

## New World 351

### Chapter 351: Ethics and Armies

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 the fight,

“It’s being used on the other rulers as well.”

Shalahora condensed himself over the crater, “And your proof was the lifeless Kalat?”

I shrugged, “It’s the only conclusion that makes sense unless there’s some other way of killing someone’s mind. Personally, I don’t know any.”

Shalahora oozed towards the liquid bone while keeping some distance, “If there is another method, I don’t know if it...And this disgusting liquid was harvested on this planet?”

“It’s under the surface of the ossuary. You’ll find it in these fountains where primevals are tempted to drink the fluid. They end up dying, and I think the bones collect the bodies into the giant mass below.”

I tapped the opalescent shards beneath me, “It’s like a defense mechanism for primevals that get too strong.”

Shalahora simmered, “Hm. Perhaps that’s why my shades return from the tunnels so rarely. They may be allured by liquid power, so they pay the price for indulging in their temptations.”

I shook my head, “That could be some of them, but I think it’s because someone’s guarding those places. If I had to guess, it’s Valgus and the rulers he’s converted.”

Shalahora scoffed, “You believe his operation expanded to such an extent? That idiot can hardly run a guild, let alone destroy rulers in mass.”

I shrugged, “Eh, maybe, but do we really know him?”

“We know him enough to ascertain his lack of tact and recklessness.”

I tapped my side, “Well, he’s been laying low for a reason. If he’s gathering primevals, that explains why he hasn’t destroyed the survivors yet.”

Shalahora peered up before murmuring, “Hm...Perhaps he is the most likely culprit. Baldowah was always fond of conflict, and this course of action isn’t that far removed from Valgus’s own abilities.”

“How so?”

Shalahora gazed towards primevals in the distance, “Valgus used the harvested souls of strong eldritch to defend himself. He is no stranger to such underhanded methods.”

I leaned back, “Huh...See, I guessed it was obvious because his faction has been scooping up wandering rulers. I had no idea why he wanted to eliminate everyone, but now it makes sense. He wasn’t killing them.”

Shalahora seethed, “He’s controlling them for his own means. Grotesque, just like this liquid.”

I pointed at the shadow, “Maybe it’s a bit underhanded, but regardless of what we think about it, it’s effective. Using this stuff, Valgus gained an army of primevals and likely a

hundred plus rulers as his pawns...I'll be honest, we don't stand a chance in an upfront confrontation, and neither do the survivors."

Shalahora shivered, "There is a chance for victory, though it is slight."

I had my own ideas, but I raised a brow and asked, "What are you thinking?"

Shalahora flowed towards my city's barrier. On the forcefield's outer surface, shadows danced to life in the shape of the two of us. They mirrored Egyptian hieroglyphs, and the Sovereign pointed at one of the shadows, one reflecting an asura,

"Valgus relies on his eldritch shackles to protect his mind. If we can dismantle those protectants, he'll be vulnerable to my abilities. It's a question of how we'd go about tearing those chains apart."

I tapped my chin, "That's betting those shackled eldritch are his only psionic defenses. Seems risky since they could just be one layer of many."

Shalahora scoffed, "That's doubtful. In many ways, a person's strength unveils their weaknesses. Valgus's psionic defense is absolute, but it also demonstrates a need and desire for that protection. It's safe to assume that without those constraints, he's vulnerable."

Two shadows on the city's barrier struck at the asura shade while Shalahora murmured, "While he is incapacitated from my psionic wounds, we strike him down. We may require the assistance of the other rulers to help hold onto some sort of bulwark during our siege--"

I shook my head, "That plan works off of a lot of assumptions, and I'm not willing to bet my life on something that fickle."

Shalahora's shadows dispersed, "So you believe we stand no chance, or perhaps you wish to avoid aggression from here on out?"

I pushed myself up by shoving my hand onto the ground. Landing light on my feet, I waved my arms, "There's no way I'm going to bet on a plan that desperate. We've got much better alternatives, anyways."

Shalahora turned to my cities, “Such as fighting with your golems? I didn’t believe you’d do so, but if you’re willing to make that sacrifice-“

My face wrinkled with disgust, “What? Hell no. You’re right; I’m not sending my golems to the grave. It’s unfortunate, but we’re fighting fire with fire.” I spun the psionic liquid around me, “We’ll be using this to make an armada of primevals for our own use. Temporarily, of course.”

Shalahora’s eyes narrowed, “If you were so inclined to use this method, then why haven’t you created an army of primevals already?”

I condensed the liquid into a ball, “If I’m honest, I didn’t want to. The situation’s changed, however.”

Shalahor jeered, “Ah, ethics that change based on the situation...That’s quite convenient, isn’t it?”

I raised a brow, “We’re in an inconvenient situation. Besides that, you put centuries of torture into someone’s mind because they spoke against you, and you’re calling me out?”

Shalahora tilted his head, “But he is no worse for wear now, is he? It’s a simple spell that can be remedied with a competent magician, of which the survivors have plenty.” Shalahora simmered, “You’re throwing away your ideals at the first hint of sacrifice. That’s what bothers me, little one.”

I frowned, “Eating people is wrong as a general rule, but what if you crash-landed on an island? Assuming there are corpses already and you didn’t kill them, then you can survive if you eat the bodies. It’s an unfortunate reality, but eating them gives you a chance to survive.”

I frowned at Shalahora, “We’re in that kind of situation. In the end, you can’t be ethical if you’re dead.”

Shalahora leaned back before mulling over what I said. The shadows on the barrier wisped to nothing while Shalahora murmured, “Hmmm. Ethics without ability turns

into idealism, and it's diverged so far from reality that it often poisons it. Is that what you mean?"

I pursed my lips, "Huh... Yeah, essentially, but we're getting lost in the weeds here. The point is, I'm not bringing a knife to a gunfight. In this case, everyone on this planet will die if we don't take action. I'm going to assume the worst-case scenario, which is that they have hundreds of primevals. Maybe even thousands."

I narrowed my eyes, "And to catch up, we've got a lot of work to do. Are you with me?"

I stretched out a hand before Shalahora sighed. He grabbed my hand before shaking it,

"Hah... Then it must be done."

"Good." I pulled the warping panel out of my pocket dimension. Shalahora followed me into the insulated environment of my city, the cool air washing over us as we floated in. In front of us, several rows of core golems stood at the ready for various commands, and the director floated over two hundred blue cores to me. The primordial golem bowed and thought over,

"Here is the harvest of the last few days, creator. Use it as you wish."

I snapped the massive pile of cores into my pocket dimension while pulling out pieces of machinery attached to the dying rulers. Making more room in my pocket dimension, I stripped all of the concrete, steel, and other extra bits I scooped up while containing the other rulers. This gave me a chunk of room for other pieces of gear.

pointing at the director, "Prepare escape plans for each city, so that difficult to replace resources are shuttled to defended locations. We don't want another assault to lose us supplies like this one did."

The director stood tall, "Brilliant idea, creator."

The director stepped away before I shouted at the other golems, "Everyone, we'll be using defensive tactics in order to prevent losses like the director's done until now. We know the enemy uses the rainbow bones to incite gamma bursts to attack us. Be ready

to leave at any point, and also be ready to use restraining tactics. We'll be using the enemy's strategy against them."

The director golem raised a palm, "Ah yes, creator, what do you mean by restraining tactics?"

I raised a fist, "When the primevals incite a gamma burst, we'll pin them down so they can't escape. They'll die in their own attacks, and that's also why we'll be heavily investing in scouting to prevent any surprises. Staying one step ahead is key here."

Another golem stepped up, "How should we pin them down?"

I dispersed the nearby rainbow bones from the lining of buildings around us. These needles surrounded up from all angles pinning us down. I gestured to the bones,

"Like this. We'll use the opal shards to hold any enemy in place and stop their assaults. After trying this strategy for a while, we'll reassess it. Everyone dismissed."

They shouted in unison, "Yes, creator."

The core golems raced into action, becoming a flurry of motion. Shalahora gazed at the metal armada, "They are an extension of you. They mirror a hive with you as its queen."

I winced at the comparison, remembering Baldag-Ruhl and Plazia. I had nothing against hiveminds, but it wasn't like I wanted to become one. Either way, I turned a palm to Shalahora, "Can you use your shades to scout the tunnels below? We need to have some idea of Valgus's movements."

Shalahora turned to me, "Do you wish to fight this enemy head-on? It may not be the wisest choice."

I frowned, "There is a threat on the horizon, and I'm not going to sit here and wait for him to overwhelm us. Besides, he attacked me. I will retaliate to aggression."

The shadow seethed, “You risk all that you’ve gained by doing so. Diplomacy won’t be an option after this.”

I shook my head, “Diplomacy wasn’t an option the moment they attacked me...So are you willing to send your shades or not?”

Shalahora sighed before a plume of shadows burst forth from his back. They skulked through the ossuary before seeping between the bone shards. Before following them, I pulled out Entilla and Drelex from my pocket dimension. The two rulers peered around, Drelex being the most confused. He grabbed the edges of his algae pit and scoffed. An alien, warbling sound ebbed from his throat.

I gawked at him before he rolled his eyes. He cast a spell over us a moment later before he snapped, “Where in Schema’s name are we?”

I spread my arms, “One of my cities.”

Entilla’s eyes widened at his surroundings, “So this is one of your settlements? It’s far more vibrant than I imagined it would be.”

Drelex peered around, “Uhm, what exactly is happening?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, “It’s a lot to explain.”

Shalahora rippled, a telepathic tether forming between him and the two rulers. Drelex and Entilla both fumbled with the memories while the shadowy Sovereign raised a palm, “In those memories, all questions will be answered.”

I headed back outside of my city. After a couple of hours, I remade the destroyed cities in full, and I established a warp panel that connected us to the survivors. Shalahora nor I wanted to deal with the Survivor’s reaction to this crisis, so we sent one of Shalahora’s shades to warn them about Valgus and his tactics.

When we finished that, Drelex and Entilla digested their memories to an extent. With the three of us sitting down in one of the towers of a city, I turned a palm to them, “Do you need supplies for your work or something?”

Drelex and Entilla peered at each other. Entilla coughed into a hand, “That...That isn’t what we wanted to say.”

I leaned back in my chair, “Then what’s the problem? Why aren’t you both working already?”

Drelex sighed, “We...We want to return to the Survivor’s base.”

I raised my brow, “Uh, why?”

Entilla spread his hands, “You never mentioned you were in the middle of some war with Valgus. We want nothing to do with it.” Entilla flexed a thin arm and gestured to it, “Obviously. Just look at this. I’m working with toothpicks here.”

I scoffed, “It doesn’t matter where you guys are. You’re both already a part of this war with Valgus, no matter where you are.”

Drelex frowned, “So you’re saying you’ll drag us into it whether we want to be in it or not?”

I raised my brow, “What? No. I’m thinking a couple steps ahead. For instance, do you honestly believe the survivor faction is going to escape this unscathed?”

They peered at one another but said nothing. Drelex dragged his webbed hands down his face, “No. They won’t.”

I let my hands rest on the arms of my chair. Drelex shook his head, “Bah, we don’t even know whether the survivors have been infiltrated by Valgus or not already.”

I nodded, “Exactly. I can understand being afraid of what Valgus will do from here on out, but you both have to understand something – this is the safest place on Leviathan-7 right now. It’s the only spot where I can guarantee that none of Valgus’s psionic zombies are. They could easily be infiltrating or have infiltrated the Survivor’s faction already.”



Entilla gulped, and I pointed at them both, “So I’m not just paying you with blue cores while you work here-“

Entilla grabbed his chin, “You’re giving us protection as well...That’s definitely a way of thinking about it.”

I raised a fist, “We reached an understanding then. Now, let’s get this show on the road, shall we?”

Drelex grumbled, “Can we perhaps have a few days to acclimatize-“

I scoffed, “Days? You must’ve been smoking too much of Leviathan-7’s atmosphere. Either that or I misheard you.”

Entilla cackled while nudging Drelex. The blue lizard jeered, “This guy hasn’t quit moving since we met him. What makes you think he’ll let us get off scot-free?”

The catfish sighed, “Well...I might as well go out of retirement at this rate.”

My director golem walked over before giving each of them a bow, “Ah, the honored sirs. If you would, please follow me.”

The two rulers stood up and followed the director golem to the first place of work. With my allies informed, I walked back outside of my city structures. I went about remaking the three destroyed cities, spending a couple hours recreating them and their former glory. Having my base established, I prepared myself for the most challenging part of all of this – compromising my apparently shaky ethics.

With Shalahora as backup, we skulked out to the outskirts of my cities. We crossed the shining hills and blotted algae before finding an isolated primeval. The rock variant spun around as an atronach of dense stone and opal shards. As it fed on choice rainbow bones, Shalahora and I stalked it from afar. The shadowy sovereign cast some kind of veil over us, letting us get near the primeval.

Once within striking range, we both dashed towards it with a few core golems in tow. Gravitation held the primeval in place before shackles of shadow condensed over the beast. It writhed and tried escaping before I pulled out the liquid rainbow bone from my

pocket dimension. This shining liquid spread over the primeval, and I grimaced when the glowing ichor drenched into the stone.

The beast trembled at first before the initial rush of power and energy coursed through the monster. The empowered primeval broke its restraints and tossed us aside, its body emboldened by the psionic fluid's immediate effects. It spread its rocky form while bellowing out, its voice echoing out like a roaring mountain.

However, within moments, its movements slowed to a crawl, and its mind faded. Rainbow bone needles expanded from under its skin before it turned still and lifeless, a crystallized memory of its former glory. The powerful eldritch devolved into a statue, and we both gazed at the sight with equal measures of horror and awe.

I murmured, "It works."

Shalahora trembled, "Too well, in my opinion."

I shook off my unease before jumping toward the abomination. Shalahora flowed in thereafter, and he murmured, "Its mind has been slaughtered while its body is primed... This liquid does as you said it does, but I thought it would be uglier."

Shalahora prodded one of the shining rainbow needles, "It's beautiful...In an insidious sort of way."

I sighed before placing a palm over the stone monster's face, "Visually, I guess. Inside, it's just a husk...A useful husk, though."

I flooded this monster's emptied mind with an ascendant consciousness, one that followed my word as law. The being of stone joined my star primevals, becoming a pawn for me, and it took less than ten minutes to make. I gazed at the stone monstrosity, the opalescent shards changing into blood-red spines. They curved at the edges while ascendant mana oozed off its body as a thick aura.

The creature followed my orders, pacing back and forth, doing jumping jacks, and even doing backflips on command. Silly as it seemed, the beast's innate tenacity and strength omened its future purpose. One that Shalahora mused about,

“This will be your army then?”

“Yes.”

“And this isn’t the first time you’ve done this either, is it?”

I peered out into the distance, “No.” I frowned,

“And it won’t be the last.”

## Chapter 352: Clashing Kingdoms

The creature followed my orders, pacing back and forth, doing jumping jacks, and even doing backflips on command. Silly as it seemed, the beast’s innate tenacity and strength omened its future purpose. One that Shalahora mused about,

“This will be your army then?”

“Yes.”

“And this isn’t the first time you’ve done this either, is it?”

I peered out into the distance, “No.” I frowned with a fierce resolve,

“And it won’t be the last.”

With an efficient practice in place, we collected our own army of these monstrosities. It left a bad taste in my mouth using this method, but I wasn’t an idiot. I knew when and where I had choices, and this wasn’t one of those times. Against a foe using these tactics, I lacked any proper response outside of doing the same.

And I did so. I also appreciated this opportunity, and I intended not to waste it. Even with my upgraded golems and super cities, we stood no chance against several

thousand primevals. If anything, we were lucky they only sent in a few dozen at first. I aimed to capitalize on that mistake.

So Shalahora and I worked tirelessly to match whatever forces Valgus amassed. The shadowy Sovereign kept pace with me, something I hadn't expected but appreciated nonetheless. The other rulers fell behind from fatigue, but Shalahora was inexhaustible. Without any lulls in our soldier creation, we gathered a large force at a breakneck pace.

The shadow Sovereign's shades harvested the liquid bone from nearby tunnels in the ground, and I prepared ascendant psyches for the hollowed-out primevals. Once made, the mindless husks assisted us in creating more of their kind, so after a full day passed, we amassed an army's worth of them.

Shalahora also scouted out a portion of the rainbow tunnel network below, one I documented. Having records helped keep everything organized and planned. Just as well, the maps served as escape routes, giving us another means of retreat should all other measures fail. Considering the importance of the bone liquid, knowing the lay of the land was helpful in its own right as well.

With that growing knowledge in tow, we gathered a couple dozen primevals. I stationed them at chokepoints in the tunnels below, each of them defending us from underground assailants. They even hoisted in any straggling primevals who drank the psionic fluid of their own accord. This efficiency resulted in palpable returns for our efforts.

My army evolved over several hours, turning into a force worthy of respect and fear. Despite knowing all of that, the monster battalion unsettled me. When I gazed at the emptied eyes with each of their minds shelled out and replaced, they reminded me of Hybridized gialgathens.

I remembered slamming into plasma-fueled ships and finding vats of silvered slush. Sights of the gialgathen's genocide crept into my mind like an old curse I couldn't shake. I recalled the bombing of Giess's cities, each thriving metropolis transforming into glowing slag after being consumed in light.

At that time, I toiled until my hands peeled and my eyes bled. No rest. No time for thought or doubt. I compromised my sense of morals and ethics to accomplish a goal, and I still question my actions. However, I saved a species and slowed down Elysium. I accomplished that, and I wasn't some cold monster. Yet.

Giving my face a light slap, I woke myself up for what was to come. I would maintain my resolve, even if my actions unsettled me. I would be a survivor driven to kill, not a broken man who believed that murder was my weapon. In that way, I played with fire, and I'd seen many do the same, from Yawm to Schema.

They rationalized where I would not. I did this because of my weakness, and I'd carry that forward.

Of course, I'd be lightening the moral load where I could. I'd be eliminating any access to the rainbow liquid and anyone who abused it. That contained this problem to Leviathan-7 and this war alone. I found solace in preventing this malevolence from spreading, like cauterizing an open wound. Painful, sure, but it was a necessary evil.

The liquid bone was similar to nuclear weapons in that way. It ushered in a totally different kind of warfare, one where you either opted in or outright lost. That's why I intended on keeping this psionic mess here on Leviathan-7. Anyone could understand that, so I kept my head down and worked on amassing primevals under my wing.

In time, I created several different kinds of converted primevals, similar to my golems. For the most part, I kept it simple with ascendant mana types. They operated like demonic machines, their minds like golems but their bodies divergent. Their eldritch rampancy warped the otherwise calm demeanors I made, so they snapped at each other like an unruly pack of wolves. I didn't intend to keep them for long, however.

As for the quintessent kinds, they helped with bolstering that assaulting force. They created terrains, buffed zones, and added mental strength to the violent ascendent variants. As for primordials, I refused to make those kinds of converted primevals. Mixing the insidious nature of primordial mana with the unrelenting hunger of an eldritch was a recipe for disaster. It was a mistake I intended not to make.

Specializing the monsters I made, I settled into a manufacturing mindset, as did Shalahora. Within a day, we gathered several hundred of the primevals. The mass of monsters waited for us outside a city on the outskirts of my territory. Within the nearest town to them, I met with the others.

Shalahora, Drelex, and Entilla waited for me in the tallest building of my enclosure. Entilla already wired this one, and Drelex incorporated a language cipher. They draped over their chairs in exhaustion, neither of them peering out the glass rotunda. On the other hand, Shalahora demonstrated no signs of fatigue whatsoever as per usual.

He sat in the shade of the room's entrance, admiring the view via a window beside him. His eyes popped out of the darkness, the sky blue slits contrasting the dim gloom enveloping them. They peered with resounding clarity, a composure that inversed Drelex and Entilla's glazed eyes and slack jaws.

Despite that, they showed up at my impromptu meeting, which I appreciated. When I hovered up into the room from below, a flood of shades rushed out of the darkness present. Those writhing, dark blots inundated the city below us, weaving between the buildings. They darted out of my city's barrier while I sat in a gravity chair.

Opening my pocket dimension, I pulled out two blue cores and floated them over to Drelex and Entilla. They gawked at the reward before Entilla mused,

"Is this a bit of prepayment for motivation?"

I shook my head, "No, it's an extra payment for the speed. If you finish a city in a day, I'll give you an extra blue core apiece."

Their jaws slackened further, and I smiled at their surprise. Shalahora scoffed, "He makes dozens of cores a day. This is nothing to him."

Drelex eyed the core before sliding it into his robe, "What is nothing to some is everything to others. Isn't that right, Entilla?"

The blue lizard stared into the depths of the violent, blue sphere, "I suppose, but either way, I need some sleep after this, extra payment or not."

Drelex dapped his brow with his hand, a bit of magic applying moisture to his amphibious skin, "Me as well, me as well...The gesture is appreciated, however."

I raised a hand, "And there's plenty more where that came from if you guys keep showing up and showing out. Anyways, we have to plan out our expansion and assault on Valgus since we're taking the fight to him."

Drelex blinked, "We?"

I raised a brow, “Not in actual combat, but you both will be fighting on the sidelines.”

Drelex let out a sigh of relief, “Just, ahem, making sure of that.”

Shalahora peered at his shades, “Their fears aside, my scouts have found disembodied primevals west of us. There, our enemies lie and wait.”

I nodded while appreciating the black hole above the world. Since this planet always faced that celestial body, it served the same purpose as the North Star did on Earth. It allowed us to orient ourselves regardless of where we were. The slight tilt of the black hole cemented that, letting us create a consistent reference angle.

Technicalities aside, Shalahora pointed westward with an arm of condensed shadow. He simmered, “The psionically dead crawl across the land like a cloak of death, harvesting the liquid below as we do. In those recesses, Valgus and his ilk fester.”

I leaned forward while musing, “Then he’s on the edge of the desert biome like we expected. I’m guessing he’s taking easy-to-collect rainbow bones and psionic liquid... Have we found his base?”

“No. Neither your golems nor my shades have delved that deeply. Valgus’s operations don’t reside on the surface, and even in the tunnels below, he disperses outward in all directions. He is like a hydra with no head.”

Entilla raised a hand, “What if he doesn’t have a base?”

I raised a questioning brow, and Entilla coughed, “Ahem, well, the situation is like this. Valgus knows he won’t be here for much longer. He needs to get everything he can from this place before being warped away. Knowing that violent lunatic, he’s not interested in growing roots, well, anywhere.”

Drelex spat out, “Valgus is far more interested in harvesting what’s already there rather than seeding the ground. Homicidal maniacs tend to operate that way.”

I liked the analogy, and I agreed with him. Thrumming my fingers on my armrest, I tilted my head at Shalahora, “Should we initiate now or wait a while?”

Shalahora simmered, “Each second we wait is another he’ll use for his own purposes. This is why our hesitation is like a gift granted to him; we give him precious time for his plots, whatever they may be.”

I gestured to Entilla and Drelex, “Do you have any knowledge about Valgus and how he fought?”

Drelex peered up, “Hmm, not to any measurable extent...Outside of his bout with you, of course.”

Entilla leaned against an arm, “You could ask a few of the rulers at the Survivor’s faction. They fought against him already, and their experiences could help us out. Probably.”

I tapped my fingers against my chair, considering for a moment. I shrugged, “Eh, it’s as good a plan as any.”

I stood, walking over towards the teleportation panel from the Survivor’s vault. After establishing a telepathic link to Shalahora, I thought over,

“Yo, Shalahora.”

“Hmm?”

“Before we were sent over to the Leviathan-7, you telepathically linked up to everyone, right?”

“And what of it?”

I frowned, “Valgus has probably infiltrated the Survivor’s faction already. I want to know who’s psyche has been changed since our arrival, and you’re the only person with a usable reference for that.”



Shalahora's eyes widened, "That's quite cautious of you. And risky. What if they uncover that I've been searching for them?"

I narrowed my eyes, "We need to know who we can trust even if we expose some of what we know."

Shalahora mused, "Then I shall connect as I did, though I will do so more subtly than before."

I smiled, "Hah, way to use your head."

"I am a shade. I have no head."

I waved my arms, "Whatever, you get my point."

Entilla frowned at us, "Uh, are you two telepathizing right now?"

I raised a palm to Entilla, "We're talking logistics. We don't want information spreading further than it has to. Otherwise, you two could be captured and tortured, but if you really wanna know--"

Entilla coughed into a hand, his voice hoarse, "Honestly? I'm good. Really good, actually."

After giving them an approving nod, I tossed the Survivor's warp panel onto the ground before channeling some mana into it. The archaic runes sparked to life, and like a starving vulture, the slate fed off my mana until it bulged at the belly. Literally. The panel swelled three times its size before turning into a perfect sphere. A ripple of energy coursed across its surface before a warp popped up in front of the ancient device.

The portal exposed the survivor faction's upper floor, rulers talking to my director and arguing over the autonomy of the massive battery I left behind. I pinched the bridge of my nose before pointing at Drelex and Entilla,

“Get some rest, guys. We’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Stepping into the revitalized compound, Shalahora and I marveled at the difference a day of rest made. Several magicians joined the ranks of the rulers here, their opinions enmeshing with the low drone of the diplomatic rulers. Signs of their magical influence dispersed throughout the room, many of the maps becoming arcane in nature rather than paper and pencil.

Those sorcerers constructed advanced holograms that replaced the two-dimensional maps and charts used prior to the sorcerers’ arrivals. Feeding those enchantments, several mana strings floated through the air, a telepathic web forming across the compound for communication and recreation alike.

They even kept a variety of temperature orbs floating over the entrance to the room. If a species preferred heat, they gestured towards a red sphere, and it sailed over. Some misted over the surface of aliens while others dried the air instead. I spotted a cold, dry orb hovering over Alctua’s head, the blue lizard preferring a bit of a chill.

She spoke with Obolis about the new raid paths they intended on making over the next few days. I walked up, the two of them peering up at me. Obolis raised a hand, “Ah, it’s good to see you’re well.” Obolis’s eyes darted over Shalahora, “And you too, of course.”

Shalahora scoffed, “Your sincerity oozes like a dark poison.”

Obolis sneered, “Well, at least I tried to be polite. Any whom, what brings the both of you here?”

A presence, dark and cold like a tundra’s night, crawled over my mind. I shivered before breathing out, “So, we’re about to assault Valgus. We need to know how he fights, what his tactics are, any information on him really.”

Alctua and Obolis turned to one another before peering back at me. Alctua raised a spiked brow, “The most educated on Valgus would be Iona. She led the Schema faction before being dismantled by that primitive beast.”

I nodded before gesturing to everything, “Alright, I’ll take that advice. Also, how is everything working out? Any kinks anywhere?”

Obolis raised his brows, “Your adjustments have run smoothly, outside of a few mental collapses.”

I crossed my arms, “Mental collapses? Sounds pretty bad.”

Obolis peered down in disgust, “A few members overgorged on the mana supplies and were, in turn, overwhelmed by the energies they ingested. Apparently, there’s never enough warnings for certain people.”

Shalahora murmured, “For many, it doesn’t matter what form temptation manifests as. It always corrupts since those individuals are designed to crumble.”

Obolis peered at Shalahora with a sideways glance, “Perhaps...But shouldn’t you both be trying to find Iona?”

Shalahora whispered, “I know where she is already. There’s no reason to search for whatever is already found.”

Obolis frowned but remained silent. He and I shared a glance, one where the Emperor displayed intense skepticism towards Shalahora. I shrugged before following the shadow Sovereign towards Iona. After passing several floors, we reached the armory where Iona patched up several wounded rulers.

Despite the injuries, the atmosphere changed entirely. Several of the rulers laughed and joked around, each of them carrying joyful exhaustion. The kind of rugged joy came about from someone elevating themselves out of poor circumstances. Even if the situation was tricky in the present, the hope for the future made it easy to tread through.

That energy saturated the room as Shalahora and I reached Iona. She stitched a nasty wound across a gray-skinned warrior, her brow furrowed and eyes sharp. A magical needle and thread held the two edges of the gash together, and in seconds, the mana seeped through the alien’s body. The congealed, blue blood evaporated into a glowing mist.

Finishing the aid, Iona’s eyes darted toward us before letting out a sigh. She dragged a hand down her face, “What is it now?”

I raised a palm, “You already know. We need to figure out what Valgus’s combat tactics are. It’s like my golem said yesterday; I’ve been attacked.”

Iona’s brow raised before she sat up straight. She grabbed her chin before murmuring, “What do you know already?”

Shalahora tilted his head towards Iona, “And what difference does that make? Tell us what we wish to know.”

The Sovereign’s words set even me on edge, so Iona stammered out, “Er, well, w-we were attacked before we even knew what to do. Valgus assaulted us within a few days of our arrival, and that was well before we were able to do...Like, anything really.”

Shalahora’s eyes narrowed, “Then that would mean you observed an assault. Describe it.”

She raised a hand, “It was...So several rulers with Valgus attacked us. A few members of our faction did too, so our defensive lines collapsed immediately. We had no idea who was friend or foe, and we were dismantled in the confusion.”

Shalahora simmered, “Members of your own faction allied with him before your arrival?”

She nodded, and Shalahora turned to me, “Then he’s been utilizing psionic methods since his arrival here. Either that or Valgus has planted spies within each faction preemptively. I doubt he is so calculating or careful.”

I shook my head, “Well...Damn, that’s pretty awful. Ok, so we’ll keep that in mind moving forward. Did you happen to see any attacks?”

Iona blinked before shaking her head, “No...It was just pure chaos.”

She clammed up, the memories drawing her into a protective shell. I tilted my head at Shalahora, “We got what we came for. Let’s go.”

With the quick trip handled, we warped back towards my base. Once inside the city, I turned to Shalahora and telepathized,

“So...Has anyone’s mind been heavily altered?”

“Yes. 37 of the rulers carry a fragmented consciousness.”

I blinked before tilting my head, “Huh...37?”

Shalahora nodded, “Those are the ones whose minds were unrecognizable from before. I didn’t believe the psionic replacements would be so shoddily done.”

I rubbed the sides of my face, “That’s bad news. Very bad news. Any particular names you could mention?”

Shalahora sighed, “None that you would know. The majority of the converted rulers were quiet and withdrawn. This made them easy targets that wouldn’t draw suspicion should their minds be emptied. There are far worse events unfolding, however.”

I grimaced, “Like what?”

In the distance, a flow of Shalahora’s shades arrived on the horizon. They darkened the sea of shining bones, their forms umbral and menacing. As they weaved in from overhead, they cast us in shadow. In the gloom, Shalahora murmured,

“The Kalat survived your destruction, and they are leading a charge with Valgus to your cities. They reek of bloodlust and frenzy.”

My eyes set while my gaze lowered, “Then they head in for war?”

“It is unmistakable.”

I grimaced, “Then we’ll clash.”

Shalahora waved a hand over me, several shades adorning portions of my armor. The Sovereign menaced, “They’ll let us communicate and act as your scouts.”

I pulled out several dozen blue cores, having them embedded into my armor. While pulling out their mana, I breathed out energized miasma. It floated down, a cloud of crimson red adorning me in a coat like living blood.

I menaced,

“Then we march to war.”

### Chapter 353: A Hollow Roar

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“We march to war.”

I raised my hand towards my director golem, “We’ll need our soldiers organized. Get them amassed near the enemy’s line of attack. Organize them as we stated before.”

My director bowed, navy-colored mana wafting from between his metallic joints, “As agreed – two golems to every five primevals, and the golems stay back to control the charging assaults of our monsters.”

I smiled, “After all, that’s about what we can expect them to do.”

Shalahora's shades intermingled with the various units, becoming scouts and informants to each line. They'd keep the battle organized and under our control. I raised a brow at Shalahora, "Any idea when they'll arrive?"

"An hour at the quickest."

I nodded, bending at my knees, "Then I'll be back by then."

My director golem coughed into a hand, "What are you doing, creator?"

I raised my brow, "Getting ammo."

I bolted through my city's barrier, the ethereal energy pluming out like pierced clouds. While darting through algae and the horizon alike, I rose into the sky. After getting away from my cities, I slammed myself to the ground, and these impacts mirrored my orbital bombardments. In tandem with blasting into the opalescent shards below, I opened my pocket dimension to contain what I could.

I stored as much of the energy of the impact along with the resulting gamma burst. My body disintegrated into nothing time and time again, but with every passing hit, I gained another round for my dimensional shield to explode out. It allowed me to detonate a series of explosions from my pocket dimension in mass.

I called it my dimensional eruption.

While collecting the kinetic blasts and gamma bursts for the technique, I uncovered a nifty trick. Instead of regenerating where I landed, I kept myself in an aetherial state. I pulled my dimensional wake upward, above the algae, before reassimilating my physical form. This gave me a measure of stealth with my assaults.

Instead of waiting at my point of impact, I left only a dark blur that traced down from the sky with my attacks. Having collected several dozen of these impacts, I returned to my set of cities. A mass of primevals raged along the outskirts of the plasma shield, the ascendant psyches hungry and lusting for blood.

My golems contained them, their disciplines absolute, and Shalahora's shades darted along unseen paths and darkened tunnels. Still present, a psionic connection formed

between Shalahora's shades and me. They escaped and returned after my orbital bombardments, and from this new connection, Shalahora murmured like a slow toxin,

"He comes in moments from the far western hill."

I bolted into the sky above my city, readying myself for an assault, "Let's do this."

Even from above the thick, kelpy canopy, I spotted the enemy primevals as they hovered or hopped in. The star beasts arrived first, their fleeting forms like living fire. They rode the wind and bolted across the sky, the celestial realm far more a home than the ground ever was. Following them were the gem monstrosities.

These congregations of glowing gemstones existed as both the physical and the incorporeal. Strands of multicolored lightning rose from the bright shards below, feeding those shifting monsters. They rode just above the ground like shimmering shadows, and the air hummed at their presence.

Beyond them, the ice and water primevals arrived next. Those demons carried a wave of fog and mist, coating the battlefield in a literal fog of war. From these clouds, rain drenched down like cold bullets. Lakes, streams, and rivers flowed with these monsters, each of them a storm in their own right.

And the last of these primevals were the stone monsters. They carried forms condensed out of the best and brightest bones of their fallen brethren. They skulked across the horizon like the walking dead, each of them a juggernaut treading the ground with earthquakes in their steps and mountains of strength in each arm.

I don't know who followed after that.

I landed in the middle of them, my body disintegrating in the kinetic aftermath of my collision with the planet. The surrounding area ignited in a flash of white light, and even the far-off algae crisped to ash. The shockwave of my impact left me immaterial, and I flowed through the battlefield like a ghoul. Wielding my mana, I pulled the regenerating primevals into my point of impact.

And the gamma burst evaporated them.



All the while, I collected more munitions for my incoming dimensional eruption. Once the gamma burst plumed, I pulled myself back above the algae. With the black hole Leviathan over my head, I bolted towards the ground, landing with another monumental explosion. In each dive, my body turned into a warhead, a bomb used without limit.

And so, I reaped the benefits of my bodily destruction. The primevals here died in mass, the majority of them not even converted by Valgus. He simply lured them here through some unknown method. However, I turned his tactic into an advantage. I gained dozens of blue cores before he arrived, and his initial force turned into pocket change.

Despite my efforts, the primevals kept arriving in mass. Though they didn't number in the thousands, they did tally in the hundreds. The beasts also changed in form and function. Instead of being purebred primevals, these beasts carried rainbow bones as armor. Spines of the dead eldritch erupted from within, the liquid bone having hollowed out their minds.

At the same time, rulers intermingled with the monsters. Many carried the same rainbow spines, meaning they were already dead. However, many of the rulers were left unconverted. These members rallied and controlled the primevals or their converted kin. They saw my impacts miles before reaching them, and they had already restrategized.

While I darted down once more, the wind whipped on my face. Before I made an impact, I spotted star primevals burning the algae above, giving them a line of sight. As I approached the ossuary's floor, the glowing gemstone primevals congregated nearby. They impaled their arms into the bright bone piles.

Peering at me with energized eyes, they wielded the rainbow bone as their weapon. It opened up where I was about to land. At the bottom of the pit, spines of bone erupted, and a pool of liquid bone oozed up. They intended on psionically killing me, having a trap to ensure I drowned in the shining liquid.

This was far from enough.

With a burst of gravitation, I turned my descent a few degrees. Landing on the side of the pit, I devastated a pack of converted rulers and primevals. In my intangible form, I

wafted out of the impact radius using my sense of mana. That gave me a clear, vibrant vantage point, and I admired the cascade of spells coming my way where I landed.

As a dazzling splash of colors, the energies crisscrossed below. The rulers also retreated from the area before the gamma burst ripped them to shreds. This tactical retreat dramatically lowered their losses. Not wanting to give them more time to think, I shot back up. I whirled in the air above the planet, the black hole dominating my skyline for a moment.

Diving down, I turned myself into a dark, thin needle. This visual change let me land in the middle of their forces. Converted rulers and enemies died by the dozen before I made another dive. On my third dive, I shot towards the ground before a colossal primeval erupted from the bones below.

It was an abominable fusion of many primevals, at least twenty of them plastered together into one howling mass. Its screams thronged out before it moved faster than its form should've allowed. A bolt of living lightning, it darted towards my descent before meeting my charge. The rough approximation of a fist met my plunge, and the world whitened in my view.

I lost all comprehension of time and space before coming too nearly a mile away. Disoriented, I peered around and found the star beats burning the kelp far away. The mass of primevals marched towards my cities unimpeded, having already recuperated from my collisions.

I grimaced before rising up once more. I thinned myself to a thread's thickness, and my body stretched to its absolute limit this time. Despite my size and shape, the amalgam found me with ease. The mass of primevals turned and smiled at me, its teeth composed of bones, minerals, gems, and howling beasts. When I flattened my form, it met my charge with its own. My body disintegrated once more, utterly deposed of anything physical. Down to the atom, I dispersed.

However, I kept my consciousness intact.

I floated away from the absurd monstrosity, but it peered up at me in confusion. Swiping an arm through me, it tried to catch what it couldn't see. A laugh erupted from the beast, and the broken bellowing merged with the sound. It was like a festering corpse giggling with glee, both alien and unsettling.

The beast leaned downwards before jumping from a hill of bones. The landscape bent under its might, and it ran through me once more. My mind raced for solutions to retaliate against this abomination. This thing could easily swat me like a fly, and it took my orbital bombardments like a champ. That was my trump card, and it left me rattled that it matched my best efforts with ease.

Mentally slapping myself out of my stupor, I remembered my other trump cards. Regenerating myself, I tried creating singularities in its body. It darted through me, destroying my form and leaving my singularities far behind itself. Despite several of my attempts, the monster flashed through me each time.

The physical forces of the monster exceeded anything I'd ever seen, its charges strong enough to shatter moons. And shatter me. Thinking for a moment, an idea popped into my head. Instead of trying to get some distance, I closed in on the abomination. It spread its arms when I did and laughed with its eerie, unsettling congregation of howls.

It pounded its torso, the kinetic boom destroying the nearby kelp forest. Once I reached within arms reach of it, the beast clapped on my position. Even when immaterial, it left my mind askew and my psyche trembling. It was incredible, far exceeding my orbital bombardments in strength. The sheer scope of the monster's might was unbelievable.

However, it wasn't invincible.

I floated into the godlike creature before pluming out gamma bursts, orbital bombardments, and gravitational singularities. From within, it enveloped in fire, darkness, and light. A cascading, rippling series of explosions turned the entire environment into a playground for physical forces. All life devolved into fuel for these energies, and they swarmed outwards with an eagerness to destroy.

All life shattered, and these elemental forces laughed at the thought of anything other. They were absolute. They consumed. They devoured. They left nothing in their wake, being beyond the physical.

As was I.

I stood from the inside of the creatin, its body being blown apart. Blue cores glowed in the distance, many of them embedded into the rainbow bones. They shotgunned out like shrapnel, each of them invincible. Many of the primevals composing the colossal mass survived my onslaught, but others died.

Before they rallied, I sprung into action. Blots of darkness consumed straggling figures, and bursts of radiation cooked fleeing forms. With an aggressive rage, I tore through the corpse of the colossal monster. I bit, pulled, ripped, and gnashed it apart. The pieces of the beast fought back, becoming like writhing entrails of an eviscerated belly.

They swarmed in from all angles along with other rulers, my own body becoming akin to a distant memory. I flowed like an ocean, my blue cores long lost and my perspective wholly warped. Time lost meaning. My sense of scale lost meaning. I lost myself in the flowing force of war, survival, and desperation.

After an indeterminate time, the battle calmed until I could hold my body together for a time. My senses returned, as did the colossal monster, though it shrunk. Despite that loss of size, it stepped towards me, and the ground for miles trembled and quaked. It spread its arms, a roar erupting from its maw.

Primevals shivered in fear of the apex predator amongst their midst, and the colossal amalgam laughed with broken faces and shattered minds. A wave of fear rode up my spine before I peered around. Behind us, the incoming force of enemies clashed against my city's barrier. They swarmed against the blue core's forcefield, finding it tens of times more potent than before.

My soldiers routed and rallied against them, finding openings and weaknesses where there were none. Shalahora kept the fight under control with his shades while wielding light like an illusion, turning vision and sight into his plaything. He controlled any primevals not already psionically killed, and they turned on our enemy.

However, the enemy swarmed with numbers unending. I turned towards them before the giant mass of primevals cackled out, "You...Stay...Fun not over."

It was like listening to a symphony of screams honed into a voice. A primal fear raced up my spine at the sheer torture of the monster, this battle being its only hope for an end to its excruciation. Wriggling in my vision, the mass of energies and bodies flowed towards me. It popped into my vision before my vision was gone.

Using my mana sense, I hovered through the monster, erupting the same forces as before. It escaped the worst of the attack, leaping from my dimensional eruption. This dance continued, each of us swarming back and forth. The two of us fell into that cadence, our minds grappling with the dynamism and duress of our attacks.

I couldn't even hold a physical form against the beast, but despite that overwhelming advantage, I whittled it down in time. The gargantuan mass turned from a mountain to a hill to a mound. As I destroyed more and more of its body, the creature laughed with a voice relishing the battle. It thrived on the pain, and it gorged on its wounds.

Each blow or strike I landed evoked glee from the monstrosity. In time, its voice constructed into a deeper, more brutal sound. Howls gave way to the sound of iron, ash, and smoke, the sound familiar, one forged in war. The form of an asura took shape out of the primevals, its many arms and red skin smiling down at me.

The sentient wore a frenzied smile and jagged scars across his skin. Captured eldritch swarmed in his armbands as before, but they numbered in the hundreds now instead of the dozens. When patches of his cipheric runes popped up between the eldritch mass, it became undeniable.

Valgus stood in the middle of the primevals.

As an extension of himself, the creatures flowed around him. I tore one of the last of those creatures from him with a singularity before he roared out at me. With the swing of his arm, he smashed a hill of bones apart.

The opalescent shards misted out like powdered glass.

I darted out of that glistening cloud before Valgus leaped from it. The sparkling cloud traced behind him before he wrapped his hand around my helmet. He lifted me up and slammed me into the bones below. Peering down, his hair flowed like a flame.

He spread four of his arms while bellowing over the chaotic hellscape,

"We meet again, blighted one."

Chapter 354: Madness

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“We meet again, blighted one.”

Valgus squeezed his hand, aiming to crush my skull. I liquified in his grasp, materializing above him. With my hand raised, I hit him across the back of his skull, but my hand and arm snapped on impact. Valgus turned and swiped his arm, and he moved through me once more. The asura grinned with tusked teeth,

“There it is once more – a form that is liquid.”

He tightened his fist, and the impact of his fingers radiated out with a sonic boom. The shockwave erupted, splattering my molten body in all directions. I condensed back above him before slamming telekinetic blows into his sides. The rebounding force from my attacks broke my arms and crushed my fists.

I frowned while Valgus grinned. With his arms spread wide, the asura sounded out, “I am invincible. You will know this after today.”

He clapped his hands together, another wave of kinetic energy splintering out. It rivaled my orbital bombardments, the physical forces beyond reckoning. I stayed in position, using another dimensional eruption aimed at his head. A cacophony of sounds and an explosion of energy rippled out, and our surroundings disintegrated.

But Valgus remained unharmed, even the flowing hair across his head. He laughed before roaring, “Awe-inspiring. Truly.”

I grimaced, “You’re not the first immortal I’ve fought, and I beat the last one until he lost the will to fight.”

I grabbed at his skull, my fingers wrapping around his entire head. I condensed a singularity in my palm, but no mana bent where I willed it to do so.

Valgus grabbed my arm, “You will find that the universe has ceased before I will choose not to take a fight laid bare to me...And as for your petty attempts at harm... Well-” He crushed my armor and bones in his hand, “To magic, I am untouchable. To the physical, I am unbreakable.”

He laughed, “And to you, I am finality incarnate.”

I opened my pocket dimension, splattering molten dimensional fabric over him. He spread his arms outwards, the glowing mass splashing out with a heated sizzle in all directions. At the same time, I swiped my dimensional shield over his head. Valgus dodged backward, but my pocket dimension caught him at his shoulder.

It sliced through his invincible body with ease like a katana through bamboo. Organs and blood exposed themselves to the air while Valgus’s eyes widened. He blinked in surprise, “What kind of magic is that?”

I dashed towards him, swiping my shield again. With his three remaining arms on his good side, Valgus reached out. He bolstered his palms with mana, and he caught the edge of my pocket dimension. He reached in and pulled his captured arms out before kicking through me.

I disintegrated while he put his limbs back in place. Rolling the shoulder of the cleaved arm, he scoffed, “Impressive effort, but ultimately pointless.”

I rematerialized above him before frowning. So far, Valgus lacked any weaknesses outside of dimensional capture. I pressed that advantage, attempting to restrain him with the rainbow bones while swiping my shield over him.

Any time I approached, he wiped my body clean from existence. He crashed through walls of rainbow bone as if they didn’t exist. Even when I closed the gap, he caught my

shield and grabbed inside it. At one point, he nearly pulled a dying ruler from its confines.

At that point, I quit using that weapon, and my minds raced for another solution. Valgus gave me no time to consider my options, the asura darting toward me once more. His fist tore me apart with ease, and I was helpless. But so was he, and I couldn't be killed by something like punches or kicks anymore.

He splintered me into nothing several times over before I laughed at him. For all of Valgus's tenacity, he lacked flexibility. He continued his destructive attacks, keeping them simplistic and brutal. After a while, it felt like I was battling against some overgrown child, but given the body of a god.

And I took full advantage of that fact.

I assaulted the psionic shackles on him, finding the defense absolute. Well, at first. In time, cracks in them began to show, though the minute cracks were so small I questioned if they were even there in the first place. I kept launching timed mental attacks while trying out different approaches to the physical side of the conflict.

I found no weaknesses for Valgus. Unlike Lehesion, his body absorbed the brunt of my onslaughts with sublime ease. He carried no waning fatigue, and he never changed his approach. Time and time again, I splattered like a dropped egg. Over and Over, Valgus continued this simplistic assault.

During the entire blitz, he never once checked on his forces. So far, he cared nothing for them, giving me hope while sending a nervous chill racing up my spine. The aftermath of Valgus's strikes destroyed mountains and splintered the clouds. He could kill and destroy the cities I laid out behind me at any point.

He hadn't because I was a more tempting target, but I had no idea how long that would last. Even worse, if Valgus survived this lottery and found Earth after this was over, he could kill every person alive. A burst of anger exploded in my chest as I remembered Schema announcing my home planet's name.

This was why that bothered me – it attracted unwanted attention. I raced for ideas about putting Valgus down, and Althea kept popping up in my head. One of my minds explored that idea. Althea was the best answer because she didn't play by standard



rules. She ignored defenses entirely, no matter what they were, and that was because of the influence of Etorhma.

Peering at Valgus, he was no different. However, instead of being given the ultimate sword, Valgus was given a supreme shield. Taking my time, I inspected the properties of the shield. I sensed the mana, the gravitation, heat, and other physical properties surrounding Valgus, but every sense gave me a different set of rules for him than everywhere else.

If I guessed right, someone changed the rules of the physical world for Valgus. The only thing capable of that would've been the cipher, and the only ones capable of using the cipher to that level were the Old Ones. Well, maybe Schema, but I hadn't seen anything like this so far from the AI.

So until I cracked the code of how this was done, I couldn't kill or even hurt this guy. But Valgus Uriyah's death wasn't my only goal. Taking a calculated risk, I rematerialized closer to my city. Valgus darted towards me, splattering my body like a bubble of water encapsulated in ice. This time, I incarnated at the edge of my city's battle, leaning close to Valgus's allies. As I expected, Valgus darted in once more, and he erupted an explosive attack of titanic proportions.

The aftermath left his own side reeling.

He killed a converted ruler and disintegrated the bodies of several primevals. Some enemy rulers peered up at Valgus with fear, and a few tried shouting at him. I erupted several singularities near the asura, and the booming bursts stopped their protests from reaching his ears.

It was just as I had hoped. Valgus shot towards me, emboldened by bloodlust and riding my kinetic implosion's shockwave. Before he reached me, I stood still and slowed time. Several minds went to work on different tasks of the battle, and we prepared to use Valgus against his allies.

One mind kept an awareness of where we were relative to enemy rulers and my golems. Another psyche thought up angles of Valgus's attacks that would hurt his own but leave my side unscathed. Several other minds helped me position myself while the rest kept inching down Valgus's psionic restraints.

Valgus reached me, and his fist arrived with the devastation of a nuclear bomb. Blow after blow rained down like the hammer of a god. Death after death, Valgus culled his own and left me with minimal losses. He laughed. He cackled. He raged and roared, wanting for nothing more than the battle to continue.

A kind of insanity overtook him, his mind lost to the sensation of battle. He cared little for his allies. No, he outright didn't care for them at all. He gave no concern for their lives, and he whittled his own forces down with the glee of a blood-crazed butcher. After an hour of baiting him, a dark voice rippled in my ear,

"We have turned the tide of this war. I may join you know."

My armor smiled at Valgus, the grin jagged. I thought back to Shalahora,

"Good. Let's tear those psionic defenses into splinters and his mind next."

Shalahora jumped into the fray, using his own powers to help contain Valgus. The shadowed Sovereign wielded illusions constructed out of dampened light, and they left Valgus confused and full of wrath. The asura laid out that wrath at the abyssal sights Shalahora forced on him. Valgus couldn't strip the illusions from his eyes no matter his efforts.

The invincible warrior culled his own kind, becoming our greatest weapon. As our numbers dwarfed theirs, the enemy rulers began losing their spirit for battle. They fought with far less fervor, becoming fearful in mind and soft of heart. Two lost control of their hollowed primevals, and the monsters feasted on them.

Another ruler, a battle-hungry berserker, saw the sight with wide eyes. The ashen war markings hid the wrinkles across his orange skin as terror spread over his face. He took a step back before turning around. As he ran, Valgus stopped fighting. The clashing forces of war passed over the asura's body before he took a deep breath. Valgus spoke like a soft wind, but his voice covered the entirety of the battlefield,

"Is that fear I smell?"

Valgus closed his eyes, Shalahora's illusions no longer cluttering his view. The asura bolted towards the retreating warrior, and he landed beside him before picking up his

ally by the throat. Valgus tilted his head at the berserker and smiled. Hostility oozed off Uuriyah's frame as his eyes opened to narrowed slits.

He murmured, "Are you...Trying to escape the battle?"

The ruler grabbed Valgus's arm, trying to cut at his skin. The orange-skinned berserker's nails broke, and he roared out, "This isn't battle. This is a massacre."

Valgus tilted his head in the other direction while speaking like a chiding mother, "But I thought you relished in a massacre? What makes this so different?"

The berserker frothed out his words in anger, "We're the ones being massacred, you idiot."

Well, that did tend to make all the difference.

A genuine smile traced up Valgus's lips, "And? It's still blood. It's still an outcome. It's still a consequence."

I gawked at the scene, a shiver running up my spine. The berserker growled, "We fight for glory, but there is no glory in a meaningless death."

The skull squished in Valgus's clasping palm.

"Nonsense."

The blood splattered over the asura, and he spread his hands, closing them and sighing with relief, "Ah...Do you feel that? His death was only a meager piece of this battle's crescendo. It beats with the music of mayhem and the cacophony of killing." Valgus frowned, "Yet, the glory of his passing could've been the beat of a drum instead of the whimper of wilted courage."

He roared out, "I told all of you. We came to battle for glory. That glory is not in our gain – it arrives at the conclusion of our conflicts. Baldowah speaks of finality and our ethereal existence. He believes that our lack of permanence is what makes us so

compelling, and that is why he watches from afar. If that lack of perpetuity is what sets us apart, then why should we avoid death at all?”

My jaw slackened. Valgus was totally and utterly insane.

Valgus smiled, his eyes wide, “March towards it, and bring forth its call to all that you can. We will usher in the finality of life, its presence a cycle of destruction. That lies at the center of our call – life. All fight to bring forth its creation. Only a few battle for its end.”

Valgus cackled, “And that is why we stand here. We are on death’s side, and death stands with consequence and conclusion as his brothers. Hold those brothers in your arms-“

Several rulers saw right through the meaning of his speech, and they sprinted away. I couldn’t blame them. Valgus ripped out several shards of rainbow bone from the ground and lobbed the spears at the escaping rulers. They exploded into bloody vapor as the spears made contact like large bullets.

Valgus gasped in dismay and genuine shock, “You’ve joined me. You may choose to die by my hand or at our enemies. That, or choose to fight for the chance to live. Regardless of your choice, two threads of fate will match together now, and only one will remain thereafter. That is totality brought forth from concept to reality.”

I turned towards Shalahora, who met my gaze. We spoke no words and made no gestures, yet somehow we understood precisely what the other thought – Valgus was a total lunatic. It left me baffled. I mean, I always assumed people exaggerated rumors about people. If someone said, ‘This guy’s a battle-crazed barbarian,’ then I believed he had a penchant for battle.

However, if anything, this guy’s rumors fell shockingly short of what Valgus was actually like. He didn’t want to win. He just wanted rampant death and chaos to please the whims of Baldowah. It was a petty, small existence for such a grand and powerful person, but the more I learned about avatars, the more they followed that pattern.

They were tools for a hollowed god.

It left me sad and resolved. My helmet pulled back while I rubbed my temples, “Shalahora...I can’t kill him physically. Can you warp him away or restrain him?”

“He exists without physical limitations. Baldowah has blessed him with some kind of... Immunity to harm and eternal power. We are blessed that he battles with a brain the size of a walnut.”

I smiled, “Now, wait just a minute. What did walnuts ever do to you?”

Shalahora cackled before my face sharpened. I frowned at Valgus,

“What’s the plan?”

Shalahora simmered, “We will strip that psionic protectant bare and lay his soul under siege.”

“Then let’s get to it.”

Valgus found another ruler trying to escape, so he slaughtered the member. By then, his side was demoralized to the point they were nothing more than headless chickens. My golems and primevals gored and gouged them apart while their lines collapsed. After all, a reckless charge had merit, but a disorderly retreat was destined for failure.

And so, they were slaughtered. Valgus continued battling with a grin on his face, and in time, my golems joined the fray. Primevals of mine also arrived in mass, and we coordinated our assaults to get the most out of our efforts. I lobbed out my strong magic, Shalahora sent out shadowed slices, and the rest distracted the asura.

It wasn’t enough.

He continued pressuring our entire army without any signs of struggle. No sweat. No fear. No racing eyes or heaving breaths. Valgus wiped dozens of primevals apart with each swing of his arm or kick of his leg. He tore through the rainbow bone with ease, and he decimated the shield of my city with a single swipe. If anything, he showed fewer and fewer limitations as we fought.

Outside of his psionic barriers, that is.

Shalahora and I joined forces with my golems and his shades. We pressed down with the might of many, whittling those protectants down. We tore through one splintered eldritch soul after the next, peeling the multi-layered defense back one layer at a time. We even found the shattered souls of the Kalat; the entire race turned into a piece of Valgus's psionic securities.

Grotesque as it was, we dismantled those trapped within. When I found a large enough hole in the psionic bulwark, I glimpsed at Valgus's psyche underneath. An eerie feeling washed over me like diving into an ocean of red. Valgus was an embodiment of war, and his mind carved itself until nothing but battle remained. That, and some strange, warped presence that seeded in the back of his mind.

I probed towards it, finding some kind of dormant titan. It hibernated without any inkling of stirring. It satisfied itself with the actions of its host, and that kept it slumbering soundly. I grimaced at the feeling before thinking back to Shalahora,

"Something's off about this."

Shalahora's body dispersed as Valgus wrought him apart. The shadowed Sovereign menaced, "This will not be the first mind I've slaughtered. They all carry an oddity or two, most of them fabricated for their defense. This is no different."

I shook my head, pulling myself back from Valgus's mind. I tugged at Shalahora's telepathic tether while thinking, "We need to stop until we know whatever that thing is in the back of his head."

Shalahora shoved my mind aside, and the shadow radiated confidence, "There has never been a mind that has equaled my own. No individual. No construct. No entity. I will pull this beast apart from the inside out, and your fear will not stop me."

My eyes narrowed, "Tell me then. Were you Mesmera's equal?"

Shalahora's mental battle ceased. He seethed, "What did you just say to me?"

Before Shalahora's anger manifested, a curious entity arrived in an instant. Its aura conquered the entirety of the battlefield, muting sound, heat, and even light. Shalahora simmered, "Why would you send that abomination an invitation?"

Mesmera suppressed the roar of battle and turned it into a whisper. It murmured, and the low sound radiated through us,

"Ah, you remembered me, little one."

Shalahora trembled before his shifting form shrunk. His eyes closed, and he molded into a shadow nearby. Mesmera spoke out to me, "You are still here. You've called me with cause, no doubt--"

I condensed my dimensional space while standing still. The thing bounced off of me, unable to slide into the depths of my mind. I let my thoughts hone in on Valgus, who still battled beside the city. He smashed a primeval apart before laughing at the eerie presence.

The asura howled out, "You feel of Baldowah but weaker."

I had to give Valgus some credit. He had balls.

Valgus kept howling, "Little Old One, what brings you to our domain? Were you whispered of? Or are you observing us to witness time's passing as well? To feel the intensity. To relish in finality as Baldowah does."

Mesmera spoke with a deep chill, "What has been done to you is disgusting. You're a shadow of what you were, aren't you? You...Are shattered, and what is left is simply sad."

A flash of confusion spread over Valgus's face before a smirk replaced it. The asura smashed his fists together, "You use words to weaken me, for you are little else. Come. Tell me your name, and we will battle."

It replied, "Others speak for me and of me. You and I shall speak no longer. Goodbye, shattered one." Mesmera turned its intent toward me, "And we will see how long that

little trick of yours works, little one. I learn from our every encounter, and I will change. Remember that.”

As Mesmera left the battlefield, my mind raced at the possibilities of the conversation. Connecting to Shalahora, the shadow shouted at me, “Why would you summon forth that thing-“

“I needed you to stop prying at those psionic restraints, and I didn’t have time to think of other things to say.”

Shalahora’s anger dampened before he murmured, “Psionic restraints? They are defenses.”

I shook my head, “I don’t think so. They aren’t meant to protect Valgus’s mind from someone’s attack. They stop his mind from becoming unsettled.”

I gazed at the asura, “He’s not a warrior.”

Shalahora’s eyes widened as well, and the shadow whispered,

“He’s a prison.”

Chapter 355: A Sea of Red

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Shalahora's eyes widened as well, and the shadow whispered,

"He's a prison."

Shalahora sent out an umbral slice towards Valgus, the lack of light lingering for a few seconds after the blade passed. It cloaked Valgus in a dark ooze, one that the asura tried peeling off. Shalahora thought over,



"If he's a prison, then what is he holding?"

I peered as Valgus ripped chunks of darkness off of himself. I bit my cheek while thinking, "There are a dozen different things it could be. Either way, someone set Valgus up to be a moving fortress, and if we crack that cell open, we really don't know what we're letting out."

Shalahora sent out two more dark slices, "That entity might be what's empowering Valgus to such an extent. He is the container of a spirit, and it emboldens him until he is unstoppable."

I lifted my arms, smothering Valgus in rainbow bones from below, "He could be a host."

Shalahora tilted his head, "Of what?"

I kept piling more rainbow bone onto the asura, "If I had to guess, it's something related to the Old Ones."

Shalahora rolled his eyes, "As everything is, apparently."

"On this planet, yeah, it seems so. Anyways, the point is, I have a policy of not messing with the Old Ones as a rule."

Shalahora tilted his head at me, "Yet you are composed partially of interdimensional energies. You also show forms of the cipher that are based on Old Ones' standard forms. You're doused in their aura and presence, considering you're trying to avoid them."

I tensed my jaw, "Let's just say that wasn't entirely by choice."

Shalahora's stared at me with piercing eyes, "If what you say is true, then you are a walking contradiction."

I threw my hand at him, "You seem to hate the Old Ones even more than I do, but you've struck deals with them in the past just like I have. Sometimes, it's inevitable."

Shalahora peered off, "We are both forged by circumstances in many ways."

Valgus erupted out of the pit of rainbow bones, and he grabbed six pieces of rainbow bone. He tossed them at us, each of his throws tearing us apart. I came with Valgus in front of me, and he grinned with glee. He swiped a hand through my face before I thought over,

"Look, Shalahora, my point is that unsealing this thing in him could be pretty bad for us. It might leave us with more contact with those giant weirdos, and I'd really rather not talk to them anymore. Yeah, that's despite my armor being influenced by them."

Shalahora rushed over and broke an energy dagger on Valgus's back. The shadow jeered, "Armor? You wear nothing."

Huh. While peering down, I watched my legs get destroyed by Valgus. I never thought about it, but Shalahora was right. A wave of reticence passed over me, and I smiled at myself. I'd been this way for years, yet something like that made me feel self-conscious. Hah. I rematerialized myself towards the ground before dodging Valgus's dive downward.

The asura fell into a pit of dark ooze that Shalahora filled. Valgus tore through the tar before dashing towards us. He ripped me apart before swinging at Shalahora. The Sovereign weaved between his strikes as he thought over,

"If we wish to leave his prison unruptured, then how will we rid ourselves of this imbecile? He'd be content swinging at us until the end of time, and I tire of this already."

I shrugged, "You and me both, but at least we know we'll be sent away at the end of the lottery. This ends at that point at the worst."

Shalahora menaced, "But how long will that stop this war-loving idiot? Valgus may hunt either of us down to finish this fight. I know little of this asura's circumstances, but I don't doubt his willingness to throw everything aside for a fight."

Shalahora's form dispersed around several of Valgus's swings before the shadow oozed out, "As for your circumstances, I'm sure you have a home elsewhere, one that Valgus may decimate should he find it."

My shoulders tensed, "Yeah. I'm guessing the same for you?"

"In a sense, yes."

I peered around before looking up, "Well then...It looks like we'll be using some environmental hazards to our advantage then."

Shalahora looked up with me, "Perhaps so."

I raised a brow, "Can you hold him?"

Shalahora washed over Valgus before the shadowed chains pulled the asura upward. Valgus flexed his musculature with enough force that wind erupted off of him, as did Shalahora. I gawked at that, stunned by the simple yet effective strategy.

I lobbed gravitation at him, but it couldn't touch the guy. Telekinesis fizzled anywhere near him, and with some frustration, I materialized an iron pillar under the unyielding asura. He ripped it out of the sharded ground before tossing the metal at me. I split it apart as Valgus laughed, and Shalahora appeared beside me.

I looked at the shadow, "Let's coordinate."

Shalahora let out a disappointed sigh, "I would try anything to stop this simpleton."

We rushed towards the red figure. Valgus clapped his hands at us, erupting a wave of kinetic energy. I blocked with my dimensional shield while Shalahora warped towards a nearby shadow. My allied Sovereign threw a blot of darkness over Valgus while I tried swiping my shield through him.

Valgus waved his arm towards me, and the dark spilled onto me instead of him. The shadows splattered over me for a split second before Valgus swiped his arm in my direction. At the very least, I no longer had to worry about the shadows since I lacked a body. Regenerating above the asura, I erupted a few more bombardments of forces from my shield.

At the same time, Shalahora lobbed sun splitters from below. The large strands of darkness stretched out like dark lines drawn across the scenery for miles. They connected with Valgus from above and below, but the absurd power shattered against the asura.

Valgus grabbed my foot and hurled me towards Shalahora. Shalahora whirled around me before I splattered against the ground. Valgus darted in from above, but I planted my hands on the bone shards. With psionic dominance, I controlled the nearby rainbow bones. Enormous, opalescent pillars shot out of the ground, piercing Valgus.

He grabbed four of them while laughing once more. He snapped them like twigs before hurling them at me. Once more, my body disappeared before I came back. Shalahora wisped beside me, and the shade murmured,

"This has gotten rather dull, hasn't it?"

I pulled back my helmet and dragged my hand down my face, "Yes. It has."

Valgus tilted his head at us, "Boring? Are you two stupid or simply cowards?"

I marveled at his singlemindedness while pointing my thumb at my chest, "You mean me? I'm stupid and a coward?"

Valgus snapped, "Yes. Both of you."

I turned to Shalahora, and we laughed for a bit. Valgus flushed a deeper red while howling, "And you laugh at me? For what cause?"

I shook my head, "How about we call it for today. Neither of us has gotten anywhere."

Valgus's eyes narrowed, "I can feel you weakening with each regeneration."

I blinked a few times, "Uh...No, I haven't weakened. Like, not even a little bit. I'm the same."

Valgus grinned at me, "Your attacks have gotten far more flimsy and less destructive. That is a sign of your weakness in and of itself."

I held back the urge to look at my city nearby, the settlement being why I held back some. I waved a hand at Valgus, "Look, I'm doing just fine. You haven't even dented me."

Valgus scoffed, "You attempt to weaken my resolve since you can't weaken me. Your words will fail as you have."

I leaned back, "Wait...No, I'm serious. You haven't even hurt me at all. This has been a relatively easy fight, all things considered. If anything, it's boring."

Valgus rolled his eyes, "So dying tens of times is considered an easy and boring battle these days?"

It was my turn to grin.

"For me? Yes. Yes, it is."

Valgus's smile dampened before he landed beside me. He swiped me into non-existence, and I regenerated right back in place. I shrugged, "See? Nothing doing."

Valgus swiped me apart again, but I stayed in the same position. He swung seven more times, his cadence building a brutish momentum. I sustained through each attack before ruffling his head,

"You can't do anything but swing at me. I told you when we first fought - that isn't enough. It hasn't been enough for a long time."

Valgus jammed his hand through my chest, but I stared at my gauntleted fingers. I tried mirroring Helios's casual boredom, and I spoke with disinterest, "You are a master of the physical, but I am beyond the physical. Duh."

Valgus wrenched his other hand into my chest wound before splitting my body. With my rived corpse beside me, I reappeared without any injuries, "This is less than nothing."

Valgus gawked at me in confusion before a wide grin crept up his face. He spread his arms and cackled, "Hah, this is a test from Baldowah. I relish in the challenges you've given me, oh mighty one. Gaze at the finality we create, and I shall grant it to this supposed immortal."

Valgus was a broken record, but calling me immortal caught me in the chest for some reason. I'd faced immortals but never considered myself one. As I gazed at the lifeless eyes of my split corpse, Valgus's words rang true. I was just as immortal as he was, perhaps more so.

In all honesty, it shouldn't have bothered me, but I tended to change faster than my ideas of myself did. Trying to reverse that trend, I wrestled out another idea of how to handle Valgus. Turning to Shalahora, I thought over,

"After he deletes me again, blind him."

"Easily done."

I threw myself at the asura, finding him slower in my vision than before. I traced the lines of his swings, predicting where and when they'd land. After a few hits of my own, the guy scraped me. My body disintegrated before Shalahora lobbed shadowy muck over the asura. Valgus clapped his arms at the blob before I opened my pocket dimension while immaterial.

I moved the upper portion of my portal to his stomach. Valgus leaped up, dodging most of the swipe. However, I caught one of his legs, and Valgus peered down in confusion. The wild berserker's eyes widened before he lurched for my portal. I closed it before darting above him. His eyes followed where I was, though he didn't see me.

He growled, "Give me back my limb, weakling."

I left him in silence as I bolted away. Valgus roared out before tearing two of his arms off. He put them onto his thigh, and the bleeding wounds healed. However, his arms didn't regrow, the missing limbs trapped in my pocket dimension. Valgus leaped off of

the fresh yet deformed limb with a weakened gusto. Even when mitigated, his jump was more than enough to catch up to me amidst the algae.

The barbarian hunted me down with enraged vigor, and he frothed at the mouth while trying to grasp me. After taking him away from my cities, Shalahora and I met above the clouds of kelp. I thought over to Shalahora,

"I'm using the leg as bait. Let's toss him into that black hole."

"Consumed in darkness...A fitting end for one lost in war and blood."

Shalahora dashed in, his body becoming a writhing, dark foam. He reminded me of ocean waves at night, and Valgus's form was a red star writhing with motion. They tore at one another, a dark tide meeting a raging sun. As they shifted and toiled, I charged mana into my body for several minutes.

With plasma oozing off of me, I pulled Valgus's leg out of my pocket dimension. As I grasped the limb in my hand, Valgus darted at me like a red bullet. While I couldn't use mana on Valgus, I could use it on myself. A ludicrous panel of gravity pulled my arm over my shoulder as I tossed the limb up towards Leviathan-7.

My shoulder ruptured from my torso.

My entire arm splintered into fragmented, glowing mush. At the same time, Valgus's leg fired right at the center of Leviathan. It hit a point where it shrunk in our view before freezing in a spot several miles overhead. We gawked at it, the three of us confused. The first to move, Valgus jumped off the air near him, sending out enormous shockwaves rippling below us.

Reaching his frozen limb, Valgus stuck out his hand to grab his leg. Somehow, he ignored the overwhelming gravitation at that level. However, when his arm passed a certain point, Valgus's eyes widened - he couldn't move his hand. He tried jerking it out with his other arm before that limb reached a point of no return as well.

It left me stunned. I couldn't believe we were so close to the event horizon of Leviathan, but the evidence laid bare before me. Valgus reached into it, and Old Ones or not, he couldn't stop a legitimate black hole's pull.

Shalahora shot toward Valgus, and that knocked me out of my introspection. I created a panel of steel and lobbed it at the asura, hoping to push him into the dead zone he hovered at the edge of. Simultaneously, Shalahora sent shades and dark slices out, and our attacks crashed into Valgus.

Dolloping drops of plasma, Valgus ignored our impacts, his expression grim and muted. After several minutes of struggle, he grabbed the two stuck arms and tore them off his body. He lost a hand and a forearm when he tried to save what he lost. He missed two hands and a leg now.

The asura's jovial, bloodletting smile shriveled into a bitter, hateful glare. Valgus boiled, "I will crush and kill both of you. After I've finished annihilating your being, I'll find your homes. No one, not even a single member of your species, will survive the apocalypse I render."

He drifted down from Leviathan while I crossed my arms. I taunted,

"It's just like I thought. You don't like fighting. You just like winning."

Valgus lost all sense of reason before he dashed towards me. I let out a sigh before some kind of alien presence crept over us. I bit my lip, recognizing the sensation as both familiar yet different. I grumbled, "Is you-know-who back?"

Shalahora simmered, "No. This is a different Old One."

My stomach sank as my vision blurred. Around me, a line of red consumed my surroundings. It rose up and over everything, even Valgus. The asura reached me with a maddened roar, but the crimson wave flowed over him, and all was gone. My sense of sight returned, but no color besides red remained.

They took on different, brilliant shades around me. Bright crimsons, deep maroons, and illuminated burgundies soaked into everything. A sea formed beneath me like dark wine. Above, the sky took on the shade of splintered cherries that plumed in all directions. Leviathan eclipsed, a moon appearing where the celestial body once stood.



In the waves below, mutilated corpses floated. None of the bodies rotted or stank of death. They effused the gritty scent of iron, sweat, and dirt, an aroma that rose from the waves like the muddied blood of war. The paradigm shift continued, pouring into and through every aspect of my being.

My hearing altered. The gentle drift of the waves wobbled in my ears, stretching and morphing into a high-pitched drone. Even slight sounds sharpened until they rang in my ears like whipping blades or clanging swords. Every sound left me irritated, the subtle sounds forming a recursive loop that fed on itself.

I covered my ears with armor, but it blocked no sound.

The essence of this old one effused through my skin, muscles, and bones. It filled my mind, and my thoughts inverted. My thoughts thundered out in rage, and all other emotions fizzled. I tried thinking of happy memories, but only moments of wrath splashed in my mind. It left me unsettled.

Every thought diluted through this new prism, and my every doubt, fear, and emotion devolved into a form of anger. For minutes, I floated in something akin to memory as if I lived the lives of Mars and Ares. My everything melted into war and battle.

I was war and battle.

Gasping for air, I calmed myself as much as I could, but I still writhed with rage. Around me, all was still for a while, and I thanked that pinch of time since it let me adjust to this bizarre world. Once I gained some footing, I peered around, my eyes bloodshot. I spoke with a calm intention, but my voice seethed,

"Where the hell am I?"

An ataractic voice ebbed from within my mind,

"Ah. The Harbinger. We finally meet."

I growled out, "Who are you?"

"You know of me already." It laughed before continuing,

"I am Baldowah."

#### Chapter 356: A Goal

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I snarled out, "And I'm Daniel...Now let me go, or I'll tear you apart."

The rasp in my voice shocked me, but instead of surprise, my emotion released as outrage. Those thoughts boiled in my head before several of my minds went to work. They tried different experiments while the others listened to Baldowah. The Old One omened,

"Like all the others, you're consumed with emotion. Don't fret yourself over it - I am accustomed to such a reception. Now, onto more important aspects of this greeting."

Even after a few words, I could tell that Baldowah was different. It radiated, "You've known of me for a time, actually. Just as you knew of me, I've known of you. I've seen your battles with Baldah-Ruhl, Yawm, Lehesion, and many others. I've been eager to meet you since."

I blinked, my mind racing for ways to hold back my anger. I shouted, "That's something we don't have in common. I've never wanted to meet, see, or hear about you. Any of you."

Baldowah spoke as if he expected me to scream at him, "You despise us, Old Ones? That's fascinating. Most entities wish to envelop themselves in the gifts we offer."

"You aim to destroy us."

"That isn't quite right. We intend to offer gifts, but we lack the perspective to offer anything useful. You see, it's difficult for us to conceptualize your world, let alone interact with it. That's often why we use subtle means and methods for our interaction. Anything overt oftentimes leaves unintended consequences; we undo what we wish to create."

I heaved for breaths, quiet anger fuming in the back of my mind. I resented my emotions, as Baldowah was the most open and useful Old One I'd ever met. I'd waste this opportunity if I just screamed nonsense at the being, but what other option was there?

None at that moment, so I howled,

"Then that's why you always leave your champions broken like used toys?"

"That's a perspective that is perhaps fair. I'd argue that we give hammers to you all, and you break your limbs with them. Think of Lehesion. He was granted a rebirth by Eonoth, yet his second life made his first life seem like heaven. Is that not proof that you will all waste it no matter the gift given?"

Wanting to growl at him, I chose not to scream out. I kept quiet, and my minds took on different kinds of anger. The coldest of them closed my eyes and spoke, "Eonoth knew that would happen. He enjoys watching us writhe, doesn't he?"

Baldowah mused, "He knew nothing of the sort. Eonoth knows all and is a being of immeasurable power. However, that is where we all exist. Where you are, he is as limited as you are...In a sense."

I seethed, "Everything is in a sense, isn't it? And besides, he manipulated our timelines to destroy a Spatial Fortress. How is that limited, exactly?"

"Ah, so you sensed what he actually did then? Hm...It was a risky venture. I've never felt time until I've visited your domain, and neither had he. As always, that being defied expectation. To handle such a soft, small concept so deftly...It was awe-inspiring."

"Once again, why is that showing his limits?"

"Because to us, that should be simple. It's made difficult by how frail everything that you exist upon is, but that frailty is mesmerizing. I relish its flavor. That and meaning. I've never experienced either of those sensations, but now I chase them."

The more Baldowah spoke, the less I understood. It droned, "In a manner of speaking, I walked from one prison to another, and I am chained to those new, vibrant sensations. In my dilution, I've found purpose. In my fall, I've found a cause. Your world is one of coexisting opposites, and it's incredible."

The awe in his voice silenced the waves of the eternal sea around us. I sneered, "Enough chatter. What do you want from me?"

"Your servitude and more, in time."

A coursing, volatile rage coursed through my mind, but I held it down, "No. I'm not some plaything."

Baldowah sounded appalled.

"Hah, what? Of course, you aren't. You're rare in your world, a true immortal untouched by our meddling. That gives you unique status, and that's why we wish to make contact with you. You crossed one of the thresholds between your kind and us."

I kept myself contained with long, hard breaths. I matched my fiery waves of anger with my cold ones, finding a precarious balance. With a neutral, quiet rage, I spoke with disgust, "What are you?"

Baldowah scoffed, "We don't know. We simply are. You are the same, are you not?"

I simmered out in frustration, "Stop with the word games. I don't have time for it."

"You do. You have all the time you'll ever need. That and your unique constitution are why many Old Ones have contacted you. They wish to use you to enact their own will onto your...Hm, place? Is that what it is? I suppose so."

I closed my eyes while rumbling, "Why do you all want to influence us? What's your aim?"

"We are...Watchers from afar. Imagine you watched a play. However, its acts are random and unruly. Now imagine you are an actor. I wish to have you, a performer, enact my will unto that play, and through your influence, I'll have my parts depicted."

I didn't like the sound of that, but at least Baldowah's motives were comprehensible. I raised a brow, "What kind of parts do you want to see?"

"You heard Valgus speak of it - finality and consequence. I love your concepts of war and fate. They are like beautiful mirages to me, and they speak the most clearly of meaning and time. I envelop myself in that fantasy, knowing they are hollow concepts to me yet so real to you all. By association, I experience a piece of it as well."

A spark of real anger formed in my chest, fusing with the unrelenting rage of the red ocean around me. I kept it still while glaring at the red moon, "So you enjoy death?"

"Yes...Many of your kind have misrepresented me, but that is a fact - I cannot deny death's beauty. I enjoy the beginning of things as well, but death carries a weight that

beginnings lack. Beginnings are freedom. Endings are absolute. It is the collapse of freedom, where life meets history and potential meets reality."

I shivered with an uncontrollable rage, "So...This is a game to you?"

"No. It's more than that. It's a purpose. It's a goal and a meaning to me. I've lived forever, and I may touch upon any event, time, or outcome. I branch across all timelines, having experienced all there is...Yet you...Your branch has been severed. And it rots. That rot gives meaning where there is none. In that decay, scarcity is created. It is...enrapturing."

I frowned, "Rotting branch? And is that why Yawm came to my planet? You're telling me that was all to find meaning for you all? Is that why Etorhma feared Yawm?"

Baldowah laughed before jeering, "Fear? Us? We are beyond your kind. Imagine drawing a figure onto a page. You carry the same influence against us as your scribbles do to you. You've simply mistaken Etorhma. He feared his gift's influence, not that which he gave the gift to."

I remembered Yawm's deteriorated state, the ciphERIC runes over his skin having ruined his mind. Lehesion's deformed body popped into my head, orange pustules pressing up from under his skin. I clasped my hands into fists, "Etorhma twisted him into an abomination. He tried doing the same to me."

"It wasn't intentional, though intent means little to you."

"It means nothing to me."

"Hm. The difference between you and Yawm is that you are far more robust than Yawm ever could be. He was wood. You are metal, as Eonoth puts it."

"You talk with Eonoth?"

"And the others. We speak in echoes, but the inklings of our intentions are sometimes heard."

At this point, Baldowah incited genuine irritation in me. The thing kept talking about their actions in a disconnected, inconsequential way. It made all of the Old Ones seem like impassive observers who toyed with whatever they watched, and I didn't enjoy being toyed with. My hometown was leveled because of these beings. I nearly died countless times too.

That annoyance built in me as I shouted out, "Those are meaningless words. You're treating my world as entertainment whether you'll admit it or not."

"That's because it is entertainment. Everything in your universe will perish in time. You'll become nothing. Your memory will become nothing. Every atom you've touched will become nothing. That is all there is, and that is all there will be. All will become heat after the death of your universe."

My eyes narrowed, "You're contradicting yourself. If this is just entertainment, then why does it give you meaning and purpose?"

"Simple. The limitations of your universe are novel. At no point have I denied their merits, but I will not lose myself in the illusions they present. They are transient, and I will tire of them eventually. We all will, but the journey will be invigorating."

I taunted aloud, "You're wrong, and you know it."

"Oooh, really now? How so?"

My minds raced into action, all of them debating, so I didn't misspeak,

"You can experience everything, and from the sounds of it, that makes everything meaningless to you. You've found meaning in our limitations. That means that you can't have meaning without limitations. Otherwise, you would have found that meaning since you've experienced everything."

"It's still a novelty. That's it."

I shook my head, my voice growing sad, "No. You'll never know what it means to live with a purpose. You're just grasping at something you'll never know. What you're doing

is no different than a human grasping for infinity - it's impossible and foolish to even try."

A wave of silence passed over us before the red waves grew in size and scope. They wobbled up and down, and the sea turned stormy. Baldowah radiated out, "Perhaps arguing with the omniscient and omnipotent is a poor idea? You might enact consequences upon yourself that you cannot afford to bear."

I grimaced, "Huh...You're weak. I let you know what I think out of respect. I thought you could handle it. Tell me, was I wrong?"

A pause coursed over us before the sea stilled. Baldowah laughed for a long while before he spoke out with an unnerving cheer, "Hah! You are one of the few who have kept their senses in my presence. This is precisely why I find your world's ever-shifting tides amusing and meaningful. That was an excellent display of your world's concepts, and I simply can't outdo you while existing in this comprehensible form."

Baldowah's admission of defeat felt like its victory. It radiated, "Regardless of what you say, I understand how impermanent this all is. Every planet will become dust and atoms in time. To you, that may seem distant. To me, that is here and now."

I raised my hands, "Then why even toy with us if it's so pointless?"

"I don't toy with any of you. Each of you is precious, in a sense."

I looked around, "You're talking in circles, but is that preciousness why you're here to save your pet?"

"Pet?"

"Yeah, Valgus Uuriyah. You're here to save him, aren't you?"

"He's chosen his path, and it's a dark one. I wouldn't dare to ask my followers to tread the brambles and briars he races through. He will do that alone."



The more I heard the Old Ones speak of Valgus, the more pity I felt for him. Something awful happened to the guy, and I was curious about what it was. Baldowah interrupted my musing,

"I'm actually using my avatar's call to action as an opportunity to speak with you. On the other hand, Valgus will die, or he will survive as he always has."

I leaned back, "So you don't care about your avatars?"

"Valgus Uuriyah is no avatar of mine. Quite the opposite, actually."

A wave of confusion passed over me, and it fused with my anger to become frustration. I fought through it while thinking. Based on what Baldowah said, Valgus worked against the Old One. Considering that and the fact that he was a prison, Valgus's current state started making sense. I rumbled out, "Ah...Valgus contains one of your previous avatars?"

Far off in the distance, the moon blinked like a bloody eye, "Yes...That is correct. Would you wish to free my warrior? I will reward you."

I bristled, "Reward? Don't look down on me. In fact, don't touch me. Don't even speak my name."

"Ah...It would seem your sense of reason is passing. It's most certainly time for my presence to overwhelm you as it does the others. Inundated or not, it was a noble effort for you to contain yourself for such a length of time, but I'll leave before you are driven mad."

I pointed at the moon, "Your aura's one thing, but my own anger is another."

"Oh...Your rage is adding to my presence? Interesting. What has you so angered, little one?"

I shouted out, "Isn't it obvious - you're messing with our worlds. If you don't know what you're messing with, don't do it. Simple."

"That's a reasonable logic, but I'm sorry to say you will find yourself more angered in time. Our meddling will only become more prevalent, though I will attempt to keep the others measured in their influence."

Red eyes opened where the craters of the moon formed. They gazed through me, "However, there is little I may do. Eonoth is powerful. Etorhma is sly. Mesmera is unavoidable as your kind cannot control their thoughts. I do pity your predicament. If it helps you, I hope that your world isn't left shattered like the others, but I cannot control what they've chosen to do or will do."

I blinked, a wave of dread rolling over me, "You're telling me that more Old Ones are coming?"

"Of course. There is no limit to us, and you all exist outside the scope of all that we know. Why wouldn't more come?"

I stared down at the red ocean below me as Baldowah said,

"And we will arrive. We'll cut up where you infest, and we'll find our own meaning in your temporary existences. Many will die and survive as you always have. It will simply be because of us instead of the natural forces you experience."

I peered at the dark moon, "Why?"

"Why not?"

"Because we're fighting to survive. You could at least respect the effort. And you don't have to do this. You could sit by and watch."

"For your first statement, I'd like to establish a simple fact - you all die. Even you will perish eventually. If your deaths happen to stem from us, it makes little difference. As for your second statement, I could say the same of you, yet you interfere with the world around you. I am here now, and I've chosen to do the same."

I raised my hands in frustration, "We die because of inevitable realities around us, like growing old or starving to death. It's not because someone is forcing our death...Most

of the time. And your second argument is awful. The kind of changes you're putting out there makes everything worse."

Baldowah laughed before chiding, "Child, you mistake yourself. To you, we are as inevitable as those forces you speak of. Far more so, actually. Gravity can be fought. So can time. I am beyond both, so there is no difference in the cause of your demises. Both are uncontrollable to you."

Baldowah spoke with finality, "Accept it and move on. Your kind is good at that, and I admire that perseverance."

A darkened, malevolent sensation crawled up my spine. It wasn't anger. It was something closer to hatred, so I snapped, "You're nothing more than a bored scientist playing with the corpse of a dog. There's nothing inevitable about you."

Baldowah wondered aloud, "You compare yourselves to the corpse of a dog? No, you're more akin to...Hm, parasites, maybe? It's hard to define your existence to us. That's part of what makes you all so interesting to interact with. Speaking of which, how about we establish some kind of deal?"

I stayed silent. Baldowah's voice heightened, "I'll take your silence as interest. If you free the ensnared avatar within Valgus, I'll give you great power. That is why your attempts to harm Valgus are foiled - you fight against something you don't understand."

I resolved to uncover what means these avatars used for their invincible bodies. Once I dismantled the rules that kept them safe, they'd have to face me on their own merit...Something I didn't expect any of them to match me on.

Baldowah wondered aloud, "Power...It's something your kind always wants more of that...Right? It must be a tempting deal, but to specify, it will be great power in combat. I wish for you to bring forth the demise of others, and you have many enemies you could kill already. Remember Elysium? I can give you the ability to crush them. Same for Schema, should the AI cross you further."

Baldowah rumbled his words through this realm, "Tempting, isn't it? You could taste infinity, but you will lose a part of who you are. Such is the sacrifice of exceeding limits that are otherwise unbroachable."

I bit my tongue to keep myself quiet. Baldowah kept talking, "You'll need to let go of your goal to save the eldritch. I quite like the eternal battle they put your kind in, and there's a twisted irony to it all that I find so delicious. Schema and I agree on that point, which is the primary reason that little automation thinks I've allied with it. Hah. Foolish."

I blinked a few times, struggling to keep my words suppressed. Baldowah omened, "And worry not for new foes. Once you've crushed them, their loved ones will become your new foes, and they'll kill some of your family and vice versa. Inevitably, a cycle of vengeance will form. You'll battle on forever, as my other avatars have."

I marveled at the red moon, my sense of disgust fading. Baldowah understood so little about us and why we lived. No matter what I said, it would never relent. I mean, I wasn't the first person to argue with it or the smartest one to either. Reasoning with it was pointless, so I had only two options.

Let it be or fight it.

I peered at the waves below me, the shifting liquid mirroring maroon-colored wine. This entire conversation robbed Baldowah of his previous mystique. I imagined some otherworldly being with unknowable intentions. Instead, I found a binge-watching junkie hellbent on turning our world into a war film. In a way, it made all of my efforts up to now seem pointless.

If some all-powerful being could wipe everything away with the snap of its fingers, then what was the point in doing anything? And based on what Baldowah said, everything would fade eventually. It left me spiraling in existential dread, and a pit of nihilism was where I found myself.

Even if I avoided these entities, they'd seek me out with their avatars until I joined one of them. Then, I would fight an eternal battle, one without cause or merit that was dictated by an entity that understood nothing about us. I was in a kind of rat race, but instead of being financial, it was entirely built on fighting.

Schema wanted me to kill eldritch and Elysium, and Elysium wanted me fighting Schema. Baldowah tried to turn me into a machine of war, one that created endless cycles of killing. It felt inescapable, suffocating, and like I was twined into some string of fate, an awful one. I never believed in the concept before, but it reared its ugly head at this moment in a commanding fashion.

The rage around me molded with that sense of helplessness, and it whispered to let the wrath consume me. My life would be so much easier if I forgot about anything outside of fighting. I mean, I'd eventually amass enough power that I could challenge these entities and win. Would they let that happen? Would I even want to kill them after going through what they wanted me to experience? I doubted it.

A wave of disgust passed over me for contemplating that vein of thought. Regardless of what anyone thought, I was more than a warrior. I was more than some simpleton who beat people to death with his fists. I had a lot left to learn, but I'd taken a different path for quite some time. Despite my decisions, these all-powerful beings kept trying to put me back in that box repeatedly.

In one sense, it left me humbled that only my fights left a mark on them. From another perspective, it made me feel pity for these entities. They chased these absurd, idealistic realities where their whims were put into action. Schema wanted us fighting eldritch, Elysium wanted a utopia built on torture, and the Old Ones wanted...Well, whatever the hell the Old Ones wanted.

The problem was that their goals were manufactured and hollow. I never had to worry about that. I had my plate full just trying to survive, let alone thrive. That's why they kept fighting to sign a contract with me. It was so that they could take my place, which meant my position was something they envied. I had something they wanted and couldn't have, whether they admitted to it or not.

Armed with that knowledge, I spoke with stone in my voice, "I won't let it be."

"After all that thought, and that's all you have to say? You will let us be...You all will. Obviously."

A resolve formed in my chest. I was one of the few capable of making a difference, and I intended to do just that. I glared at the red moon, and it peered through me. I spoke with a quiet, raging calm,

"I will become a hunter of you and your kind. You will regret peering at us, and I'll ensure it."

It laughed, but my voice omened over the laughter,

"Give me time. That's all I need."

The voice replied, amusement rich in its tone, "But you will never reach us. You never can. It's impossible, and your foolish for even thinking you can."

I shrugged, "There was a time less than ten years ago when I struggled to pass my high school classes. Now, my mind has become many, and my body has become an army. I'll spread an empire across the cosmos, one that's better than these farces I see everywhere. Before you can end it, I'll find you. I'll find all of you."

I seethed, "I'll drag you down here, or I'll reach wherever you've manifested. When I find you, be ready."

Baldowah spoke like a teacher talking to a new student, "You simply don't understand where I am and where you are. I am not like the others. I have been within your realm the longest. I've touched and tasted it, which gives me the means to convey my thoughts...To a degree."

The Old One scoffed, "You're a parasite on a corpse, and you don't even know it. You may defy the limitations of those around you, but that means nothing to me. Less than nothing, as it shows your lack of perspective. You feel you are a king, and perhaps it is true. If you are one, then you are the king of leeches."

Baldowah impelled, "If you wish to rise above a mere parasite, simply drink the blood of the waters beneath you. Writhe in the mud, and I'll watch happily."

Below me, the waves opened eyes, and elongated smiles formed on pits of the water. Baldowah whispered, "This will be my last offer. You may drink this blood below and never need to worry in battle again."

My eyes narrowed, and I lifted a hand with a glowing, cipheric rune. It fed on my flesh, and I stated,

"The only blood I drink is my own."

"Hah...then so be it. Perhaps your mind will change after you've seen what Valgus can do to you all, and remember, little one, he merely holds an avatar within." The eyes blinked, "It was good to speak with you, even if you've lost coherence towards the end. Goodbye, Harbinger."

Around me, the sea of red drained. Spirals of blood whirlpooled into an unseen abyss, the kelp of Leviathan-7 returning to my line of sight. The hollow smiles reached the whirlpools, and they laughed like a chorus of children. The eyes cried tears of blood as the moon eclipsed with the crimson sky overtaking it. In time, sound dulled, becoming a muted shadow of its sharpened self.

The light of Leviathan returned, and I peered around.

The red dissipated like a body bleeding out. Thoughts intermingled in my head, a mix of dread, sadness, and terror rushing in. The other emotions almost hurt to experience, like opening curtains in a dark room. The light contrasted what I adapted to, its brilliance blinding. These emotions took on the same sensation, the worst being panic.

I facepalmed, wondering why the hell I spoke back to an Old One like that. I usually held back as much of my opinion as possible, but I shouted at the bloodied moon like some maniac. The aura of madness overwhelmed me more than I'd like to admit, but the consequences were set in stone.

I announced war against the Old Ones.

I could only pray they wouldn't take me seriously, and by the sound of it, Baldowah didn't mind much. As the welled-up fear and panic faded, a glowing ember of resentment remained. It came with pride and intention - I'd drag the Old Ones here and show them some 'purpose' and 'meaning.'

A part of me congratulated the new purpose. I'd finally roused a goal for myself, one I'd made on my own. Even if the Old Ones found it laughable, we'd see how long they found it funny.

Blinking for a few moments, I centered myself back on the moment. Around me, everything remained in perpetual stasis. Valgus stood above us, maimed by his attempts to regain his lost limbs. Shalahora sent out spirals of darkness at the asura, and below us, my golems harvested the results of our battle. I rubbed my temples, wondering what to do next. Peering up, I bolted towards Valgus.

Time began moving once more, a sort of lag affecting the others. They regained motion over time, and I slammed into Valgus before he could attain his previous dominance. As I hit him, his body remained motionless. His eyes peered down at me, a smile creeping up his face. I rolled my eyes as he grabbed my arm.

My casual disinterest altered into fear as Valgus slung me into the abyss of Leviathan's event horizon. I pulled myself out of my body as my corpse flew into the field of no return. It stalled like all other objects, becoming part of the scenery. I regenerated beside Valgus, and his smile waned as he growled out,

"It would seem Baldowah has tried blessing you. Why did you deny him?"

I smiled, "Eh, it was probably the same reason you denied him, right?"

Valgus blinked at me, utter bafflement spreading over his face. He scoffed, "I'd never do something of the sort. I am carved in his image, and though it's a poor rendering, I'll do my best to see his changes wrought forth."

Shalahora's blades sliced into us, the dark flames sizzling on my armor. Valgus and I traded blows, my bones breaking against his fist while he destroyed me. After landing on the rainbow bones below, I lifted my arms. Pillars of rainbow bone sliced up at the asura, but he caught them again. His eyes glazed over as he crushed the rainbow bones in his hands.

He murmured, "Baldowah...You've returned so soon. What is it, my lord?"

I raised a brow, peering at Shalahora. The shade shrugged, understanding about as much as I did. Valgus blinked a few times before frowning,

"But why? Have I disappointed you?"

Seconds passed, and Valgus's shoulders slumped, "No, please, I didn't mean to refute you. I shall do as you command."



Valgus's eyes regained their previous sharpness. He narrowed them at me while murmuring, "As you've no doubt heard and felt, Baldowah commanded me to leave. I'll do as the great one asks, but know that this is no retreat. I'll find you both again at another time. May we share it in battle as we do now."

Valgus turned around, and I thought to Shalahora, "Baldowah didn't pass over us, right?"

"If he did, I felt none of his presence - not even the smallest inkling of it."

Valgus leaped across the shining hills of the horizon, and I raised a brow, "Can you have a shade follow him?"

"I already have one doing so."

I turned towards the chaos left behind by the clashing armies, "Well then...We'll see where he and the others are holed up after we clean up this mess. And yeah-"

I grimaced, "It looks like someone's convinced Valgus that they're Baldowah."

Chapter 357: Infiltration

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I winced at the prospect of someone controlling that oaf before peering at my city's remains. The barrier still held though the color dampened into a semi-translucent sheen. The outside fared far worse, becoming a cratered warzone for several miles. Sifting through the chaos, I gave it a closer look.

Deep craters and carved valleys stretched in random, disparate directions. They held no set pattern, and bodies of other rulers sprawled out in the distance. We annihilated them, and my golems picked them up for looting later. Following one of those golems, I flew into my city with Shalahora.

A pile of those bodies amassed, and my director observed it in silence. Several golems' bodies joined the mound, their cipheric centers torn apart. Only the blue cores remained, and the director stared with a stoic gaze. I put a hand on the primordial golem's shoulder, "It's ok. You've done the best you could."

The director gripped his arms behind himself, "And it's also an observable reality that my best wasn't good enough." His head twitched before the director shook it off. He glanced, "I'll see if I can't improve my management until occurrences like this are no longer the norm."

Shalahora faded in beside us. The shadow murmured, "There is nothing normal here. It is all chaos, but that is no fault of your own."

The director sighed, "But...Chaos is simply how we describe unknown patterns and unforeseen outcomes. If I knew-"

I squeezed the shoulder pauldron, "Enough. Quit beating yourself up. Undeserved guilt is a useless emotion, and it wastes time."

The director squeezed a hand into a fist, "Yes, and perhaps using my time more efficiently now may save more of my kin later."

I let his shoulder go, "Are these the spoils of the war?"

The director let his hands down to his sides, "Yes, along with our casualties. I was hoping you could give them a kind rebirth with a new body. They'd carry on the legacies of their forefathers."

I nodded, "I'll remake every last single one."

The director peered down, staring at the lowest bodies, "That...That would be much appreciated."

We gave the bodies a moment of silence before separating them into two piles: rulers and golems. I helped process the rulers, peeling off helpful tech, gear, and runic markings. This passed the time for the next few hours after the battle, giving me a good idea of how much we collected.

A lot of it looked more valuable than it was, but Drelex and Entilla would help me sort the wheat from the chaff. As for the cipheric inscriptions, a lot of them involved combat-related utilities. Rapid communications, internal maps, and data recording intermingled with generic augmentations like speed and strength. The rest of the loot involved blue cores in abundance.

The battle involved hundreds of deaths, and most of them were primevals. With all of it said and done, we gained 543 blue cores. It dwarfed any expectations, but we left with losses this time. 48 cored golems piled up with a few more missing. We lost even more converted primevals, but they weren't a priority.

Shalahora inspected the damage without the same sadness, though he held a meeting with his shades before we moved on. With the damage sorted through, I handed off the tech to Entilla and Drelex. After hearing a few half-hearted complaints from them, I left and met with Shalahora outside my attacked city.

I peered at the shadowy Sovereign, the craters surrounding us, "You ready to find where they're hiding?"

Shalahora lifted an arm, a shade whispering to him, "This way, Sun Swallower."

Shalahora assimilated the shade while saying, "We are all prepared for what is to come. Follow."

We darted across the landscape, both of us avoiding primevals. After a few minutes of passing the shining horizons, we neared the edge of the desert. At the cusp of the endless sands, we landed at the sight of some fallen kelp. The stuff died all over the place, but the large eldritch always ate the dying algae.

I grabbed the edge of the leathery plant matter, "This isn't fresh. It's sun-dried and weathered like an old boot."

Shalahora molded himself under the fallen algae before standing beneath it. He turned to me like some child in a creepy sheet costume for Halloween. He tossed it aside like a stage cape, "It covered the entrance. Let's go."

We walked through a tunnel into the great labyrinth beneath the shining hills. After crisscrossing a dozen forks and diverging paths, converted primevals began intermingling with the other eldritch.

Shalahora cast us in darkness, and we kept moving around the beasts, though it slowed our pace quite a bit. As we skulked beyond a pair of primevals, Shalahora thought aloud,

"What did you think of Valgus?"

I raised my brows in the gloom, "He was a pitiful, broken man with no future and a destroyed past."

We snuck past a room shaped like a bottle with three primevals. Descending into another winding tunnel, Shalahora murmured, "Did you fear him?"

"No."

Shalahora stood still, peering at a converted primeval, "I did."

My lips thinned, "Uh, why? He couldn't even touch you."

"There are three things all fear: the past, the present, and the future. I have nothing to fear from what Valgus has done, and he may not harm me in the present. However, I believe he may omen my future."

I blinked, remembering how Shalahora mentioned a rough past and having to meet with the Old Ones. He could be in an irreversible situation like Valgus, so I frowned,

"Are you a prison too?"

"No, and I could never be one."

"Then what's got you so melancholy?"

"It's that Valgus seemed stripped of who and what he was. I worry I will be the same."

I blinked, ruminating for a bit. I scratched my neck, "Yeah, I worry about that too sometimes."

Shalahora let out a joyless laugh, "You are still free. I am a shadow in both form and function. I linger like a corpse of my old self, and Valgus was no different. Even now, I wonder if I am a puppet to forces I don't understand."

I peered up, not knowing what to say. A couple minds went to work, and I leaned into their thoughts on the matter, "We're all puppets in some way, but it sounds like you're worried about which strings are pulling you...Right?"

Shalahora peered through me, "An odd way of putting it, but yes. I am being pulled by many strings I no longer wish to bear."

I shrugged, "That's the thing - I think most of those strings are a choice."

"But choice is often an illusion."

"You're right about that one."

"Would you choose your species' continuation or your own dilapidation?"

I frowned, "My species, of course."

Shalahora spread his arms, "Then what comes after that is no longer a choice, but a series of outcomes disguised as choices. I worry that those consequences will continue their unstoppable march until they chain me as they have chained Valgus."

Shalahora dropped his hands and peered off at a converted primeval, "He and I will become brothers in bondage, each of us different sides of a hollowed husk."

A silence passed over, the remaining primeval stone still like a statue. I grimaced, "I've met a lot of Old Ones, and I've tried to limit my contact. However, they always seem to leave a mark on me somehow no matter what I do."

Shalahora peered back at me, "Hm...Then what mark did Baldowah leave?"

I remembered my new goals and glared at a wall, "A mark he'll come to regret."

Shalahora nodded before turning forward, "I hope you're correct about that. If anything deserves retribution, it's those entities haunting our worlds." He molded into the gloom, "Come. The faster we find them and scout, the quicker we may leave."

We rolled through the tunnels, passing around a dozen sets of guards. After reaching past them all, the tunnels widened until they mirrored caverns. The cave rooms molded into massive entrances, all leading to a single place. Shalahora and I stepped out to it and marveled for a moment.

The opal shards thinned, becoming like colored glass. Patches of this glass shifted the shades of the light of Leviathan. They mirrored stained windows, the expanse larger than any church. Sand dappled those rays, creating majestic mirages of light. Those beams radiated onto rolling hills of smoothed bone since this tunnel was made of a single piece of the stuff.

We stepped into the enormous, underground world. A charged wind rolled through the tunnel, and each gust swelled with rippling energy. It was more miasma than air as cyclones of sand rolled across the smooth floor. My hair charged with static, and in the distance, a crackling boom thundered across the tunnel.

I peered out as lightning struck the sand. It melted the sand and bones below. A glossy, smooth, and glowing texture pooled up in its aftermath. I smiled, now knowing the cause of this smoothed interior. Shalahora and I skulked into this otherworld, keeping ourselves hidden as the temperature rose.

In time, it sweltered like a furnace, the air blurring in the distance, and the environment remained consistent until we found an oddity. A series of rectangular shapes rose from the ground on one edge of the grotto. We made our way there, seeing people inhabiting the rectangles.

Rulers huddled into the chambers of Rainbow bone, but whenever we closed in, we found no home here. Someone trapped the rulers within these rectangular cells, and the capturer implanted strands of rainbow bone to pin the rulers in place. Worse still, opalescent spines pierced out of the rulers from within.

They were all psionically dead.

No enemy rulers or primevals guarded the place, so I walked up to one of the cubicles. I met an invisible wall around it. The entire area was sealed off from its surroundings. If I pressed on the invisible barrier, it didn't budge, and a knowledgeable individual carved cipheric inscriptions on the walls. Those markings soaked in the air's energy to fuel their effects. Beneath it all, dozens of blue cores helped hold everything together.

Peering at the prisoners, they held them here like artifacts in a museum. If anything, the constraints were excessive; they already drank the liquid bone until their minds died. Peering closer, they all still breathed. I peered off and blinked a few times, trying to clean my eyes. Someone had them drink the bone and huddled them into these cells while alive.

Valgus wouldn't have done this. He'd have just killed them, but someone convinced him not to. I rubbed my temples while wondering why do all this and for what? To hold them here? It made no sense, and Shalahora thought over to me,

"This is such a strange prison they've created. Why have Valgus's company killed these rulers and strapped their bodies into these...These pillars?"

I shook my head with a hand on the runes, "I have no clue, but they're not dead."

Shalahora murmured, "It would be better if they were."

I nodded in agreement while thinking of how to free them. I scratched through a few of the runic markings with telekinesis. Before I did any real damage, a few wild primevals flew by us, each looking at the prison cells. I stopped tampering with the prisons, knowing my pocket dimension was filled to the brim already. I couldn't save them anyways since they were all dead where it mattered.

Shalahora and I kept moving forward, finding more of the cells. They were put at even intervals, and we passed hundreds of them. Nearly all of the missing rulers were stuffed into these states of comatose. The more I looked at it, the stranger I found the entire prospect. I couldn't even imagine a reason for it, but regardless of the motive, the ruthless nature of it sent a chill up my spine.

That didn't stop us from heading through the cavern, finding a few mindless primevals and rulers. After a few dozen miles, the cavern angled downward, heading deep under the ossuary. We traversed the smooth tunnel as if diving through the throat of some colossal beast.

The flowing energy turned into a rich, overwhelming aura. It left my skin tingling and my hair frazzled up. The light dimmed, and no primevals made it to these depths. However, the rulers colonized this space, and a few weren't converted either. Gazing at them, these were the monsters I expected from the lottery at the start of it.

I couldn't see their levels, but they exuded enough energy to efficiently dispatch a primeval. To further that point, these rulers fought and wrestled primevals for entertainment in a carved-out arena. One of the weakest of the unconverted rulers proved his worth, facing an eldritch in the ring.

The stone primeval slammed a clubbed arm into a treant's side. That bark-covered ruler sent a shot of panic through my chest, not from the treant's strength but because of who it mirrored. It was a treant without any facial expressions, its skin glowing like Yawm. The entity lacked the same cipheric carvings and crumbling skin, however.

This plant creature was a vision of vitality and power, its form rippling with energy. It caught the stone primeval's arm before roots expanded from the treant. As the eldritch jerked its arm away, its hand crumbled from the root's infestation. The treant followed the primeval's pull, and the planted creature spun in a circle before slicing the stone beast's chest apart.



Dust plumed into the air before the primeval molded its body over the treant. It smothered the plant, both sides writhing. The treant reached roots through the eldritch's body before charging with violet mana. The arcane energy coursed through them both, and after a few minutes of struggle, the treant was victorious and bloody.

Its wounds leaked sap onto the ground, its body falling apart before another member walked over. The ruler helped the treant up, their comradery evident as they joked. A wave of envy coursed through me for a moment, but I turned away. It wasn't my place to watch. I was here to uncover what the hell was happening.

To further that end, I observed a few of the others. Many rested at the center of the cavern, each person trying to assimilate the coursing energy there. A few talked or handled food, though no one here would've complained about burned meat or dirty water. These were the uncivilized conquerors that rode across the universe.

They took what they wanted, and these rulers didn't worry about maintaining what they stole. In a way, it made perfect sense why they allied with Valgus - why fight the strongest person here when they could just coast along with him? Shalahora and I would probably throw a wrench into that line of thinking, but it made sense regardless.

The shadow and I kept heading deeper into the cavern until we neared the heart of their camp. No one piled up the resources like they had at the survivor's faction. Instead, only the bare minimum beds and shelters lined up as flattened sections of the walls or floor. Valgus kept a sizable pile of resources, primarily blue cores or psionic fluid.

That 'camp' lounged beside a pit leading towards the center of Leviathan-7. A dull sheen ebbed from that place, and near the entrance, Valgus argued with a remnant. Around them, an army of converted rulers and primevals idled like zombies. After a few minutes, a kinetic wave pulsed out. The rhythmic quaking was like the heartbeat of a planet.

If I guessed right, this led to the center of the rainbow bone beast. The kinetic shockwaves from its heart would've disintegrated steel, but knowing Valgus, he should've dove in already. Wondering why he hadn't, I stepped forward before a shadowed hand rested on my shoulder.

Shalahora murmured in my mind, "This is as far as we go. I cannot hide us should we get closer."

I nodded before Shalahora raised two coalesced hands. The shadow channeled mana while saying, "But, I may be able to hear whatever they speak of. One moment-"

An aura passed over us, one like Torix's hearing magic but far more palpable. It turned the waving wind in the tunnel to a deafening roar, but Shalahora adjusted the volume of different sounds. In a few moments, the remnant and Valgus's conversation oozed into our sphere of veiled magic.

"-You've made this far more complicated than it needed to be."

I didn't recognize the voice, but it was a woman based on her pitch. The other voice rasped, "It was for battle, and that is why I live...And why is storming in and killing them not what Baldowah would want? Surely you'd understand my reasoning as a fellow avatar?"

I dragged my hand down my face, recognizing Valgus by what he said and his voice. The woman snapped,

"We needed his alliance further down the line. This was a once in an eon kind of opportunity. How are we going to fix this? No, how are you going to fix this?"

I turned to Shalahora, my face smeared with confusion, and Shalahora peered back with bafflement. We listened as Valgus destroyed a primeval with a swipe of his hand. The Asura howled,

"And what is there to fix? Since when has Baldowah ever wanted us to make friends rather than destroy? It never has, not even once in the centuries of life I've lived."

In the distance, I saw the remnant rubbing her temples. She sighed, "Sometimes making friends results in more conflict than making enemies."

I blinked at that, remembering the past toxic relationships I'd seen. For a moment, I wondered what my dad's life would've been like without my mom. Those thoughts passed over me as Valgus scoffed,

"There's nothing insinuating that this is that sort of situation."

The remnant shook her head, "He's our ticket on and off this hell hole, and there's a lot we want to take back with us. That's why we didn't attack him until you wasted a fifth of our forces to set us back." Valgus grabbed and pulled his hair, "Agh, but for what? And besides, how could I have known it was him anyway?"

The remnant pinched the bridge of her nose, "You could've talked to me. That would've been a pretty simple fail-safe."

"But I have failed nothing."

The remnant frowned before glaring at Valgus. She murmured, "You fought a battle but avoided a war. That is not what Baldowah wants. Think of it like this - why did Baldowah leave Schema to his own devices?"

Valgus contemplated for a moment before crossing his arms, "To ensure a perpetual conflict with the eldritch."

"Yes, and Baldowah has loved that war, even relished in it at times. How did that war come to be?"

Valgus's eyes narrowed, "Er, Baldowah ceased fighting Schema so that the AI could muster its strength against the eldritch."

I had no idea Schema duked it out with Baldowah before even fighting the eldritch. That sounded nothing like Schema's official story, but Torix had mentioned a conflict with Baldowah a long time ago. Based on what these two said, the timeline of everything I knew was a wash. Then again, Schema lying about a few specifics of his early years didn't surprise me in the slightest.

It was kind of like how dictators presented their rise to prominence as some noble feat. The reality of their ascensions usually involved assassinations, betrayals, and plenty of outright murder. Schema's rise was likely no different. Interrupting my train of thought, the remnant raised her hands in frustration,

"Yes, but why would Baldowah let Schema regain his strength?"

I frowned at that. It sounded as if Baldowah was winning the conflict, though that's probably what any of its avatars would say. Valgus shrugged,

"The Old One's ways are more than I understand."

The remnant shook her hand at the Asura. She fumed, "Baldowah understands that for the absolute maximum level of conflict to occur, there must be two sides with each of them on even footing. The forces also need to be as large as possible. Without those two pieces present, there's no hope for a war of any size."

Valgus furrowed his brow, "But there is nothing wrong with a massacre, is there?"

The remnant slowed her words as if speaking to a child, "A battle will lead to one massacre; a war will lead to many."

Valgus's eyes widened with comprehension, "Ah...And that is why we wanted to ally with him." Valgus smiled at the remnant, "You are truly remarkable, a servant of Baldowah with a mind made for war's creation rather than war itself. Truly brilliant."

At this point, I frowned at the conversation since much of what they said had implications. For one, Schema might've fought a losing war before even trying to face down the eldritch. Baldowah stopped tearing the AI down because he wanted Schema to fight monsters. After a bit of thought, I put my hand up to my temples, other unsettling realizations passing over me.

First off, Baldowah was a professional at turning people into machines of war. Its avatars even fought over how to accomplish just that. Secondly, Baldowah would only make contact with Schema to create more war. Assuming Baldowah won, that could explain a few of Schema's inefficiencies since they tended to result in more conflict overall.

Thirdly, any attempts I made to stop the current, perpetual bloodshed would be met by Baldowah and his avatars. They'd fight me every step of the way, so we'd clash in time unless I played their game. Knowing I'd need some means of dismantling these avatars' immortalities, I resolved to explore my options.

In my final thoughts, the amount of destruction that Baldowah wrought onto everything defied any expectations I had. The more I thought about it, the more problems Baldowah could've caused. He was like growing, malignant cancer, and the other Old Ones would be no different. Taking me out of my contemplation, the remnant chided Valgus,

"So whenever you attacked the Harbinger's camp, you set us so far back that we may never ally with him again. Doubly so since he's weird; he seems to value his ability to position more than being in a good position. I can't understand him rejecting three Old One's blessings already."

I tapped my chin with a knuckle, not even having wondered about who they were trying to ally with. It turned out it was me, and the remnant was right about one thing - I had no intention of associating with these monsters. Valgus frowned with distaste, "And this was to help us start a war, allying with that weakling?"

We would see who was weak in the end.

The remnant smiled, "No, it's to continue a larger conflict. The Harbinger is the only person who will have a reliable means of getting on and off this planet. That's why he made those cities in the first place."

Shalahora's eyes widened as he gazed at me, "Ah...That's why you made Schema promise to officiate your self-made cities during your introduction. He'll establish hubs with his warping systems in place."

I sneered, "Yeah. I didn't think it would make these two lunatics aim at me."

Valgus blinked a few times, the explanations overwhelming him, "So...The...Er...We need the Harbinger to bolster a weaker side of a war."

The remnant put a finger in Valgus's face. She menaced, "The primevals, the fluid, even this giant bone beast could be game-changers. We need this planet if we're going to uproot Schema. Lehesion isn't enough anymore."

I froze in place, my brow raised, and my jaw tightened. Shalahora sensed my unease as he turned to me, "What has unsettled you so?"

I bit my tongue before omeneing out in my mind,

"She's with Elysium...And Baldowah might've allied with them."

Chapter 358: Cause and Effect

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"She's with Elysium, and Baldowah might've allied with them."

Shalahora murmured, "I suppose that's possible. It would seem somewhat...Unlikely."

I frowned, "Why? She's a remnant, and she wants to uproot Schema. She even mentioned Lehesion. That's about as obvious as it gets."

Shalahora tilted his head at me, "It would seem more evident to me that they've manipulated Valgus rather than actually allied with Baldowah."

I shook my head, "You're underestimating how resourceful and motivated they are. Besides that, they're fighting Schema, which is exactly what Baldowah wants."

Shalahora peered off, "Hm, that may become the case given time, but I doubt the validity of those claims as of yet. Aside from that, it seems coincidental that Elysium interjected into this lottery."

I turned a hand, "They created their own system, so it's not that unexpected for them to infiltrate Schema to some level. Hell, I even personally know people who can mess with the AI."

Shalahora tilted his head at that, "Hm, perhaps Schema wishes for infestations of his system to be kept hidden from prying eyes. I may be wishing for it to be so as well, for this signifies a deeply rooted weed, one that may harbor more to come in the future."

I grimaced, "Honestly, this explains a lot, but we'll talk about it later when we have the time."

The conversation between Valgus continued as we discussed with each other, but another one of my minds listened. The remnant continued while Valgus rolled his eyes, "Surely the Dyson sphere will have more than enough energy?"

The remnant sighed, "No, it won't. This planet doesn't have the same energy output as a large star, but the time dilation makes harvesting energy here far more efficient. It also allows for many innovations to current strategies we use."

My stomach sank at the prospect. They'd turn a portion of the planet into a silver-laden wasteland before harvesting unbelievably powerful Hybrids from this place. Valgus dragged his hand down his face,

"Then...Then I shall attempt to make amends with the Harbinger."

The remnant hissed, "You need to if we're going to stand a chance in our war after this stunt Schema's pulled."

She turned to the primeval army beside her and raised her arms, "We'll need you to lead an attack against the survivors soon."

Valgus furrowed his brow, "That will enrage the Harbinger even further. He's remodeled the entirety of their interior according to our spies."

The remnant propped her weight onto one leg, "It's fortunate for us that the Harbinger doesn't have any real allegiance to them. He's taking a portion of their profits, so we

have to give him those resources and compensate him properly. That can serve as our apology, actually."

Shalahora scoffed, "Knowing of you, that strategy might've worked should you not have known of it beforehand."

I seethed, "The moment I knew Elysium was involved, everything about our stay here changed."

Shalahora straightened up, "Ah...You have fought them before for your own reasons. Do those grudges still burn brightly?"

I raised a finger, "Wait one second."

Valgus spread his arms, "Then I'll avoid destroying those golems and any refinements the Harbinger's made. That should assuage his rage while demonstrating my goodwill."

The remnant nodded, "When can you leave?"

The asura emboldened with mana, "At any moment, really."

"Then go now."

The asura turned, walking on his torn arm like a deformed peg leg. He steadied himself on his regular foot before pulling his arms off his leg. Tossing them aside, Valgus rolled his shoulders before his leg rematerialized. I peered away as the remnant sneered,

"If you could've done that, why not do it earlier?"

Valgus grinned, "No one will fight when there is no hope. Since he is no longer an enemy, then I will no longer lie to them about their helplessness."

His hands regrew instantly, and Shalahora simmered, "We never stood any chance of even harming him. What a monster."



I scoffed, "He's nothing. It's his backer that's big and bad."

Valgus cracked his neck before bellowing out over the pulsing heart of the bone beast,

"Listen, mongrels."

The primevals turned to him. Valgus roared, "We attack the survivors now. This time, do not kill nor harm the golems. We will capture the rulers alive as we have the others, understood?"

The primevals crackled out with energy as a form of recognition. Valgus leaned down, "We head to greater glory."

The remnant walked up to him, putting a hand on Valgus's shoulder, "Hey, remember our deal."

Valgus scoffed, "Then hide within it, weakling."

Ignoring his jab, the remnant fell into a dimensional portal, stars glimmering on the warp's surface. Valgus leaped away before several hundred of his primevals followed him into the distance of the tunnel. No other rulers followed, all of them knowing what happened to the last batch that left with him.

Once they disappeared, I turned to Shalahora,

"We need to reach the rulers before they do."

Shalahora discarded his hearing magic before amplifying the veil sorcery already over us. We darted through the cavern, staying behind Valgus and his army. As we chased, I thought,

"You still curious about my thoughts on Elysium?"

"Yes."

"Well, they've committed genocide to stop Schema, and I disagreed with it. I wanted to keep fighting them, but Schema offered no support or rewards while I did. I couldn't keep justifying my people dying and my home planet suffering while I fought someone else's battles."

I grimaced, "Well, Elysium's at it again, and it hasn't even been a few months. I still need to catch my home planet up to speed before the culling ends and other races come to grasp our territory." I dragged my hands down my face,

"And now I have to worry about Elysium's invasion of Earth since Schema so eagerly told everyone about it. I don't want them touching my home planet since genocide is the tip of an ugly iceberg to Elysium. Just as well, I'd rather not see the rest of what they have in store if they get a hold of this place either."

Shalahora nodded, "And you'll be the only access point back to this planet, so they'll harbor resentment of you until you share this place with them."

I sneered, "They'll peel my skull back, replace my brain, and wield me like some animatronic if I let them. Hell, I wouldn't put anything past them at this point."

Shalahora peered at the two of them, "Then you intend to exterminate them so that no information leaks from this place?"

I peered through the remnant, "Yes. Every last one."

Valgus and his primevals rose out of the tunnels before Shalahora, and I followed. We bolted toward my base, and as the shining hills passed us, Shalahora jeered,

"Elysium is a blight, but so are Schema and the Old Ones. This entire universe is controlled by the insane and the broken. It's debilitating to think about."

I nodded, my voice saddened, "Yeah...We can agree on that."

We reached my border city, each of us launching through one of my blue core barriers. After landing within the city, we traversed through the tunnel system between towns, reaching the settlement with my warping panel. Shalahora and I rushed through it, my mana already charged enough to power the tech.

We opened the localized warp, both of us jumping into the control room of the rulers. The group worked out logistics for further ventures into the unknown areas of Leviathan-7, and they carried a festive air about them. As they turned to us, I boomed,

"We need to leave. Now."

One of the rulers stepped up, their robes elegant and clean, "What seems to be the problem?"

I shouted, "You're all going to die if you don't escape with me."

The rulers turned to one another, several of them beginning discussions. One of them walked up with wide eyes, "What's coming? What do we need to do?"

I pointed at the localized warp, "Valgus. You need to go through that portal."

Taking the first step, the ruler jumped through the portal without second-guessing what I said. I gazed at where the ruler once was and blinked in confusion. I never imagined convincing someone would be that easy. After one of them did it, several others followed. Like a pack, they ran out of the building, leaving everything behind aside from what they could pocket in a few seconds.

Both proud and shocked by the rapid progress, I slammed my hands down before ripping through a steel panel on the floor. Several rulers gazed up at me from below before I yelled, "Come on. We need to leave, or everyone's dead."

A few of the sorcerers peered around in confusion. They reacted like they walked through a sludge, a few of them still dazed as if someone struck them across the chin. Frustration mounted in my chest before one of the clearer-minded wizards saw the others leaving. She followed them to my cities, and like before, the others followed her lead.

I gawked at their disorientation because I expected some serious improvements from the last time I saw them. Without the elements holding them down, they should've improved by now, yet they struggled all the same. Contrasting their lack of readiness, Obolis floated over toward me, his eyes sharp as a knife. He grimaced,

"I heard you mention Valgus. I'll assume he sent a raiding party, and you intercepted them?"

I weighed my hands back and forth, "More or less, yeah."

Obolis turned to the rulers, "I'll shepherd these individuals to your city. Can you and Shalahora distract Valgus and his fighters in the meantime?"

I shook my head, "Actually, no. He'll run right past us, and he's the only one that really matters. Once he's here, he'll easily kill everyone, and I mean everyone."

Obolis raised a palm, "He's that powerful?"

I shrugged, "He makes Lehesion look like a grade-schooler."

Obolis leaned back, "Then where are we going?"

"My cities. They won't attack you there. Well, probably. It's better than here, at least."

Obolis's eyes narrowed, "Did you or did you not arrange a ceasefire? We need to know whether they'll attack us after our arrival?"

Shalahora murmured, "We are enemies that they wish not to make, and we own resources that they need."

Obolis frowned at Shalahora before the Emperor tilted his head, "You've been serving Daniel rather diligently since you met up with him. Perhaps now is the time to tell us why you follow him so ardently?"

Shalahora laughed before scoffing, "You all will be vaporized under Valgus's fists in moments. Now is the worst of times to discuss details, isn't it?"

Obolis raised his brows, "Then we discuss it once everyone's protected, hm?"

Shalahora cackled, "If I feel that it is time, then yes."

A tense silence followed before Obolis gave us a tight smile, "Regardless of my misgivings, I want to thank you both. I wish I could offer more in return for your services, but I'm simply not in the position to."

I raised my hands, "At this point, I just want Elysium to fail more than anything else."

Obolis raised his brow, "Hm, fair enough...Elysium?" Obolis struck up the rest of the conversation telepathically, "We'll discuss that later as well. Now, I've already sent out an alert through our system updates. Everyone is informed to carry what they can and leave within five minutes."

I shook my head, "They need to leave now."

Obolis's left eye twitched, "We'll be left with nothing. You understand that, right?"

I shrugged, "You'll have your lives, and like Shalahora said, we can't stop Valgus. Not even a little bit. My cities are the only safe place on this planet right now."

Obolis peered at me before looking down. He menaced, "Gah, this lottery...Time and time again, I am useless. This is the most humbled I've been in centuries." He looked at the rulers escaping, "It's as if Schema's playing some sick joke on us to expose how inept we all are. Unfortunately, we're all caught in the punchline."

I frowned, "No. It's not Schema. It's Elysium."

Obolis turned to me before blinking. He thought over, "What have they done so far?"

I sighed in my mind, "They've convinced Valgus that they're Baldowah, and they use him like a cudgel. They're also capturing the rulers and putting them in stasis."

Obolis's eyes widened, "Stasis? Is it...Is it through the rainbow bone liquid?"

I nodded. Obolis sneered in disgust, "Ah...Then that is so that they will not die."

I tilted my head, "Huh...Well, yeah, probably." I thought over, "In fact, they're probably ensuring they don't die while eliminating any donations to Schema too."

Shalahora muttered, "It could omen something far grander. The top ten of the lottery are given freedom from their empires being stripped of any resources. If they were to capture all but ten of the free rulers, then Elysium could ensure no donations from all the rest."

Obolis sent messages while thinking, "And if they do donate nothing, then last place will be a tie between those 490 rulers. That ensures that last place would fall within the top ten."

I frowned at the escaping rulers, "Elysium is trying to make sure this lottery results in nothing for Schema while giving them extra resources after it's all said and done. It's a shame because I like the idea behind it; you know, turn this lottery on its head against Schema. However-"

I closed my eyes, "Elysium can't seem to stick with even remotely reasonable methods. They'll do anything for their end goals, and I don't even want to imagine what they would do with the psionic liquid."

Obolis twitched, "They'll...They'll tear my empire to shreds." Obolis turned around and walked to the edge of the ruler's room.

He gazed at one of his gauntlets, inspecting the ciphelic markings on them. He clasped that hand into a fist, "I've spent my entire life building a sanctuary for my people, and it will be torn apart within a year's time. It's as if I built a castle of stone, but it has now become sand. Each grain of it was a soul under my wing, a sapling in my shadow."

Obolis's breathed deeply, "A wave has come to take it from me. All of it."

Obolis froze in place. His eyes widened as he growled. He flung a steel chair, and it slammed into one of the monitors as he snarled, "I will become a king of nothing...An owner of memories that are feeble and fleeting. And the albony will be left barren."

I let Obolis have a moment before I shook my head, "You won't have to worry about that."

Obolis raised a brow, "And why is that, exactly?"

I rolled my shoulders, "I'm killing them all, every last one."

Obolis rolled his eyes, "How would you even go about doing that when you can't even scratch Valgus?"

I shrugged, "Valgus knows nothing. It's the Elysium spies who we really need to get rid of. Once their information network is gone, we'll have to get rid of all the evidence of the psionic liquid as well."

Obolis grimaced, "Ah. Instead of cutting the head of the serpent, you're pulling off each of its scales."

I leaned back, "Huh, I guess so. Either way, I'll try to destroy Valgus, but it doesn't seem necessary for now. He's not the sharpest tool in the shed. We'll find out a way of hurting him eventually."

Obolis sneered, "Everything can be destroyed. We simply need to find his weakness...Or create one."

Shalahora pulled up one of Valgus's ripped-off arms, "I stole this as they ran. It should be useful for uncovering his defenses."

We leaned away from the arm before Obolis murmured, "Ah...Do you make it a habit to steal limbs?"

I raised a hand, "Man, I have to hand it to you, Shalahora. That's helpful. Handy even."

Shalahora and Obolis stared at me. The shadow threw the arm onto the ground, "I don't even want to take credit for this anymore."

I picked it up, tossing it into my dimensional storage. It was a tight fit, but it worked out. With that awkwardness handled, we glanced towards the rushing rulers, most of them within my city already. Iona Joan flew with her wings from the bottom floor as they left. She carried a few injured rulers with her, sweat beading off her brow. With a swoop, she went into my city's sanctum.

With no one left, the three of us flew towards the warp leading to my city.

Obolis stepped through before raising his brow at us, "Are you not coming?"

I shook my head, "I'm getting what I can first."

Obolis pointed down, "We've gathered the files from our research already. As for the physical resources, the uncovered gear and rainbow bones remain here. Good luck gathering it all."

I gave him a knowing grin, "You won't be worried about the rainbow bones after you arrive in my cities."

"Why is that?"

"Let's just say it's in plentiful supply."

Obolis peered around, seeing the buildings left behind by my golems, "It's in the buildings themselves even...Remarkable." He waved, "Good fortune to you both then."

I picked up the teleportation panel, the grafted steel snapping under my grasp. Shoving it in my pocket dimension, a spike of discomfort waved through me. That was the limit of my storage for now. Not having time to think about it, Shalahora and I raced toward the vault before I tackled into the colossal doors.

They dented, though the graphene held. Shalahora sent out blades of darkness that split the gray substrate, and my final charge slammed the door down. As it fell, an enormous kinetic pulse radiated through the entire building. It sent a shiver through the steel and graphene, hinges on doors snapping and panels shattering nearby.



I winced, "I'm guessing that wasn't you?"

Shalahora jeered, "The crimson idiot is here, it would seem."

Shalahora sent out dozens of shades to gather supplies. I piled balls of supplies that could fit through the door in a gravity well. I got several bunches of them, and we dove through the collapsed doorway. Chaos erupted above as we crossed the inner hull of the survivor's sanctuary. Valgus and the primevals dented and destroyed everything they came across, the entire area leveled in seconds.

The booming thuds and echoing throngs mirrored the breaking hull of a ship. The rays of Leviathan's radiation pierced through the building once more, the waves of warping gravity returning with the warmth. They easily minced my dimensional fabric before a primeval eroded through the roof above. The star beast turned its eye at me, its form bright enough to blind anyone peering its way.

I stomped my foot, a panel of the floor lifting between us. I dove down as the star beast pierced past the steel barrier. It destroyed one of the balls of gear I carried along with several of Shalahora's shades. Swooping the equipment with me, I pulled the panel down as the shimmering primeval gazed around in confusion.

Before it discovered us, I squeezed my palm towards the floor. Gravity wells crushed the steel together, sealing the hole we left behind. Before it found us again, we dove into the medical bay again. Surrounded by medical machinery, we darted over and around various sick bay supplies. The star beast above decimated the floor above, tearing it apart.

Getting the hell out of there, Shalahora and I reached the wall. Shalahora sliced through it before stabbing several fingers into the steel. He grasped the metal and wrenched it away, the cut steel decaying into ash as the umbral flames burned it. I expected to see the stony earth of Leviathan-7, but we found a small room stuffed with storage pods instead.

I jumped into the cubbyhole, cipheric markings covering the entire room from head to toe. I frowned at Shalahora, "Could you sense this room at all?"

Shalahora put a palm on the wall, "No." Shalahora sliced and wrenched the steel wall once more, the familiar rock of Leviathan-7 coming into view. Shalahora shrugged, "This is where they store breathable air."

I shook my head, "Wait a minute."

My gravitational sense told me the tubes weighed too much to be full of pressurized gases. I stabbed my arm into one of them, and a wave of energy fired up my arm like energized needles. Fear roared in my chest before I tore my arm off while scrambling away. I fell onto my back before jerking myself out with a gravity well.

Rainbow bone spines splintered from my amputated arm in mass, the limb destroyed in a moment. The shards ruptured the other tanks nearby, liquid rainbow bones flooding at us. I siphoned it into a ball before the star primeval found us. It launched itself into the room, and the nearby steel liquified instantly. A flood of psionic liquid erupted out, and Shalahora sent out a shadow slice at the chaos.

The star beast dispersed around the attack while the liquid flowed towards us. Before the beast rematerialized, I jerked myself upright and stomped forward. A telekinetic wave shoved the primeval into the psionic liquid, and the beast flared for a moment, its eyelid smiling at us. It bent down to charge before rainbow needles erupted from every square inch of its glowing body. Its internal plasma slimed off the spines of its body, the dead husk falling down.

Nothing remained but growing shards of rainbow bone covered in ooze.

Before even more of them arrived, I melted the exposed ground into magma and flooded the room with it. That created an opening in the rock, and we both slid into that opening with our gear intact. After growing the pocket of air for a while, I fitted the psionic liquid and the supplies too.

Sealing the tunnel behind us, I kept the pocket of air moving underground. I melted and solidified the earth at will, getting us several miles away before we shot out of the ground with most of the gear left. Staring at it, the majority of the equipment would need to be cleaned of ash and solidified rock, but it would survive.

At the surface, we turned behind us, the survivor's base being a small pyramid in the distance. The graphene tendrils of the base thrashed at nearby primevals. The eldritch snapped, cracked, and crushed the gray supermaterial, turning it into crumbling refuse. Valgus exploded out of one of the walls, his laughs booming as he decimated what took months to build in seconds.

So much for his promise not to tear the place apart.

We peered at the destruction for a moment, a sense of silence overcoming us. It passed before we darted away, Shalahora casting his stealth magic over us both. The darkened veil cast another silence over us, the layers of calm compounding into a killer kind of quiet. We reached the ossuary several minutes later.

We converted a few primevals as we passed by, knowing their power would be necessary for the future. I also had nowhere to store the psionic fluid from earlier, and I'd rather we got rid of it then rather than later. With several dozen primevals dashing in with us, we reached the base. Once there, a crowd shy of a hundred survivors was waiting for us.

We left the converted primevals outside the city limits, many of the rulers letting out yelps of terror at the massive army. They gawked at the piled bones and layered algae, no one having seen the ossuary's horrors. As I floated down, I raised my arms,

"You'll all be fine. We even got most of the gear back with us."

As we floated the cores and gear over, Obolis stopped speaking with the director golem and walked up to us. The Emperor scoffed,

"I now understand why you left the rainbow bone behind."

I shrugged, "You could say it's in plentiful supply."

He grabbed his arms in front of himself, "You also arrived with the monstrosities in tow, and by the looks of it, this isn't the only settlement you've founded here. This is quite the bastion you've made."

I nodded before raising a hand, "I need a moment to talk with everyone." I stomped my foot, a wave of kinetic energy erupting through my city. The blue shield warbled in duress, silencing every ruler present. I lifted my hands and boomed,

"It's time we had a long, hard talk about what the hell's going on here."

My golems arrive in mass behind me, and the twitching primevals skulked outside. The rulers huddled somewhat, hiding behind the guards who were hopelessly outgunned. I let a silence pass over them before announcing,

"You've all been poisoned by this." I opened my pocket dimension and pulled some rainbow bone liquid out. I swirled the beautiful fluid in a gravity well while mouthing,

"And I will figure out who did it before anyone leaves this city."

Chapter 359: Amassing Armadas

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"And I will figure out who did it before anyone leaves this city."

One of the rulers walked up, a guardsman covered in scars,

"So you yank us from our established base before forcing an interrogation on us?"

I raised my brow, "Valgus was coming, so you were all going to die. In fact, you'd likely die in seconds if you even stepped outside here. Your base's location acted as the safest part of the planet, and around these cities are the deadliest. None of you experienced a primeval or the elements here. They'd leave you all with a few casualties, to say the least of it.

A meeker diplomat paced up, "We're on the other side of the world?"

I nodded, "Yes. This is the ossuary. The bones around you are the piled-up remnants of the large eldritch you've seen worldwide. The layered algae created a competitive ecosystem that led to the evolution of primevals. Think of them like the end state of the eldritch on this planet."

I shrugged, "Unfortunately, there are quite a few tools under the surface of this world. One of those 'tools' is a liquid that kills the minds of those that drink it."

The diplomat blinked, "Kills the mind?"

I peered down at the alien, "Yes. You lose your soul, so to speak."

The guardsmen winced, "Sounds like a bad time."

I frowned, "Yeah, pretty much. Someone fed it to you all, which explains why everyone's about as sharp as the flat side of a hammer."

Obolis blinked, "Ah...I've been eating my own supplies rather than the group's rations."

I raised a brow, "What for?"

Obolis raised his brow, "I'm used to poisoning attempts, and it's a habit I picked up long ago. Also, are the mental impairments you spoke of permanent?"

I weighed my hand back and forth, "I don't know, but probably not. I've tried some of the fluid, and I'm no worse for wear."

A wry grin grew over Obolis's lips, "Are you certain of that? You have seemed rather off as of late. I'd have yourself checked if I were you."

I rolled my eyes, but I appreciated the joke. We could use a bit of humor, given the chaotic circumstances. I turned to everyone, "We'll be getting you all into top shape soon, but we have to weed out whoever's behind all this."

I turned to Shalahora, "And uh, yeah, I was hoping you could help me with all that."

Shalahora tilted his head, "In return for what?"

I pursed my lips, "I have no clue what I could offer. Golems, cores, maybe something else?"

Shalahora peered off. He lowered his gaze before seething, "Kill the Old One I spoke of."

Obolis burst into laughter before scoffing, "Ah, perhaps you'd wish for him to change the laws of our universe next? Perhaps reverse time?"

I tilted my head at Shalahora, "Let's talk about this in private."

Obolis raised a brow, "Fair enough, though perhaps you shouldn't negotiate with someone who wishes for the inconceivable."

I walked to a room, "I'll keep that in mind."

Shalahora and I found an empty room nearby, and I struck up a telepathic conversation, "I'm guessing you'd like that commitment to be made in the cipher?"

Shalahora narrowed his eyes, "And you see my request as a joke as well?"

I shook my head, "I think you're making a bet, but it doesn't matter either way. I'm aiming to destroy all the Old Ones, so I'll just put M on the top of my list."

I tapped my side, "But I will need time to handle that kind of request for obvious reasons. I'll also need more than just this request handled."

Shalahora jeered, "If you can kill that insidious, viral entity, then I will do anything you could request of me." Shalahora tilted his head, "Though your chances of slaying it are slim, as you mentioned while stating this would be a bet."

I turned a hand to him, "Yeah, what timeframe are you giving me to handle this? I need more than a decade or two, that's for sure."

"Ten thousand years. Perhaps more."

It was difficult to even imagine that much time passing, let alone having some ticking time bomb beeping at the end of it. I grabbed my chin, "What will I put at stake should I fail?"

"Your free will. If that measure of time should pass without M's passing, you will replace me and my role."

I took a step back, a wave of dread racing over me. My eyes thinned to slits, "So this is why you've been allying with me this entire time, then?"

Shalahora's eyes closed, only a shadow remaining. Shalahora murmured, "I knew I couldn't get you to willingly agree to something so foolish without first understanding you. This is why I've decided to assist you to this extent; only by knowing your needs could I ever offer you something worthy of this trade."

I blinked, "And when did you figure out I could be your replacement?"

"The moment we were taken to the lottery. You're an immortal and carry all the necessary preconditions to become an avatar in my place. I couldn't have asked for a more optimal candidate."

I raised my brow, "Wait a minute...You just don't want to be an avatar anymore? Is that the root of this?"

Shalahora leaned towards a wall, "It is part of it...Before we continue, what do you know or think of avatars?"

I scratched my head, "Well, aside from offers to become one, I know that they enact the will of the Old Ones in exchange for power."

Shalahora pressed his fingers together before swiping his hand across himself like a blade, "You should cease thoughts of power when contemplating the Old Ones. Power without direction is pandemonium. It's destruction. It's carnage. If anything, the Old Ones offer only a sacrifice; give them your ego, and they will give you the ability to influence. They then wield your body and soul like a puppet."

Shalahora oozed his words with disgust, "The strings will seem like circumstance and luck, but they are not. It is the musing of that which we don't understand."

I looked up, "Ah, so it's like exchanging your brain for muscle. You're stronger, but you lose any capacity to use your strength for what you want."

Shalahora leaned back, "That would simply kill you."

I rolled my hand in a circle, "You get my point, though."

Shalahora raised a hand, "I'll assume you understand the nuance of what I've said then. That's what avatars are - degenerated husks filled with the intention of their makers. Valgus holds one within himself, which is why he acts as he does. It's poisoned him from the inside out, yet within the shell likely lurks something far worse than Uuriyah's current form."

I crossed my arms, "Well...That's comforting. I suspected as much, though."

Shalahora waved into the room's shadows, speaking from all directions, "This reality isn't meant to comfort; it is a dive into a cold, dark sea that peers through you. That's what an Old One is and does. Never trust one. Never confide in one in either."

I grimaced, "Or talk with someone who's been tainted by one?"

"Yes...That would be the most enviable position to stay in, but you're not in such an enviable place." His voice heightened, "Are you?"

I considered my prospects, and Shalahora wasn't wrong. At the moment, many people knew about my cities, what was happening here, and the intricacies of Leviathan-7. Even if I eliminated Elysium's agents, they'd simply interrogate one of the surviving rulers to glean the information. Elysium could leak that information further, and other factions I didn't know would begin hunting me.

I stared at a wall facing where the rulers waited for us outside. I could kill them all, but that wasn't how I wanted to handle this. I'd much rather return from here with lots of allies so that I could rapidly expand my empire and get Earth on the right track. Allies,



trade, and technology were part of the answers to Earth's current predicament, and when I left here, I could fix all of that and then some.

But these people knew about my cities, so in time, Elysium would send every available resource at their disposal to reach Leviathan-7. Considering their methods, I didn't want to be their primary target, yet I would be. It was guaranteed, but Shalahora was a convenient solution that gave me a way out.

Well, probably.

I pursed my lips, "And what exactly would you do about my current situation?"

Shalahora oozed out of the wall's shadows, "I can splinter the memories of those present here. I can manipulate them entirely, leaving behind what you'd wish to keep. Elysium would be curious about what happened here, but they'd have no means of uncovering what happened."

I blinked, "You want me to promise to kill some otherworldly being in exchange for some memory manipulation? Seriously?"

Shalahora hissed, "Of course not. That would merely be the beginning of what I offer, an introductory gesture. I will be under M's thumb after this, but I can accomplish my duties and use my spare time to assist you however you need it. You know of my talents, and while my combat prowess isn't peerless, my psionic abilities are quite different."

He wasn't wrong about that part. Shalahora raised his giant palms, "I would keep your home planet safe and contain any spreading knowledge regarding it. Rumors would be under your command. Interrogations would be absolute and timely. I could even create a dystopia if need be, one where your citizens live one life yet remember another. Absolute production with absolute elation."

I raised a palm, "Woah now, I don't want to go that far." I grabbed my chin, "But it's a tempting offer for the other stuff. You'd be like a general of mine then?"

Shalahora's eyes widened, "I imagined something more akin to indentured servitude or slavery, but if you gave me such a complimentary title, I would take it."

I leaned back, "Hmmm, isn't your fate tied to your species? Something like that, anyway?"

Shalahora peered off, "In a sense, yes."

I raised a hand, "So by saving you, I'd be saving them too. Shouldn't they be included in this arrangement?"

Shalahora's eyes narrowed to slits, "You wish to enslave my entire race?"

I glared at him before standing tall with pride,

"Enslaved? No. You have an understanding of my base memories and my true character anyways. You know exactly how I treat species that end up under my wing. Look at the gialgathans or the Eltari if you're not convinced...Hell, even the Vagni are far better off, and the skeptiles will be as well."

I leaned towards Shalahora, a few inches from his face, "I do right by anyone under me. I've made sure of that."

A tense silence passed before Shalahora sighed. He murmured, "You're not incorrect."

I let the quiet sink in before I leaned back, "Alright. As long as we're on the same page-" I peered up, "Speaking of which, I do have a lot of races under my wing now. Anyways, I give them all a fair shake."

Shalahora murmured, "To bet with my life is one thing, but to bet with my species is another. Surely you can understand that?"

I tilted my head at him, "What? Come on now. This is ten thousand years in the future, and besides that, I'm doing the same thing. I'm Earth's best chance at making it out of the slave cycle Schema made commonplace. Er, probably at least."

I peered off, "I could drag Elysium to earth and have us all turned into drones. Hm, I'd rather not think about that, honestly."

Shalahora oozed back into existence, "It's true that our threads of fate affect more than just us. They affect anyone who our threads touch. We happen to be in positions of power, allowing us to weave the fates of many. It is our blessing."

I frowned, "Or curse. Depends on your perspective, really."

Shalahora sighed before speaking like a taught wire, "Hah...Then we may include my kind in this arrangement."

I smiled, "Awesome."

Shalahora lifted his shadowy arms, "Do you even agree to it now?"

I tapped my side, thrumming my fingers like a wave, "It's tempting, that's for sure. That being said, we'll have to nail down some specifics."

Shalahora expanded, "Such as?"

I raised my brow, "Well, what exactly does being an avatar entail?"

"It is simplicity incarnate. I enact the will of my patron, M, as you call it. It granted me many abilities over time, which revolve around my responsibilities. I happen to seed chaos, lies, and turmoil across the cosmos. By now, that's all I can think of myself, and I tire of my duties."

Shalahora spoke with a quiet fury, "In fact, I've exhausted my will to continue living, though I cannot choose death for many reasons, least of all how difficult I am to kill."

I pressed my temple with two fingertips, "So M has given you abilities that would let you do what they want you to do, right?"

"Yes. We should also abstain from using that alias anymore as well. It carries intent, and that entity will soon uncover the hidden meaning behind 'M'. We know which Old One we speak of at this moment regardless."

I nodded, "Ah, understood. Well, how much time would you have to help me even if you gave yourself over?"

Shalahora peered up, doing mental calculations, "Hm...I would be able to assist you around half of every second that passed on average. At times I would be gone for several months. I would then return for several months after that. I could have as much as 60% of my time as free if I am militant."

I weighed my hands back and forth, "Ok, so partial use. That's making that time limit seem pretty meh."

Shalahora glared at me, "How so?"

"It's concrete, for one thing, and I also have no idea how possible this really is. So, I think we make it more flexible. That way, it helps both of us."

Shalahora's words dripped skepticism, "Helping both of us? How so?"

"Well, we can set up the cipheric contract so that my time scale revolves around making this happen. If I ever stop working towards this Old One's demise, then our positions could swap right then and there. That could mean you'd be free in a year if I'm slacking off."

Shalahora peered off, "Hm, that would save me ten thousand years of servitude should it happen. How would this benefit you?"

I nodded, "So in exchange, we can extend the contract timeline to, like, 100,000 years."

Shalahora scoffed, "And that's an attractive proposition to me?"

I raised a finger, emulating Torix a bit, "But of course. You're making this deal with me for two reasons - firstly, I'm able to become an avatar. Secondly and most importantly, you also think I have a chance at stopping an Old One."

I turned my raised hand to him, "Therefore, this ensures my goodwill in the contract while dramatically enhancing my chances of success. What if the goal is accomplished in 12,000 years rather than 10,000? Wouldn't you prefer to wait that time to actually accomplish your goal of this Old One's demise?"

Shalahora blinked, "I...I suppose."

I interlocked my hands behind myself, "Just as well, compared to the infinity of being that Old One's servant, what's 90,000 years anyways? It will be a drop, but that drop would be an ocean to me."

Shalahora peered through me, "You sound like someone else."

I smiled, "It's a style of argumentation from an intelligent and wise person I know."

Shalahora dragged his hands down his face, "I'd never make a business deal with whoever they may be."

Missing Torix, my smile tightened, "Let's just say you're better off with a partnership when they're involved."

It would be nice to see everyone once this debacle was over. Shalahora raised a hand, "I'd be willing to double the allotted time limit considering what you've offered in exchange. However, adding ten times the additional time frame is greedy."

"So is asking me to become an Old One's avatar. It's like willingly injecting a virus, one where I'd steadily die over time. I'd cease being my own and become what they wanted of me. Considering every avatar has a long list of complaints, I'd rather not get involved. If it does happen, it will be forever too. That makes 100,000 years mean nothing by comparison."

Shalahora sighed, "I'll grant you 30,000 years. That's my final offer."

I considered as I spoke, "And that would include the species reliant on you right now, correct?"

Shalahora simmered, "If it must be so."

I smiled while reaching out a hand, "Then let's agree on that. I'll draft up the contract and have Obolis look at it."

Shalahora grabbed my hand, giving me a firm handshake in return. As we walked out, Shalahora murmured, "Negotiations aside, I'll wish you good luck with this endeavor you're undertaking."

Remembering my agreements with Plazia and Yawm, I scoffed, "I've already made some pretty big promises. At this point, I need to start taking risks so I can even have a chance to complete any of them, let alone all of them. Your stealth, reconnaissance, and psionic might will be a large part of my future goals. So is your species."

Shalahora murmured, "Do you even know who they might be?"

I leaned back, "Isn't it obvious? It's the shades."

Shalahora winced, his smooth, shadowy form wavering, "Ah...You've uncovered a bit of what occurred to us then."

I nodded, "And we'll see if we can't undo it eventually, though I'll need you all as you are right now for a while." I raised a finger, "Not infinity though, so it's an improvement, I'd say."

Shalahora oozed his words, "And I hope you succeed, else you shall take my place as a destroyer of minds and truths."

Dread swelled in my chest at that thought, but I shrugged it off,

"We'll see what happens."

Stepping back with the others, the rulers had already discussed everything while Shalahora and I formulated our agreement. I was glad I didn't have to talk them through everything, and Obolis saved me some more time by stepping up as their representative. I pointed a thumb at Shalahora, "He's in. Did you guys have anything you'd like to say before we root out any spies?"

Obolis raised his hands, "Yes, we discussed much. They're all well aware of our circumstances, from Elysium's plotting to our fates should this fail."

I glanced at the other rulers, their expressions grim. It was a refreshing change of pace, so I hoped they'd agree to what I was about to ask.

"Alright, cool. We need them to give us access to their memories along with letting Shalahora ensure their not spies."

Obolis blinked, "Would...Would that include even me?"

I spread my arms, "What? Of course. Hell, it could include me."

The rulers glanced at each other for a while, their moods changing instantly. I dragged my hands down my face before stepping over to the edge of my city. Someone needed to drive home the extent of our problems, and it looked like that responsibility fell on me.

I stomped a foot, lifting a pillar of marble from under me. Standing over everyone, I raised a hand for everyone's attention. They quieted, and I said, "You know what's out there now. At least some of it that is. Elysium's infiltrated this lottery and maybe the others that are occurring at this moment. That's why everything has fallen to pieces since this trainwreck started. They've ensured you all had no chance to die or survive here."

Murmuring broke out in the crowd Before I raised a fist. Quiet returned, and I boomed,

"Those primevals out there are strong enough to kill everyone here. Our enemies don't have tens of them or hundreds. They command thousands of them. They'll be turning this planet into a factory for their use, and that is merely the beginning. The war with

Elysium will spread outwards far wider than ever before, and you all will suffer the consequences of your detached outlook on it."

I tilted my head, "But we have a chance. Shalahora, Obolis, and I will do everything possible to eliminate Elysium's presence. Once that's taken care of, we must keep all our collected resources. Doing so ensures Your empires will remain your own, and we may actually get out of this situation unscathed."

I raised one finger, "That's reliant on your deference while in my cities. We'll be relying on extreme measures given the situation, though none of you will need to give your lives. In fact, this is likely your only chance at survival on this hell-forsaken planet. This is it. One last roll of the dice."

An aura of dismay settled over the survivors, who considered their options. Obolis stepped forward, his arms interlocked behind himself,

"I'm more than willing to cooperate. Whatever it is that needs doing, I shall strive to see it done."

I turned to Shalahora, and the shade nodded,

"As long as the contract is signed, I am willing."

I raised a brow to the other rulers present, "And you all?"

Alctua stepped up, her icy scales misting cold, "We'll do what we can to not be a burden here." She turned to the other rulers, "Unlike some other people here."

Teraz followed her, the fiery imp's footsteps leaving singe marks in his wake, "We don't have a choice, do we? It's this or death. Or something like it, at least."

The other rulers whispered, many unconvinced by my words. I waved a converted primeval into the city, and it ushered in a temperature change. The icy beast carried its primal might, void ice forming at its footsteps. It peered with six hexagonally distributed eyes over its flattened face, the alien creature looming over the rulers.



I pulled the ascendant psyche out of it while opening my dimensional storage. I left a wisp of consciousness within the monster, enough for it to function at a base level. From my pocket dimension, a flood of rainbow bone splashed over the monster. It swelled with energy, void ice pillaring up like basalt formations nearby. Its roar alone rippled the blue shield before the primeval erupted into an iridescent death bloom. The temperature shift ceased, and its might and will decayed in an instant.

I walked up before flicking one of the spines. It shattered upward, spiraling in the air before I caught it in my hand. I tapped the needle on the monster, "Anyone curious? It's still alive if you want to check. This is what Elysium is doing to all of you. Everyone that's missing has had this done to them."

I crossed my arms, "But that's not quite right." I coalesced origin mana in my palm, generating several panels of glass over the monster. I pointed at it, "There'd be a cipheric seal here to really keep you 'safe.' Me, personally? I'd rather be in more danger, but hey, it's your choice."

I crossed my arms, "I know what I'd do, though."

Reaching out a hand, I smashed the display in a gravity well before pulling three blue cores out of the mess. After heating the pulp into a moldable mass, I pulled it out of my city. A construction golem stepped over and cleaned the singe marks by scraping the stone and making new rock over the torn surface. The rulers gawked before I gave them a tight smile,

"So, who's with me?"

Chapter 360: Exposed

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"So, who's with me?"

Several rulers looked around in shock, while a few lost themselves in thought. Others peered around with their eyes wide and frantic, the nobles chewing their nails or grooming fur with spilling, nervous energy. One of them fell onto their knees, losing all of their composure. However, most stood tall, facing something uncertain.

Obolis led that group, and he turned a palm to me, "So what will we need to prevent our destruction, precisely?"

I put my hands on my hips, "We'll need you all to help me get as much information as possible about our current situation. Scouting, spying, all of that is essential right now, but the hardest part will be allowing your memories to be checked right now."

Obolis tilted his head at me, "That could easily be worse than death, and it will be done by that shadow no less. We've all seen what that monster did to Malos. Why should we trust that abomination now?"

I furrowed my brow, "You just told me you'd do whatever is required, and now you're immediately rescinding what you said."

A few rulers peered at Obolis before the Emperor snapped, "You still haven't given us a compelling reason for why we should trust Shalahora."

I deadpanned, "Because he's saved all of your lives multiple times at this point. Aside from that, you have no other alternatives. You will all die without my intervention, and this is a requirement to get my protection. Otherwise, you're on your own."

I pointed outside,

"And out there, no one will hear you scream."

In the distance, two primevals wrestled, the horizon molding to their battle as algae sheets ruptured. A solemn gloom crushed everyone, one I sympathized with. Obolis raised his brow, "And this perusing of our memories is necessary because of Elysium?"

A couple voices rippled through the crowd, and I nodded. I shook my head, "Yeah. It's a shame, but Elysium will pry your minds apart to figure out what happened here too. They're resourceful and relentless, as you've all seen and felt. To stop that, Shalahora will help us get our footing back so we can brainstorm solutions to that problem before we're sent back."

Obolis raised his brow, "Hm, perhaps a psionic shackling will do."

I narrowed my eyes, "Maybe so, but either way, they'll know I'm hiding something since you'll all return with locked memories. Still, that's one way to get some breathing room after returning to my home planet. I'm open to other ideas, however."

Rulers in the crowd murmured,

"Elysium? Weren't they locked in a war with Schema? They're still putting their claws into events like this."

"They infiltrated the lottery...And to what extent?"

"That's why everything is going to hell. They undermined us."

Obolis bristled with discomfort before he steepled his fingers, "I'm not attempting to weasel my way out of this current predicament, but is there any way to avoid having our memories seen?"

I peered up, "Huh, alright, how about this - if you can stop Shalahora from infiltrating your mind, you won't need your mind checked. That guarantees Elysium hasn't infiltrated your psyche anyway."

Obolis turned to Shalahora, and the shadowy Sovereign menaced, "Your confidence wanes, doesn't it?"

Obolis blinked, "Hm, then may you at least oversee the memory checking at the very least?"

I leaned back, "Of course. I will try to make this as unintrusive as possible, but it must be done. We're getting the spies out of this camp. End of story."

From a blot of oozing darkness, Shalahora murmured, "Know this - Elysium will simply unlock the shackles I wrap around your minds. While I have no experience facing them, they've controlled powerful entities like Lehesion or Valgus. That is proof that their psionic abilities are impressive."

Shalahora shrugged, "As individuals, they likely couldn't match me. However, they are more than a single entity. As an organization, they carry iron-clad goals with a difficult-to-dispel resolution. This makes them overwhelming in many cases. If you wish for greater safety, I could disintegrate the memories of this place and its workings altogether."

A fearful ruler asked, "Will there be any permanent damage from something that? It sounds dangerous."

Shalahora's eyes widened, "Aside from the memories themselves, no. I am precise, so you will not lose any more than what is necessary to lose. It will take time, however. Rooting out the spies would simply require perusing your short-term memories that are relatively surface level."

I pointed at Shalahora, "Can you handle their questions and probe for spies? I need to draft up the cipheric contract for us."

Shalahora nodded, "Let it be done."

With the rulers chattering behind me, I headed out. Two buildings away, I found a quiet room to begin writing in the cipher. It was an emptied home like all the places here, though the second story remained above ground level. I formed a marble chair on that floor, pulled out my grimoire, and began etching in its silver pages.

The chair couldn't hold me up, so it was mostly for show and ambiance. I digress.

A few minutes passed before someone skulked in. It was Obolis, the Emperor peering around at my workspace. He kept his distance from me, the heat from my etching enough to ignite his fur. The albony ruler scoffed at my carving, "It would seem you weren't joking about signing that shadow's contract."

I nodded while continuing to write. Obolis interlocked his hands behind himself before stepping back and forth at the side of the room, "So tell me...Why have you decided to accept such an absurd offer from Shalahora, assuming the contractual obligations haven't changed from what we heard earlier."

"Why do you want to know?"

Obolis shrugged, "Let's call it curiosity."

I considered not answering before deciding to tell a half-truth.

"Well, it's because I intend to take out every Old One, not just the one he wants me to eliminate. Therefore, it makes no difference in the long run. The time limit is very forgiving as well."

Obolis shook his head, "Aside from the fact that such a feat is impossible, you're tying your potential down with a cipheric contract. Those are immutable once formed. You understand that, don't you?"

"Of course."

Obolis turned a hand to me, his voice rising, "So then you'd put your sovereignty on the line for the allyship of an esoteric shadow? I've always considered you an intelligent arriviste, someone with unbridled potential that had yet to manifest. However, you're shackling yourself to an impossible ideal and for nothing. It's foolish, and in time, this will be the anchor that ceases your upward trajectory."

I sat in silence for a moment. Obolis interrupted my train of thought, "Well, nothing to say for yourself?"

I raised a finger, "You have something against Shalahora...What is it?"

Obolis grimaced, "I've been at war with psionics. They have destroyed my species' prosperity. They've committed genocide against my people. They want to turn us into a sack of blood for their leech mouths to suckle from, so my distrust of another psionic like Shalahora is merely my method of displaying wisdom and caution."

I sighed, "If I'm honest, I don't like psionic-based warfare either. That being said, I have to fight fire with fire here. Otherwise, I'll be burned to a crisp with nothing to show for it, and this contract guarantees I'll get the full use of Shalahora in the meantime. And he's the most powerful psionic I've ever seen, so it seems like a worthwhile risk."

Obolis considered my words for a moment, mulling over them like someone tasting a fine wine, "I'll admit he would be a powerful ally, and a cipheric contract guarantees your satisfaction in that regard. However, that neglects to consider the sheer folly of what you're trying to do - killing an Old One is inconceivable."

A while passed before I turned to him, "What's your reasoning?"

Obolis shook his head, irritation spreading over his face, "You've just entered a pool, yet you're trying to speak of its depth. Listen, Daniel, you have no perspective, so you have no idea what you're trying to do here."

I raised my brow, "Why do you even care?"

Obolis sighed, "You've assisted me on several occasions. That, and I don't want to watch someone with so much potential throw it away for nothing."

I pinched the bridge of my nose, "Ok, let's level then. Do you think the Old Ones will be our enemies in the future?"

"They are our enemies now. However, this does not mean that we can kill them. It's like trying to kill gravity or time. You can work around those constructs, but attempting to kill them simply showcases a lack of understanding of what they are. The Old Ones are the same."

I tapped the edge of my chair, "Alright, fair enough. Let me present another argument from a different angle. What do you think our chances of survival are over the next 100 years?"

"Assuming we survive this lottery, we will live out 100 years easily."

"What about a 1,000?"

Obolis peered up, "Hm...The chance of that is likely in the double digits for us both."

"What about 30,000 years?"

Obolis scoffed, "I'd liken that question to fanciful thinking. It's simply too far into the future."

I spread out my hands, "That's how long my contract term is, so what am I trading with Shalahora? It's nothing that important."

Obolis's eyes narrowed, "You know what you're giving away here, and you know better than anyone whether you'll succeed over that length of time. Considering that you're entertaining my inquiries means you like your odds."

I tapped the edge of my seat, "My problem is that everyone I know, love, and value will be gone by then. The only person with a fighting chance to make it that far would be Torix, but that's about it. Everyone else I could hold onto will be gone, and everything will fade, including the future of my species and others I harbor."

My words splashed over us both like icy water,

"Time will erode everything I want to keep until nothing is left."

Obolis furrowed his brow, "You honestly have no hope for your future?"

I shook my head, "Long-term, no."

Obolis peered off, "That...That is saddening to hear. Given your age and circumstances, you shouldn't believe that way. You are far too young to already be living life like that."

"I know. That's why I'm making this deal."

Obolis considered what I said before his eyes widened, "Ah...So this isn't selling your soul. This is your attempt at keeping it since you know it will be lost eventually."

"That's right. I know I have many enemies, but I can wrestle them all down with some time and help. In this case, Shalahora will fill in the need for psionic abilities and

stealth, neither of which I enjoy or am good at. This gives me time to focus on ways to develop my skills, which I'm sure you can relate to."

Obolis tilted his head, "Certainly. Delegation is a necessary skill for a ruler. Still, trusting Shalahora seems foolish to me. He could be an agent from an Old One that's steadily trying to pry its way into your life. Aside from that, touching or feeling an Old One hasn't been done. Few even know more than their names, let alone how they could die. Tell me, do you have any answers to those obvious realities?"

I crossed my arms, "My problem with those questions is how they're framed in the first place. They assume that the Old Ones are forces of nature beyond our understanding. Even if they are, let's compare them to lightning and thunder."

I turned a hand to him, "For one, my species assumed that gods created storms, but now we know that isn't the case. Hell, with enough people, we could make storms now. I'm willing to bet the Old Ones are like that; they're mysteries we haven't solved yet."

Obolis tilted his head, "Hm, there was a time when my species considered that to be the case, but that truth doesn't defy any of my points. Let's not forget you're betting your life on this."

I shrugged, "My main claim is that what our ancestors did with lightning, I can do with the Old Ones. We assume they are all powerful, but if you ask me, I think the Old Ones are lying. They use their abilities and distance to lie to us about their limitations."

Obolis blinked, "It still sounds as if you're taking a bet with your life on the line and over an enormous assumption. It seems...Dubious at best but foolish at worst. I expected more from you."

I turned back to my dimensional fabric, "And I thought more of you too, but over time, I learned that you have many limitations. For instance, do you think you could defeat me in combat right now?"

Obolis rolled his eyes, "Does it matter?"

"It does for proving my point. When we first met, I assumed you'd slaughter me before I uncovered more about you. Now I know I could give you a run for your money if we fought."



Obolis sneered, "Perhaps, but how does that defy what I've stated?"

"Because I've seen that same pattern over and over again."

Obolis answered by gawking at me like I was stupid. I kept etching as I talked, "When I first met Yawm of Flesh, he seemed beyond my comprehension. His powers were utterly absurd. He had developed a philosophy and charisma I couldn't compare to. He even threw away everything he worked for on a whim. The guy was so sure of himself that he did something like that without a second thought."

Obolis furrowed his brow in confusion, so I answered his unspoken question, "Yawm had a developed organization, but he killed them after they failed him several times. When we met, he was an individual. Anyways-"

I stopped etching, "That was all a facade. Yawm was a broken warrior who followed a twisted ideology. He'd been chewed up and spit out by Etorhma, and I was tasked with handling that abomination's leftovers. I wouldn't have been able to do something like that if Yawm was in full glory, but he wasn't even a shade of his former self."

Obolis spread his hands, "So because of one enemy's false pretense, you believe all enemies are hollow? He was an exception, and exceptions simply serve to prove the rule."

I continued welding into the page, "That'd be the case if I didn't have other examples. Here's another one; Lehesion seemed like some emboldened, invincible god with an absurd lifespan and unknown knowledge. Everyone spoke about him as a legend, and they revered him."

I raised a hand, "When I met Lehesion, he was a god but a shattered one, like a beautiful vase plastered back together poorly. He looked whole, but the cracks in his persona began to show when he was tasked to handle anything. He'd start to leak out from all of his imperfections."

I turned to Obolis, "In reality, Lehesion was running from all the mistakes he made in his reincarnated life, which has been far worse than his original one. Why? Because he couldn't make any excuses anymore. Even with everything handed to him, he found a

way to fumble it all, so his failings were his own. Instead of taking responsibility, he escaped by letting Elysium destroy his ego."

Obolis rolled his hands, "So let us assume your point is true. What evidence do you have that the Old Ones are comparable to sentients like us? From what I've gathered, they exist without limits outside of the self-imposed ones they've decided to take upon themselves."

I shook my head, "I've spoken with four of the Old Ones, and all four of them wanted my help. There's a reason the Old Ones are always asking for avatars, and I'll figure out why."

Obolis raised his brow, "And that's supposed to guarantee that you can eradicate them? Isn't that a colossal leap in logic?"

I peered at my contract, "It's not as much of one as you'd think. I mean, I'm a simple sentient like anyone else. Despite that, all of the Old Ones are knocking at my door. Even with all of my limitations and weaknesses, they all need me. Baldowah said it was because I was immortal, but I don't think he's giving me the full picture. None of them are."

I heated the silver page before tracing into the steel with heated, telekinetic contact points, "They're all lying while asking for my help as if I were an item at some auction house. Doesn't that say something about them?"

"It could, but that's not a guarantee. You can't base your life on some arbitrary assumptions."

I turned to Obolis from my work, "What are you even talking about? Everyone does that every day. We assume we'll continue living past our next few moments. We assume we'll have food every day. What I'm doing is no different."

Obolis considered for a moment before he turned a palm to me, "There is a difference in magnitudes between those assumptions. Your mundane examples have been proven time and time again. One does not assume they'll receive food every day until they've managed to secure it for some time."

Obolis shrugged, "Your assumption about the Old Ones is a hunch based on other hunches. Your example is a false equivalency because it ignores scale and context."

I blinked, Obolis's answer making a lot of sense. Still, something about his replies rubbed me the wrong way. It wasn't like him to dig this deeply into someone else's business unless he had something to gain. I got this sneaking suspicion that he was trying to manipulate me, and I intended to stamp it out before he succeeded.

I met Obolis's eye, "At the end of the day, I've made big promises to a lot of people. I promised Yawm I'd change Schema. I promised someone else I'd save the eldritch. Now I'm promising Shalahora I'll kill an Old One. Every one of those goals seems impossible, but I've learned that isn't true."

I raised my brow, "Half of the hardships involved with doing something is convincing yourself that it's possible. Think of all the time spent on worry and hesitation. That's a lot of what makes life a challenge. If you eliminate doubt, you're removing a lead cloak from your shoulders."

I peered at my palm, "I know I have an opportunity because I've been lucky in many ways. I'm aiming to take full advantage of it, but I need help to make that happen. Shalahora is a means to that end."

Obolis gave me a slow nod, "Hmm, are you certain this isn't an idea planted by the Old Ones you're looking down on? Even if it stretches into tens of thousands of years, this contract will still be a blink of an eye to them."

I shrugged, "In that case, I'm abusing their sense of time, so regardless of what they think, I'm getting a good deal." I frowned, "After all, the Old Ones look down on all of us. That's a weakness that's easy to take advantage of."

Sensing he couldn't change my mind, the Emperor walked to a window, "Hm...Then we shall see the results of your decision in time. It will either be bold or be a blunder. I also hope that Shalahora doesn't come to disappoint you. I say so as I've been rather discontented with these supposed 'rulers' for quite some time."

Glad for the change in topic, I blinked, "Ah...You expected more from them too?"

"Of course. They're incompetent considering the sheer amount of resources they were given."

While turning back to my unfinished contract, I murmured, "Yeah, I couldn't believe how ineffective they are, but being fed that psionic fluid hasn't put them in the best position for mental clarity."

Obolis's face wrinkled, "Indeed...It would appear they were crippled from the onset. I'm certain Shalahora shall unmask whoever has committed that crime, in particular. None of us can stand against his psionic might after all."

"Yup."

A moment passed before Obolis coughed into his hand, "Ahem, that is to say, I have a bit of a confession to make."

I turned to him, my eyes sharp as razors, "Oh man, don't tell me you're working with Elysium? You know what that means, right?"

Energy charged around me, the air turning thick like a liquid. Obolis raised his palms, "Steady there. I would never ally with those mongrels. Elysium is destroying my Empire as we speak, so there's no means of reconciliation with them. Rather, I'm making a confession regarding my place in this lottery."

The energy dispersed from around me, "Ah, alright...Then let's hear whatever it is."

Obolis took a breath before saying, "Hm. How to say this...I was contacted by Schema well before this lottery began. It was meant to be a cleansing of galactic corruption, so to speak."

I put my hands on my metal panel, "Ok, so Schema does that by killing everyone? Seems a bit much to me, but what do I know?"

Obolis raised a finger, "I disagree. This exercise was meant to expose the gluttony of the current nobles that rule over the masses. That's precisely why the current crop of rulers here has been so disappointing - they are byproducts of a cushioned life. One given to them, not earned by their own efforts."

I didn't know much about the heart of Schema's society since I'd only experienced worlds on the outskirts of Schema-owned space. Well, aside from Obolis's planets. Curious about that central core for Schema, I finished a page before turning to Obolis, "So you're telling me that every single one of these rulers inherited what they have?"

Obolis furrowed his brow, "Not all, but most. These are not the founders of their territories because a ruler merely needs to own a large set of territories. How they obtained those territories is irrelevant. Even I have well over fifty family members that classify as rulers, yet most of them hardly live up to a ruling title's implications."

Bitterness leaked into his voice. Obolis turned a hand, "These rulers here are the same. They are beneficiaries of great sentients and grew fat on that unearned privilege. So much so that they mistook their birthright for an earned advantage. It led to a mental delusion where they believed themselves better."

Obolis bristled at his words, "Until now, where the difference between the spoiled and the spoilers has become clear."

That subject sounded personal. Peering down at my contract, I wondered if I'd deal with the same issues with my guild or family. Hell, could I even have children in the first place? Obolis interrupted my thoughts as he grabbed one of his gauntleted wrists,

"Though...At times, I do worry about several of my kin. Helios or Victoria? They shall be fine. Florence? Edward? Many of my own will struggle, and that is...Unfortunate. Very unfortunate."

I wondered if anyone in my faction carried the requirements for the lottery, but I doubted it. Dismissing that worry, I kept focused on the cipheric contract while saying,

"You won't have to worry about Florence. That guy knows when to get the hell out of a dangerous situation." I etched some more while raising my brows, "But it does seem weird that Schema's killing everyone instead of just taking what they all have. Dead workers are unproductive workers."

Obolis shrugged, "Schema isn't allowed to seize property unless it's obtained through inheritance. The exchange is where Schema is allowed to force deference to his wishes,

similar to taxation. The lottery can also be contrived as a challenge, so there aren't many restrictions for Schema in decimating we weaklings."

I leaned on my desk, "Huh, inheritances...I guess that's another reason for Schema to dislike immortals. He can't get whatever they own, at least not easily. Anyways, is this the confession? Because it's not exactly the end of the world."

Obolis rolled a hand, "I wish that were the case. You see-"

I flatlined, "Obolis. I don't have time for your theatrics. Out with it."

Obolis bit his tongue before turning a hand to me, "I was offered a quest by Schema to undermine the rulers in exchange for a portion of their resources."

I finished the cipheric markings, and a couple of other minds drafted up different versions of the finished manuscript. A moment passed, and I edited out my simplest mistakes. Other psyches dwelled on what Obolis said, and the Emperor waited until I finished my task. Once handled, I closed my grimoire before picking it up and charging the pages.

I tilted my head at Obolis, "Ok...So you've been hired by Schema to kill the rulers here?"

Obolis fidgeted, "Essentially, yes."

With my free hand, I dragged my fingers down my face. I gazed at Obolis like a disappointed friend, "You were desperate to save your empire, huh?"

Obolis couldn't meet my eye, "There seemed to be no other way, and this opportunity was too much to ignore. In hindsight, I know that greed defied my inner sense of reason. It was foolish of me to accept the task, but what's done is done."

I bent my head sideways, "And now you don't want Shalahora or me to expose what you've been doing to the other rulers? Is that it?"

Obolis raised his hands, "That...That is the heart of this issue."

I peered down at Obolis, "So what have you done to the rulers so far?"

Obolis took a breath before lowering his hands, "It's more so a case of what I haven't done...Yet, that is. I have access to far more resources than many of these rulers, but I've generally kept that to myself. I've also ensured these members couldn't properly manage their information systems."

My grimoire hummed with mana as I nodded, "Ah, so that's why you wanted to take the rulers off of life support when I first arrived. You wanted a slice of what they had for yourself."

Energy coalesced over the closed pages, crystallizing and melting like cruor disintegrating back to blood. Obolis frowned at the glowing mass, "To some extent, I wanted what they owned. However, by the time that situation had come to pass, I realized the gravity of our situation. Schema needed no help culling these people, and I would soon struggle to survive once I was one of the few left alive."

I shook my head, "Damn...Well, that's not so bad that I need to cut you off or expose you. At least you didn't help Elysium. If you had, I'd probably be forced to kill you."

Obolis's eyes narrowed, "Thinly veiled threats, hmm? I thought we were above that."

I raised a brow, "Thinly veiled? What? And anyway, wouldn't you try to kill me if I colluded with Elysium to destroy your Empire?"

Obolis's face contorted at the idea. I stepped over and put a hand on his shoulder, "Exactly." I lowered my hand, "I have to head out."

Obolis murmured, "Then so be it...But before that, when did you learn to use the cipher so well that you can draft contracts now? I watched the entire time, and it seemed spotless after the edits."

Obolis didn't know I dilated time while I sat there, and a dozen different Daniels argued, conceded, and championed the document until it was perfect. It would've taken hours without those strategies, but Obolis had no idea. From his perspective, I breezed through the process like an experienced contractor.

I had no intention of shattering that illusion as I'd seen how effective those facades could be. I shrugged, "Eh, I found the time to practice since the lottery started."

Obolis's left eye twitched before he winced, "This entire event has been nothing short of a farce. I'll never know how Schema expected us to manage these circumstances with such limited information."

My grimoire finished charging, a pulse radiating through the room. Obolis coughed into a hand, "Ahem...It would seem it's time for you to go to your shadowy friend. I hope you'll keep what we've discussed in mind."

As I left, I tapped the room's outer wall with my fist, "Depending on what you've done, I'll consider not telling anyone anything. That's a big if, but we'll see. We'll discuss your repayment after I uncover what you've done."

Having a chance to survive, Obolis breathed out a sigh of relief. I gazed up at the swirling shield of blue mana above while murmuring, "Oh yeah, I don't think this lottery was an attempt by Schema to purge the corruption of the elites or to take resources from everyone either."

Obolis raised his brow, "Then what could possibly be the purpose of the lottery?"

I gazed at Leviathan, "I believe this was Schema's punishment for the rulers who abandoned him. This chaos is his roar, and the dead are the victims of his wrath. I think the next time he calls for help, there will be more who listen."

Obolis seethed, "If that is so, then Schema has simply fed Elysium more rebelling planets."

We agreed on that, and that thought swirled in my mind while I passed through the alleyways leading to the other rulers. Streaks of light beamed between openings of the algae above, giving glimpses of Leviathan. Torches of mana lit the roadways like lanterns, and those blazes waved toward me as I walked.

The reinforced marble helped open the space up, as did the tracing lines of glowing rainbow bone used to embellish the buildings. Those adornments prevented anyone



from feeling suffocated while living here. At least, I hoped that would be the case while I walked up to the other survivors.

Finding them facing Shalahora, the shadowed Sovereign sat near the city's center, engaging many of those present with telepathic conversations. I waited for him to finish, and after a few minutes, the writhing miasma opened its blue eyes. He turned towards me, "Is that the contract? There's nothing written on it."

I pulled the glowing letters from my grimoire, "Yet. One sec."

From the charged grimoire, glowing letters of the cipher floated upward. They landed on the panels of my dimensional fabric, which hovered around me. After the runes singed into the metal, I tossed the sheets to Shalahora before I crossed my arms,

"Any updates on the spies, or did everyone wait until I could oversee the memory checks?"

Shalahora's shades snatched the panels out of the air while he glanced at the cipheric markings. After a few moments, he murmured, "There are several spies within our camp whom I've captured already. They lacked psionic abilities, so even a quick mental glance was enough to uncover them."

"Who were they?"

Shalahora peered up from the metal documents, "The perpetrators are several of the food managers and those responsible for managing the life support systems in the lower levels of the survivor's base."

"Huh...I expected Iona to be in on it."

Shalahora shrugged with his shadowed shoulders, "I did as well, but there are no signs of such. Her mind shows no signs of tampering or manipulation, and her short-term recall of what occurred aligns with her stance with Schema. If anything, she seems to feel betrayed by the AI."

I thinned my gaze, "Yeah, that's something I can understand. Still, she's been suspicious since the start, so we might need to dig deeper into her memories if Iona continues being suspicious. Anyways, where are the spies?"

Shalahora pointed at another building near the city's center. I walked in with the shadow at my side, and on the wall, five different rulers wrestled against liquid darkness. As I stepped in, they all were other species and colors, none of them being races I knew.

However, each of their gazes carried familiar emotions. A bubbling mass of fear, acceptance, and hate spread over them as they glowered at me, but that was all they could convey with their bodies submerged in gloomy blots. I pointed at them while talking to Shalahora, "You can go ahead and get what we need from them if you'd like. Either that or you can sign the contract first."

Shalahora peered through the details of the cipheric document before he tilted his head at me, "Are you certain of this?"

I nodded, "Yeah. It doesn't change much anyways since my goals are already set. This gives me another ally to get what I need."

The shadow reread the contract once more before condensing a finger. It flared with umbral fire, siphoning and sucking the light from nearby. He etched into the dimensional fabric with difficulty, his signature leaving a trail of dark flames. Taking the contract from him, I channeled mana into it.

While I charged the energy, Shalahora peered at each spy for a time. With each passing second of the shadow's stare, the spies writhed and squirmed like worms over a fire. Their vessels swelled under their skin while blood dripped from their noses, eyes, and ears. After a few hours, their eyes glazed over, each of them given the mercy of comatose.

By the time Shalahora finished, every alien had fallen unconscious from the mental probing. I grimaced, "That looked...Painful."

Shalahora peered away, "It was painful, certainly, but they experienced far more as they relived their lives. They lived through agony, joy, love, and rejection in the passing moments. I merely extracted what they relived in its diluted form. The speed of the process is what afflicted them, not my technique itself."

Shalahora didn't give any signs of lying, but while I gazed at the aliens, everything pointed to the contrary. Blood pooled under the aliens like someone spilled a dozen paint cans under them, each bucket carrying a different color. They slushed into the hard floor, their pulped bodies mixing ever so slightly.

Shalahora found his reflection in that smoothed, mirroring pool, "They know little or nothing aside from their own circumstances. They signed cipheric contracts to help bring their families or clans out of servitude in exchange for ruining the survivor faction. I understand their plight, though it has ruined any chance of their survival here."

"What'd they do?"

"They've caused many of the mechanical issues the Survivors struggled with. The psionic fluid was a desperate last move to stifle your remodeling from recovering the Survivor's position. To these spies, the faction was like a tree. Since they could no longer tear the branches, they chose to poison the roots."

I gazed at the aliens with distaste while considering my options. I understood why they did what they did, but keeping them here would only endanger our situation. We also gained as much info as possible, so I raised a hand, ready to blend their heads with gravitational vortexes.

Before doing so, the contract in my hand finished siphoning energy. It plumed outward with a reality-warping surge. As it crossed over us, Shalahora's eyes disappeared for a moment. When they reopened, he turned to me with a different look. He bowed, "It is done."

I shook off an odd sensation as if my blood boiled without pain,

"Er, good."

A laugh echoed in the distance, but I ignored it. Pulling myself back to the moment, I inspected the spies once more. Figuring I could get more out of them than simple executions, I ripped them from the walls and floated them out of the room. Around the corner, the other rulers gathered near the city's center. I hovered myself up and over everyone before shouting,

"Everyone, we've inspected those present and found these were the members poisoning you all. They crippled your attempts at recovery by ruining several of your life support systems."

The rulers whispered before one of the braver ones shouted, "Where's the proof?"

Shalahora materialized beside me, and he reached up a hand. As he had when we first introduced ourselves, Shalahora telepathically linked to everyone present. Using that connection, Shalahora dispersed the spies' memories over us like spilling someone's life story out of a cup. Shalahora contained this flow, pinpointed several specific events, and locked away the other parts of their minds.

I blinked, overwrought by the flow of information. That sensation settled, and I analyzed the memories within. Though they lacked clarity, the recallings carried a different volume than other information mediums. While a movie, book, or story compelled emotion through techniques and hard work, these memories were infused with a feeling regardless of the circumstance.

What they lacked in resolution, they more than compensated with their emotional weight. In that sea of feeling, the most damning evidence arrived with the affirmation in the worker's minds. They understood what they'd done and resolved to do, and they couldn't forget that fact. I glared at everyone here, "As you can tell, Shalahora can pry out any secrets you've kept. In this case, if you work with Elysium, you will die."

I squeezed my hand, and all five spies pulped into different colored mush balls. The memory field spread over us blipped out of existence like letting go of a warm hug. Pulling all of the aliens' remains into a singular ball, I flung the corpse slush out of my city for the primevals to fight over. Accustomed to the brutality, I raised my brow at the other survivors who struggled with the display. Before they complained, I waved a hand, "You can all choose a room. There's plenty of space in this city and the others nearby."

The icy Alctua raised her voice, her scales sheening under Leviathan's light, "You have more than one city here?"

I nodded, "I have many."

My golems marched around the perimeter, fixing anything out of order or patrolling the grounds. Primevals flew in the distance, their howls ominous. They lacked the lethal edge of the converted primevals who devoured the blended bodies just outside. The rulers watched their hidden enemies get torn apart, any sense of relief washed away by fear.

I gazed at them with hard eyes. Before panic overtook them, I spread the Rise of Eden washed over them. The dimensional wake gave them an enormous boost to their stats, emboldening and strengthening them. They stood taller while I raised a hand to them,

"Since coming here, you all have struggled. The reason is simple - you were taken advantage of by forces outside your control. Schema and Elysium both had their way with you all. It was as if he tied you to a stake in the sun and watched crows peck at your eyes until you were blind."

I squeezed my hand into a fist, "That stops now. You'll be taken from the sun to the shade, and your eyes will be restored so you can all see. Until now, you lived on a killing floor. Now you thrive on a training ground. You will be given every means of enhancing and augmenting your abilities. I'll grant each and every one of you the supplies necessary for what needs to be done."

I raised a finger, "My resources arrive with expectation - I will hold you responsible for walking away from this hellhole better than you walked in."

Fear turned into the beginning of hope as I shouted, "No more turning back. No more shouting that this is unfair or undeserved. This is real, and we will face it head-on as the rulers of our worlds. Your nights have passed and now is the beginning of your dawns."

I shouted in defiance, "If they want a war, then they'll have one."

Rulers shouted, most of the lesser rulers elated at a chance to survive. A few of the diplomats from higher organizations peered at each other nervously. Ignoring them, I turned and raised a hand, twenty of my golems falling in line.

I turned a palm to them, "These constructs will assist you all in your development, whether that be constructing more infrastructure or helping rulers learn to wage war."

I raised my brow to Shalahora and telepathically said, "Is it possible to leave a shade with each of the rulers so we can keep tabs on them?"

Shalahora nodded, "Of course, Harbinger."

I peered at the rulers, "Well then, it looks like we have a planet to escape from, don't we?"