can we do this later?”

I frowned before lowering my arms, “What you’re doing doesn’t make sense, and I’m not the only one thinking that. You can choose to explain or not, but it degrades your reputation each time you hide something like this.”

While I walked off, I shrugged, “But if that’s your choice, so be it.”

Stepping away, I understood her excuse of being tired. Even I hid my own exhaustion. The stressful situation left me on edge, though that arrived from the novelty of the case, not the difficulty. Practice made perfect, but I lacked experience in healing or anything medicinal.

Staring down at my hands, I remembered Kessiah’s composure in this environment. She’d changed into an entirely different person than when I met her, shifting from a lost cause to a reliable pro. I nodded, remembering to be a pro myself.

I found Drelex and Entilla, both of them eating food delivered from above. They munched on the mutant meat my runes created, but I failed to mention that when I leaned over,

“Hey, you guys have a minute?”

Entilla leaned his head sideways, the lizard wiped out. Drelex snacked away before nodding, “I think we do, though Entilla may not be in his right mind.”

Entilla jested, “Tired or not, I’m still better than your lazy self.”

Drelex licked his fingers before shrugging, “That ‘laziness’ is why I’m not tired, and you’re exhausted.”

I waved my hands, “Alright, you definitely have a moment. I wanted to hire you both to install language ciphers and wiring into my settlements. I’ll give each of you three blue cores apiece for the job.”

Drelex leaned forward while Entilla wiped his eyes. Entilla yawned before shaking off his fatigue, “Err....Ah. Ok, how much work is this going to be?”

I waved a hand, “It’s many cities’ worth of installation. It will be difficult, and I’ll be making more of them later.”

Entilla raised a clawed hand, “Make it five, and I’ll do it.”

I nodded, “Done. What about you, Drelex?”

The maroon catfish leaned back, considering for a while. I stood up before grabbing my chin, “I wonder how many of your resources Schema will take once this is over? It would be a nasty situation, one that three blue cores could sweep away.”

Drelex peered at me, “Hm, if it’s five, I’ll do it, same as Entilla.”

Time was more valuable than pinching pennies, so I smiled, “It’s a deal.”

Before I stepped away, Iona murmured from behind me, “Oh yeah, I forgot to say this earlier. What did you do to the people and the machines? It wasn’t dangerous, was it?”

I weighed my hands back and forth, “It was...Er, I used true stasis, and I’ll be keeping them within it until after we return from the lottery.”

Drelex frowned, “Gah, that’s bloody awful. They won’t even be able to donate to the cause then. That puts them dead last.”

I shrugged, “They’re several hundred slots above last place at a minimum because of how many rulers have died. Besides that, bankruptcy is a lot better than death.”

Drelex grabbed his whiskers like a beard, “True enough, I suppose.”

I scratched my head before turning to Iona, “Is there anything else we need to finish here?”

Iona pulled a strand of hair out of her face, “No. We’re good.”

I walked off, heading over towards my elevator. Several people used it at once, many of them trying to figure out the best way of managing the resource. Opting out of waiting, I sprang up the stairwells built into the building. A few hopping skips later, I landed on the upper floor, finding my director golem keeping everything in order.

He saluted me while I walked past. Behind the mana battery and guardians, the rulers of the base chatted away about various endeavors, from exploration protocols to escape routes. On a table in the corner of the room, Malos rested in silence. Above him, the Emperor performed magic on the frog ruler’s mind.

Obolis pulled his fingertip off Malos’s forehead, and a tailing wisp of green magic trailed behind the Emperor’s movements. As the green wisp faded out of existence, Obolis let out a deep breath before wiping his brow,

“Ah, Daniel, well met. If you’re wondering about Malos, he’ll be fine. He simply needed a wipe of the implanted memories to restore his functioning self.” The Emperor tapped the side of his head, trying to recall something. After a sigh, he returned to normal,

“It would seem like you’ve utterly rectified our position within the last few days. That’s more than merely impressive; it’s given us a foundation to stand on.”

The other rulers chimed in, so I raised a hand to interject. They silenced, and their respect loomed over me as if I carried some sort of gravitas. The bizarre sensation faded before I put my hands on my hips,

“I’m pretty much finished with the rehauling. This compound’s been reconstructed from the ground up. Golem guards, infinite power, no radiation, stable gravity, clean food, clear water, fresh air, normal pressure, decent housing, technical wiring, you name it, I gave it. As agreed, I’ll need you guys to hand me the information slotted into a viewable format. Someone also needs to help allocate the resources from the treasury for me... You know, whichever way that’s done.”

Obolis flourished his cape as a blanket over Malos before walking over. His caring surprised me, though it was probably to get an alliance with Malos after everything was done. Obolis worked like that, balancing the pros and cons of every situation. The Emperor lifted his hand and waved it, several of the rulers following behind him.

We stepped towards the stairwell before walking down. As we did, Obolis put a hand on my shoulder while striking up a telepathic conversation,

“That attack used against Malos was insidious. The implanted memories dwarfed the size and scope of Malos’s life, which is extraordinarily difficult to do.”

“Why tell me all of this?”

“Because you need to be aware and careful around Shalahora.”

I frowned while thinking, “You don’t have to remind me. That guy’s a real mystery.”

From nowhere, a raspy, feminine voice scoffed into our psionic conversation, “Is that so? He should present himself differently then. I shall tell him such.”

Obolis and I froze in place, a shiver racing up our spines. A ruler bumped into us before falling back. They snapped, “What was that?”

The Emperor and I ignored him while the voice laughed. It oozed,

“Hah. Hah. Hah...There’s nothing to fear. I take no offense from caution, and it is warranted. However, there are no thoughts that hide from me here, no matter the time or the place. I know of them all, and they know of me.”

Obolis closed his eyes while closing a fist. The Emperor murmured in a firm voice, “Who is this?”

“Mesmera.”

The Emperor’s brow furrowed while he snarled, “Cease your bantering and quiet yourself. Gawking at our conversation as if we were animals-“

I grabbed the Emperor’s arm hard enough to stumbled him sideways. He peered at me, “Now you act with indecency...as well.”

His words trailed off as I stared at him with wide eyes. Fear traced my expression, and the Emperor's attitude changed instantly. Mesmera whispered to us,

"Continue walking as you were."

I ground my teeth, but I followed the command. Obolis kept pace before he coughed into a hand and thought back, "Ahem...What is it you want to know?"

Mesmera whispered, "There is nothing you know that I do not, child. You are merely a method of speaking with the one beside you...So be quiet."

My minds clanked into high gear, and a few facts became obvious. Firstly, Shalahora told Obolis about Mesmera. Second, she used the conversation between them to find me and make contact. Third, this Old One-

"And you are correct, little one."

My eyes narrowed before I thought back in a low boil, "Stop talking. I don't want to hear what you have to say."

Mesmera cackled, "Hah. You haven't heard anything I wanted to say, have you?"

I answered with silence. She radiated her words like poison, "I can tell you how to return home, how to message your loved ones, or even guarantee your victory in this lottery. I know many things, and those may be yours...If you tell me-"

I spoke with force,

"No."

Obolis blinked, confusion spreading over his face. He scratched the back of his head as I stated into the ether,

"Leave me be."

A hint of frustration spilled into Mesmera's voice, "You're little more than a speck on a corpse... You know this, and yet you speak back to me."

I stepped aside from the other rulers and spoke aloud, "Everyone, give me a minute. I need a moment."

One of the rulers raised a concerned hand, "Are you alright?"

Obolis answered, "Is his attention so important that he's no longer allowed a second to collect his thoughts?"

The ruler raised his clawed hands, "What? No, I--"

Obolis walked down the stairwell, "Then leave him."

The ruler followed the entourage before I remained there, alone on the stairs. I condensed my dimensional wake until it blistered at the seams, and Mesmera hissed,

"You run from me, but it's only a matter of time before I've set in. I am poison. I am memory. I am that which you hide but is behind closed doors...I will remain until you are weak."

My dimensional wake reached my skin, pulling down like a cloak of lead. I held the weight for a moment before sighing. After ensuring her presence was dispersed, I returned to the other rulers. Once I passed the stairs and reached the vault door, I found the rulers waiting on me. While walking up, I locked eyes with Obolis, an entire conversation taking place with that glance.

But what was spoken, I didn't fully know. While I tried parsing out what just happened, the rulers and I waited in front of a vault door. Graphene covered and interlaced the entire structure, the dull gray contrasting the sheening metal. A small, mongoose ruler walked up to the terminal, its claw brandished. Several rulers, including Obolis, walked by as the mongoose took blood samples from them.

Once collected, they placed the blood onto the terminal, which exposed a retina scanner. That unlocked a code, one built in the cipher. It required a lot of work to pop open the door, and as it hissed from air pressure shifts, the giant doorway swung on smooth hinges. It opened my view as it passed.

And a wealth of treasure piled within, all of it ripe for the taking.

I stared at it, a smile popping onto my face. The grin whittled as I remembered Mesmera's contact. With a quick collapse, I stood in place with my wake compressed. If my guess was correct, that expunged her presence once more.

It made me wonder if the Old One read minds or the thoughts of everyone present at all times. There was no way for me to know, and that thought unsettled me. After taking a few deep breaths, I regretted contacting Shalahora. Getting away from him took top priority, though I had no idea how to break it to the Sovereign. Or if I even could.

After all, his alliance became odder by the second, and Shalahora's psionic abilities weren't tested yet. He could be reading this entire planet's minds for all I knew. Questions mounted, and the more I asked, the more they needed answers.

Without any means of finding info, I put myself back in the present. I gazed at the treasury, one full of mismatched supplies. They organized the relics and artifacts onto various shelves, piles, and pods. The majority of the rewards were the blue cores and rainbow bones, but a few dungeon rewards stacked until they reached the vault's roofing.

Each set of piles served a different purpose. Bladed weapons, dulled tools, and shining armors stacked up high in one mass. Another pile of blue cores and rainbow bone sheened in the side. The rulers here dedicated the last portion of this room to over a hundred vases stacked on a shelf.

I pointed at them, "What are those holding?"

Obolis stayed quiet before the mongoose ruler adjusted its glasses, "Ashes."

I furrowed my brow, "Ashes? Why?"

“The dead.”

A wave of dread passed over me, and I peered to the side, “Ah...Sorry for asking like that.”

The glasses-wearing mongoose paced over to the wall, lifting one of the vases. Under each vase, a picture rested. The ruler lifted one of the pictures, showing the uneven smile of a gray, elephantine alien. The mongoose shook its head before setting it down,

“These are so that we can return them to their loved ones.” The mongoose bowed its head. The other rulers in the room made similar gestures, each of them coming from different cultures, yet all of them respected the dead. I raised a fist to them before lowering my hand.

Up until now, the deaths of the rulers were intangible, like some esoteric stat that exposed how dangerous this planet was. Staring at the hundred-plus remains drove home the sheer scale of death on this planet. Most of these aliens were good people, and Schema sent them here to die so he could rob them.

And I did nothing.

I tapped the side of my head, quelling a rising sense of guilt. I wasn’t responsible for every outcome. After letting out a sigh, I paced over to the pile of armor and grabbed a cerulean scale-mail at the top of it. It weighed more than iron, which explained why no one wore it. It was far too heavy for practical use here.

Pretty much everything here shared that distinction, all of it heavy in this gravitation. For that reason, Leviathan-7 invalidated the vast majority of these resources. Even worse, few of the materials matched my dimensional fabric regardless of weight, making them worthless for me. Rulers wore the lighter armors already, and I paid little attention to the rest of the weapons.

However, the tools interested me quite a bit. Most of them held strange functions for specific purposes. Some carried more generic goals, and I picked up one of the best embodiments of that practical ideal. I stared at a large, rugged hammer of black iron. CIPHERIC runes traced its sides, and the flat of it looked like raw stone. In my palm, it radiated heat and temperature magics. I lifted it overhead while murmuring, “Hmm, some of this stuff is interesting.”

Once more, the mongoose answered, “By all means, take it. Schema knows no one here can use it.”

I turned to him, the ruler acting as the effective treasurer. It wore circular glasses, mainly for style, and its body reminded me of a speckled otter. With its mouth closed, it was adorable. When its mouth opened, sharp fangs ruined that illusion, and its raspy voice added to its newly predatory appearance.

I pointed at him, “What’s your name?”

The creature adjusted its glasses and straightened its jacket, “Ohzah.”

I raised a brow, “Do you manage the survivor’s supplies?”

“Effectively, yes. I do.”

I smiled, “We’ll keep in contact then.”

From a pocket in its sleeve, the adorable predator opened its jacket. In three pockets, different-sized business cards waited for the right situation. Ohzah handed me the largest card, the paper slip the size of a fingertip to me. I floated it up before swiping it into my dimensional storage.

That left the black iron hammer. Not having room for the mallet, I placed the maul onto my back, and a band of dimensional fabric interlocked with the handle. Once planted in place, I shuffled through the other tools. I found a panel covered in cipheric markings. Giving it a quick skim, the pad acted as a short-range teleporter. I put it on my back before finding one just like it.

A quick bolt of mana verified my assumptions; these pads were a pair of twins that connected two different spaces – warp pads, in other words. Turning to Obolis, I tossed one of them over. The Emperor clasped the panel in his palm before inspecting it. He murmured,

“It’s a rather poorly optimized warping panel. While useful in a richly energized environment, it’s been useless...Until now.”

I put it on my back, “We’ll be keeping in contact, that’s for sure. Anyways-“

With a bit of gusto, I pulled up all of the cores and rainbow bones with gravity wells. Turning to the rulers, I gestured to the piles,

“I prefer accepting payment in the form of blue cores instead of the rainbow bones. What’s the ratio of exchange you guys use?”

The glasses-wearing mongoose walked up, “Ahem, it was ten-thousand pounds of rainbow bone per blue core, roughly speaking.”

They didn’t know it yet, but that was essentially free blue cores. I rubbed my temples, “If I’m guesstimating here, you guys have about three hundred thousand pounds of rainbow bones piled up here. 40% of that is one hundred and twenty blue cores worth of the stuff. I’ll trade that for the blue cores. Sound good?”

Nearby rulers dwarfed the mongoose, yet no one argued with it when it stated, “That’s a worthy trade. We can all accept that.” It adjusted its glasses, “We’ll also assume you’d want recompensation for the cores you used to remodel the actual base here as well?”

I pointed at him with a finger gun expression, “Exactly.”

The mongoose rubbed the edges of its eldritch leather jacket, “We have 436 blue cores, and 40% of that is roughly 174. You used 157 cores in the remodel as well. That’s 331 blue cores owed in total, which we can send as our initial payment. We’ll continue with this conversion ratio moving forward, and we can send over supplies weekly until the day of warping away.”

It tilted its head at me, “Is that acceptable?”

I pulled the mass of blue cores towards me, “Oh hell yeah. That’s perfect.”

While I put the cores into my dimensional storage, an enigmatta ruler walked up, its pressurized suit showing wear and tear from staying on Leviathan for so long. It raised its palms and bowed,

“Hello...We can’t send the data yet...We’re putting it in a mobile form for you...It will take a few days.”

Each pause in its speaking came about from wheezing breaths. It reminded me of Darth Vader. Either way, I frowned, “Don’t you already have a network up and running? It should only take a few days for the data then, right?”

“We do...But the amount of data is very high...It will be useful for the data to be robust...And incorruptible as well...Given Leviathan’s conditions.”

I raised a palm, “Ah, understandable. Thanks for letting me know.”

It wheezed, “No, thank you...For making this hell livable.” Its gaze lingered at the urns lined on the shelves.

I blinked for a moment before smiling, “Not a problem.”

Walking out of the vault, I closed the door behind everyone. Once at the outskirts of the floor, the rulers dispersed to their various duties. Obolis stayed behind before grabbing at the fur under his chin like it was a beard. He mused,

“If I were to guess, you’re about to leave.”

I nodded. Obolis turned a palm to me, “Then can we discuss the conscription of more golems in the future, among other things?”

I waved a hand, “I’ll be putting them onto a galactic auction house for certain contracts with them. And for the other things, discussing it could incite certain parties.”

Obolis raised his brow, “Such as?”

I murmured, “Old Ones.”

Obolis’s eyes glossed over before he nodded, “Ah...Then, then I’ll compete with the other rulers. Thank you for helping us all here, and I-I’ll leave you be.”

He gave me a slight bow, “We’ll see you at another time, Harbinger.”

Even with all his worldly wisdom, Obolis was shaken by certain things. It turned out that Old Ones were some of those unsettling factors. They were for me as well, something I noted while we parted ways.

It was time to get the hell out of here. I searched for Entilla and Drelex, finding them on the terrarium floor. Drelex lounged in an algae pit while Entilla bathed under a sun lamp a couple of feet away. They gazed up at me, both of them looking nervous. Drelex coughed, his body rustling the still water he waded in,

“Ah...It’s good to see you again. What do you want?”

I raised a brow at them, “You guys ready to go?”

Drelex winced, “Already? I just finished my work.”

I leaned back, disgust spread over my face, “What? That was hours ago. We’re wasting time.”

Drelex shrugged, “What are hours to immortals anyhow?”

I frowned, “There’s nothing immortal about us. Come on. Let’s go.”

Drelex leaned back into his algae pit, “Of course...Once I finish my algae bath.”

I gazed down at him, and the catfish man crossed his arms over his head. He blew into the pit of algae, “Ah...This place is finally comfortable.”

I pulled molten dimensional fabric from my pocket dimension. With it floating above, Drelex sneered,

“Ahck, what are you doing with that? It’s molten.”

I rolled my eyes before swiping him and his algae pit into my pocket dimension. As I paced up to Entilla, the blue lizard peered back and forth. Once I stood beside him, Entilla squeaked out,

“Uhm, where does that portal lead?”

Swinging the portal like an ax, I smiled,

“A surprise.”

Chapter 350: Untimely Assaults

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After walking out of the survivor's base, I dashed through the compressed rock of Leviathan-7's crust. Once at the surface, I erupted through the strange fauna and wildlife, pulling up mountains and hills as I did. With the dramatic exit finished, I turned in every direction, seeing behemoths, algae, and the gas bubble ecosystem. Shalahora hadn't waited out here for me.

Unable to find the Sovereign, I shrugged before heading out. Without any actual means of communicating with him, I figured he waited for me in my cities. In all honesty, I dreaded talking with the guy again since he introduced a lot of risks. Still, he's why I found the survivors in the first place, and the last thing I wanted was Shalahora siding with Valgus. If they did, the number of people leaving this hellish planet might number in the single digits.

Staring back at their tentacle-covered pyramid, I frowned. They lost the vast majority of the rulers present already. With Schema's current setup, he'd gain hundreds of planets and empires for free. As I gazed at the stars, I wondered if this same process took place elsewhere. How many lotteries resulted in hundreds dying? How many empires would Schema steal?

I had no way of knowing, and I lacked time to dwell on the matter.

Rushing across the horizons, I darted above the behemoths as a dark needle. I sliced the wind, shearing through it with ease. My form warped nearby algae, the speed and friction building heat over my body. In this strange form, I passed Leviathan-7 as a speeding flash, more akin to living lightning than a monster of metal.

Fauna gave way to the red dunes of the desert, more of the rainbow bone piles missing than before. Valgus collected thousands of them, his resources vastly exceeding my own by the looks of it. Well, sort of. The rainbow bones meant nothing to me, the material being like a worse version of my dimensional fabric.

On the other hand, the blue cores mirrored diamonds; the beautiful spheres were practical and valuable all at once. The bones weren't in short supply either. Driving that point home, I stared at the first hill of shining bones. They amassed into piles, then mounts, then mountains. In time, they patterned into a plateau, meaning I reached the depths of the ossuary.

Unlike exploring elsewhere on this planet, I never needed a compass to find my cities. They always faced the brightest section of Leviathan, the black hole a menacing

reminder of this planet's dangers. With the shining bones arrived the primevals who came out to play. Their haunting forms shifted and trembled with nearby landscapes, their battles destroying the skyline of algae.

They ripped holes into the land as if they hated it. I couldn't blame them, but I avoided the monsters for the time being. I'd harvest them later with my army of golems. As I neared my region, a wave of anxiety passed over me. That dread spawned from explosive sounds and the shaky ground.

At first, it mirrored the battles of primevals. Upon closer inspection, the clashes of light and nuclear-sized explosions erupted with too much frequency and violence. Something or someone attacked my cities, and for a moment, I worried if Shalahora had turned on me. With an explosive burst of gravity wells, I bolted towards the sound and sources of light.

Grinding to a halt with the violence in full view, I gazed at a scene of untold destruction. Three of my cities were leveled to the finest grain. A fourth city's barrier wobbled from attacks on it, and Shalahora defended my territory against a mass of primevals. Several dozen attacked him from all angles while a coal-black cyclops gazed down at Shalahora.

That shadowy Sovereign used several shining spheres to wash the battlefield in light. Using the shadows cast by the orbs, Shalahora darted between the gaps of an incoming swarm. The missing attacks reshaped the entire realm, and it stripped the area clean like a cascade of bleach drenching mold.

In each cleansing assault of light and force, Shalahora retaliated with swarming slices of darkness. He reminded me of Hod, but Shalahora used ascendant lightning for his onslaught. The rippling strikes and destructive cuts would've destroyed mountains and rivers alike, yet the primevals ignored the attacks.

They attacked with unyielding bloodlust and no regard for their lives. Above it all, the charcoal-shaded cyclops stared at the fight. Feeling he was familiar, I took a moment to recall who it was. He was one of the rulers I learned about during the introductions of the lottery – The Kalat, the union of an entire species.

While they should've been a worthy foe for most, Shalahora should've wiped them all out already. The shadowy Sovereign mentioned using psionic attacks to splinter the congregation's mind, but apparently, that theory didn't work well in practice. At least

Shalahora carried no wounds or signs of exhaustion from the battle. If anything, they both reached a stalemate.

With a grip on the situation, I took a deep breath while charging my mana. Using a long-distance telepathic tether, I connected with the director golem leading my cities. The golem responded in an instant,

“Ah, creator. Thank the creator that you’re back. That is to say, thank you for being back, but I’m speaking with you, so the phrase doesn’t hold up. I simply must rethink that when speaking-“

I snapped, “What’s the hell’s going on?”

“Ah, excuse me. A ruler found us and began swarming our cities with primevals. He’s unleashed over a hundred strong at us from all angles. We defended for a while, but he collected his forces into a singular mass and kept unleashing devastating gamma bursts onto our cities’ peripheries.”

I winced. I used that strategy, so other rulers could use it as well. The director kept calm as he recited,

“Shalahora returned a while ago, and he’s been defending the outskirts of the town while we recollected our losses and forces.”

I grimaced, “How many golems have we lost?”

The director spoke with quiet pride, “Not one, creator. I kept them all alive.”

I blinked back my surprise, “What? Really?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you, sir.”

I shook off my disbelief, “Hah, so this is what shattered expectations feel like. Anyways, we need to organize our counterattack.”

“I was waiting for your arrival while focusing on avoiding losses, sir.”

I locked my eyes on the dark cyclops, my gaze turning dark, “I’m here now, so let’s retaliate in kind.”

Mana trickled over me as thick as plasma while I telepathically linked with Shalahora. The umbral blot rasped, “Which one of you filthy mongrels still has a mind?”

“Daniel. Attacking. Be ready.”

I shot through the algae in the sky. After passing the layer of writhing kelp, the giant blot of Leviathan spread out before me in all its majesty. It whirled in my vision as I lost levity. Diving down, I propelled myself towards the shining bones below. The wind wisped over me, friction building heat until I neared the glowing ground.

Before impact, I flattened myself, maximizing my landing’s collision. At the same time, I opened my dimensional shield, capturing a slice of the orbital bombardment. That stopped the shockwave from disturbing my cities. Without any more time to think, I made contact with the shining bones.

I evaporated in a blinding sun. I washed away in a kinetic calamity. I brought forth an absolute cataclysm, and my orbital bombardment erased the horizons in all directions. With the sky cleared, Leviathan gazed down at us, a dark eye watching me recreate this world’s shape, and if the land were paper, I set the ink ablaze.

A flash of light consumed the entire region, Shalahora dashing into shadows cast in the distance. The primevals turned to powder and ash, and the dark cyclops covered his eyes in the space. It was his mistake. Before the impact settled, I regenerated and rode the kinetic wave outwards, dashing myself towards the cyclops.

He saw nothing as I lifted my dimensional shield. From within it, the impact’s absorbed explosion erupted. A disintegrating beam of raw force shot out with blitzing shrapnel. The dark cyclops turned to nothing but a memory before I burst that memory in a wave of singularities. The dark blots fed on my own body, erupting and feasting in tandem.

I turned myself into dark shrapnel, my body food for ruin and my corpse cause for calamity. Event Horizon scattered over the vaporized remnants of the cyclops, and the aura devoured the atoms that remained from its death.

As the wave of energy dispersed, I stood from it unharmed, an immortal amongst the mundane. Gazing at the cyclops, something irked me, so I sent out my psionically loaded wake. A presence lingered where the cyclops once was. The congregation of spirits wrestled out in the ether, attempting to escape.

I infested their minds, reading the memories within. I found nothing as if I had invaded some kind of animate corpse. I leaned back, stunned by apparitions. I couldn't even conceive how something like this existed. A spirit without a mind? It made no sense, and neither made its attempts at escaping or regenerating its physical form.

It ran off instinct, writhing, thrashing, and hounding to escape from the confines of my wake. It uncovered no gaps in the jail cell here, every part of this space was my own. But its struggle continued. It clawed out with the unending desperation of a wild animal. I wrangled it in, stunned that a mindless zombie carried such enormous ferocity.

I battled against it for a while before my grasp began slipping. Below me, Shalahora wrestled with the rejuvenated primevals, many of them already returned from ash. I didn't care about them. Below their battle, the shining soil filled with irradiated mana. The bone beast prepared a gamma burst, one within viewing distance of my cities.

The urgency overwhelmed me, and I struggled against the spirits. I condensed my wake over the shivering souls, but they kept fighting. After a while, I realized I had a choice. I could either let these spirits escape and save my city or capture them and let several cities be blown apart.

After a couple seconds of thought, the bones below erupted with spines that shimmered. I needed to block the gamma burst with my shield, but these spirits might bring back more primevals. I tried weighing the pros and cons of each choice, but there wasn't any time. In that mess of a mental state, an idea popped up in my head.

And I loathed myself for it.

As the ground continued swelling with vibrant energy, I made a choice. I shoved several of my minds into the spirits. They offered no resistance, and with a wash of mana, the infested souls swelled. Moments passed as the zombified ghosts ballooned to the edges of my wake. In an ego cleansing, they drowned in a psionic flood.

And they were no more.

I took a breath, but I found no air to breathe. I hit myself across the side of my head, knowing there was no time to think about what I had just done. Racing downward, I landed at the epicenter of my orbital bombardment. Pulling up my dimensional shield, the gamma burst below erupted. I vaporized into nothing; every atom in my body ripped into a wash of particles.

From nothing, I returned in a fraction of a second. With my arrival, a mental whiplash vibrated through me. My vision and senses changed multiple times in the last fractions of a second. After getting a grip, I lifted a hand, snapping a powerful gravity well into existence overhead. It pulled the remaining blue cores from the dead primevals nearby, and I snatched them into my pocket dimension.

Aiming my other hand, I snapped singularity after singularity at the primevals who regenerated their bodies after the gamma burst. Dark beads blotted through the crater I left behind. They feasted on the surrounding air and discharged energy in turn. After the kinetic rain settled, Shalahora returned to the battlefield.

A molding shadow, he darted between each enemy, the Sovereign holding many forms at once. His shades and my golems joined the fray, metal and shadow collapsing onto the enemies in unison. Gravitation implosions flashed with light before giving way to waves of darkness. I tore through the enemy lines while Shalahora cleaned the remnants I left behind.

And in time, we crushed the opponents to powder.

Standing amidst the destruction, I pocketed the last blue cores before hovering over to Shalahora. The shadowy presence rested at the edge of the crater that my orbital bombardment created. Standing beside him, I placed a hand on the Sovereign's shoulder as I said,

"Thanks."

Shalahora nodded while remaining silent. Stepping away from him and the epicenter of my collision, I found the director golem in the city nearby. After I floated through the blue core barrier, I raised a hand to the director,

“Good job keeping the golems safe. We can rebuild the cities, but the experience of the soldiers isn’t replaced as easily.”

The director golem gave me a bow, “It’s the least I could’ve done, creator.”

I lowered my arm, “At ease. Anyways, get some golems ready to establish my cities again. We have a bit of construction to handle before we find out where the hell this enemy came from.”

The director sent out a telepathic command, “You heard him, everyone. Get ready to move out.”

My soldiers shifted from still waters to a wave of movement while I hovered myself back over towards Shalahora. Sitting beside him, we gazed at the humming glow where I had landed earlier. After a minute, I turned to the Sovereign,

“Why didn’t you use that same mind attack as earlier? The primevals have robust minds, but they don’t stand a chance against that. Neither did the cyclops.”

Shalahora rested his face in his umbral hands, “They…They owned no mind to infest. I can implant centuries of memories, but they carried no weakness to trauma or pain. They were unfeeling like the inanimate brought to life, stones that breathed or water that sang.”

I frowned, “Er, it was more like zombies than talking grass.”

Shalahora scoffed, “True.”

I leaned back, my arms propping me up as I stared up, “That was weird. I noticed that same feeling when I tried some psionic attacks against the, er, spirits of that ruler.”

“Did you let any of them live?”

I frowned, “No. They’re gone.”

Shalahora sighed, “Perhaps that is wise as mercy is often an unnecessary source of future conflict. It allows a ripped plant to regrow. To truly destroy an enemy, their roots must be uprooted and pulled apart.”

I shook my head, “They didn’t have any memories to interrogate anyway, so I kind of just let anger take over.”

“Anger is a tool, one worthy of wielding given their transgressions. At the minimum, they’ve done nothing for your favor.”

I turned to Shalahora, “Speaking of earning favor, why did you help me out?”

Shalahora kept his gaze on the crater steady, letting a silence pass over us. He shrugged, “I was in no danger.”

“Yeah, but you still helped me without any real reason...What gives?”

Shalahora tilted its head at me, “We are allies, aren’t we? What more reasoning must there be? This is the line of thinking that frustrated me with that frog ruler. It was as if he aimed to dissect those around him like they were pieces in some game he played.”

Shalahora’s eyes narrowed, “A game assumes rigidity of rules. People are not so simple. When assuming control of others, one often finds that those people rebel for no other reason than spite. So I unleashed my spite, and that weakling could not carry the brunt of it.”

Shalahora seethed, “But for some reason, people are allowed to manipulate with words but not actions. It’s absurd.”

I raised a brow, “Yeah, but words don’t kill people.”

“Without context, perhaps, but what if a commander orders a village to be annihilated down to the last woman and child? His words are weapons all the same, yet he is not judged as the results of his words aren’t apparent at the moment of his speaking.”

I pursed my lips, “Huh...Wouldn’t the soldiers’ actions be the wounding element, not the words of the general?”

“You argue semantics instead of my point, which is a concession in itself.”

I leaned forward, “That assumes I’m evading the issue, but I’m not. Besides that, I’d probably judge that general quite a bit even in that moment.”

“But not in the same vein as if he tore the villagers apart in front of you.”

I nodded, “That’s true...I’ll think about it.”

We watched the residual heat of the crater blur the air above my impact point. I turned to Shalahora and nudged him with a hand, “Well, thanks for the help anyways. I appreciate it.”

Shalahora sighed, “And I appreciate your forthrightness. It’s rare to meet anyone in a position of power who achieved their means with their own efforts, and it makes us kindred spirits, each of us disparate in purpose but united on principle.”

Shalahora’s sky blue eyes carried no hints of deception, so I couldn’t tell his motives. No discomfort or sense of unease permeated him, a sense of authenticity present at all times with the guy. It was strange. I met many figures in my life, like Yawm or Obolis. They all hid behind some masquerade of magnificence like they were above it all. Shalahora didn’t do that.

I was so used to people trying to manipulate me that meeting someone honest put me on guard. Even then, I couldn’t tell if the shadow was an ancient evil or a naive optimist. Either way, I let the issue go while murmuring, “Well, thanks for helping despite the struggle. And yeah, it was as if those enemies were designed with your abilities in mind.”

Shalahora gazed where we fought, “To think there is a means or method to kill the mind but leave the body and soul behind...It is unnerving.”

My eyes widened as a realization snapped through me. I opened my pocket dimension before pulling out some liquid rainbow bone. While I spiraled it in a circle, I met Shalahora's eye,

"This...This is what they're using."

Shalahora tilted his head at the liquid, "What is it?"

"It psionically kills whatever eats it."

Shalahora wisped away from the stuff, his body trembling, "Gah, grotesque."

I spun the shining liquid in a circle, "It is, and based on the fight, the primevals aren't the only victims here."

I set my gaze where the black cyclops watched us fight,

"It's being used on the other rulers as well."