

## New World 361

### Chapter 361: Out With Weakness

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?"

I cracked my neck before pointing toward the city's center, "The first thing we need to do is get your vitals cleaned up. We're removing the psionic fluid and anything else it left behind. Toxins, impurities, all of that sludge will be cleaned out by getting near the pillar over there."

The rulers eyeballed each other before a few mosied toward the city's central plaza. There, the monolith hummed with arcane energies, ten blue cores powering the structure and the buffs it instilled. After getting the crowd nearby, I sat cross-legged at the base of the column.

Before I began, Shalahora blotted out of the ground like a writhing ink stain. The shadow murmured, "Would you mind me if I offered assistance, Harbinger?"

His tone shifted after the contract formed, as if he switched bodies with someone else. I blinked, startled by the way he worded himself,

"Er, sure."

Shalahora condensed into a physical form before gesturing to the rulers but speaking to me, "Psionic fluid has pooled within them. Clearing it out will prevent them from rapidly metabolizing the substance, which would further damage their bodies. I can help them clear it out if you'd like."

I didn't even think of that.

"Absolutely. Please do."

Shalahora shimmered over, his body fragmenting into clouds of darkness that let beams of light through. Once in their general proximity, he telepathically linked to them all. He explained himself over the next few minutes before heading over to each ruler one at a time. Using his hand as a mental anchor, he pressed a fingertip to each ruler's forehead.

He pulled a portion of his mind into theirs through that contact point. With their minds compacted, Shalahora pulled out the remnants of the psionic fluid lingering in their bodies by drenching them in umbral energy. As I watched, I uncovered why they hadn't exploded from it as I had. The rulers absorbed the material over time while I metabolized it instantly like the primevals did. The spines still lingered within the rulers, and those pricking points created systemic pain that was difficult to alleviate. It even reduced cognition over time.

Shalahora soaked up whatever amount was left of the liquid, his mind expansive enough to do so without any issues. I could've done the same, but I would've killed several of them if I had tried doing something like that. I'd apply too much pressure on their minds and not contain the psionic liquid's reaction. By comparison, Shalahora handled the deft task with an experienced hand, like a surgeon at an operating table.

Still, he couldn't remove the physical shards already in their bodies. That was where my talents kicked in. Having distributed them, my enchanted rings and other gear expanded the ruler's regenerative abilities by leaps and bounds. The monolith at the city's center offered further augmentation, and the Rise of Eden was the cherry on top.

With all the amps running at full throttle, everyone regenerated their physical conditions rapidly. The built-up contaminants flowed from their skin, eyes, and, disgustingly, their orifices. Blegh. Several aliens stood up and vomited up rancid, black sludge while others handled the process in, er...Other ways.

Let's just say Shalahora stayed incorporeal while working with them.

After a while, shards of bone oozed out of the rulers' skins, some having more bits than others. The rulers grimaced in agony as the process took place, many wanting to stop.

However, having others pull through helped those who struggled like a hell week at a boot camp.

Several hours passed before the rulers pulled themselves out of their mental fog. People talked, joked around, and cleaned the area up. It helped that everyone was gross, so no one stood out in the filthy situation. After getting to a tolerable level of cleanliness, everyone beamed out with a euphoric kind of joy.

Having cleaned out their systems, many gazed at pounds of shards that had oozed out of their body. The worst offenders were the wizards and magicians; their bodies had been soaked with the potent poison. They all glared at the shining needles as my golems carried out the sharpened shards. We didn't want anyone bloodying their feet while walking, so I condensed it into a ball.

Trying to motivate them further, I created a marble pillar with a spherical indentation before setting the sharp ball onto the pedestal. After using heat to clean it, I gestured at the spiny ball, "This is out of you all. If any of you doubted your abilities before, move forward, knowing this held you back like a ball and chain."

Inspired, several rulers walked over to thank me. This set off a chain reaction where they all did so, a line queuing in front of me. I thanked them while memorizing their faces for later. In particular, the mages interested me since they had so little say up until now. Being a mana battery didn't leave them much room for being anything else.

With introductions handled and cleanout done, we began their basic cleanup. I gathered my constructor golems and let them know what adjustments I wanted to be made to the buildings. We'd have running water and warm runes imprinted into them, along with blankets, pillows, and other necessities. We'd give them other supplies as well, letting them get sanitized.

A shower stall would be added along with a grate to hold the runoff. The golems would pull the grate out and empty the water outside the city daily using the tunnel systems. The moment they threw it outside, it would explode with a plume of steam before igniting anything the rulers got off of themselves. It was simple, easy, and efficient.

Getting to work, the golems and I renovated the homes over the next hour. The rulers got nameplates for themselves, everyone choosing to stay in this city instead of moving to another one. That instinct to stick together kept them alive until now, and they believed it would do the same when heading into an uncertain future.

I hoped for that as well.

After handling the basic living situation, I sent out an announcement using the psionic web of the city. Everyone tuned in, and the rulers got to the central plaza once washed. Talking to everyone, I went over a training schedule for them. They'd devote several hours to psionic work daily so that no one was vulnerable to Elysium's agents.

Physical training followed since the rulers needed some kind of robustness, or they'd die from a light breeze. The last bit of training involved magic, and I doubted my ability to teach them much. While many would consider me a powerful sorcerer, my magical style was unique to me, so people wouldn't be able to learn it. The thought of interviewing everyone made me want to vomit, so I handed that task to my director golem.

With everything in place, the day's schedule began. There was no time like the present, after all. The psionic training involved my ascendant golems testing their minds, and those monstrous constructs relished in the opportunity. To my surprise, most rulers held up well, but the exhausted ones ended up resting near the city's monolith.

I paced up to them and raised a hand, "How's the training going?"

A haggard, older alien leaned over and huffed, "It's exhausting. I told the golem to hit me harder than you told it to. It laid into me like a fat man laying in a soft bed, and let's just say this bed creaked."

The group laughed, the older alien's elephantine, gray skin crinkling as he smiled at his own joke. It looked like comradery forming, so I smiled before checking out our surroundings. I put my hands on my hips,

"That's good. Let's hope we can continue this for a while before Valgus attacks us. We need time to prepare everyone for whatever they'll throw at us next."

A small, furry alien adjusted her glasses on her long nose, "Ah, if I may, what's causing such distress over the next confrontation? I can't imagine anything giving your golems problems, let alone yourself, considering you made them."

I frowned, "Valgus is blessed by Baldowah, so he's invincible. I can't remember if I mentioned it, but I couldn't even scratch the guy. If that guy's bed creaked, then mine was broken."

The rulers nodded to each other, an understanding forming between them. I tilted my head, "If you all knew that, then why ask what I'm worried about?"

The lady looked like a mongoose as she waved her clawed hands, "Oh, I figured you had a solution for that, as you've already had multiple encounters with him."

I frowned, "It was less having an encounter and more like surviving a beatdown."

The older alien smiled, his tusks giving him a brutish edge, "That's how those bastards win in all their fights. They use blessings that are immutable."

The mongoose alien cleared her throat before saying, "Ahem, blessings aren't the right word. They carry alternate rule systems to rig their fights in their favor."

Remembering my fights with Baldowah and Yawm, an overarching rule system summed them up pretty well. In Valgus's case, I played a game where his damage was turned off. It was simple yet absurd. Thinking of that, I turned a palm to the small, furry ruler,

"It was more like a set of physical laws that were different for Valgus than for me. He couldn't be broken, moved, or budged while I could."

The older alien laughed, his teeth like molars, "That's right. That's exactly right. The Old Ones change them so that their avatars can't lose. Each Old One tends to have a different way of doing it, but the result is always the same."

That reminded me of When I first met Yawm. He could control antimatter and atomic fusion, so his mana and destructive abilities defied convention. He had already lost his mind by the time I met him, but the absurd foundation still lingered like the ruins of a great city. Even after collapse, Yawm still sent chills up my spine from memory alone.

Those rule systems could also explain Shalahora's psionic abilities or Valgus's invulnerability. In Valgus's case, he harbored an avatar while Shalahora was one. Those abilities could be the source of Shalahora's immaterial form.

While I dwelled on that, another mind took over talking, so I cupped my chin and said, "Is there any way to beat those kinds of laws when they're protecting someone?"

The group peered at each other. The older alien scoffed, "Of course not. Otherwise, you'd have heard about it. That's why they can't be beaten and are better left avoided."

The mongoose chimed in, "Well, that's not necessarily the case. There are...Well, theories about how to handle it in mainstream scientific literature."

The older alien raised his brow, "And when have those 'theories' actually worked?"

She adjusted her glasses, "Not recently, unfortunately."

The alien let his hands flop against his sides, "My point exactly."

I raised my hands, "What are those methods?"

The mongoose coughed into her hand, "Well, I've read of three different kinds. The first is the most difficult and involves creating a sub-dimensional space where the laws of nature are limited. If you can get someone inside, the laws protecting them can only manifest to the limits of the subspace."

I remembered my pocket dimension, so I nodded, "Ah, it's like having a jumping competition with a low roof?"

She leaned back, "Uhm...I guess you could say it like that."

The older alien shrugged, "So, to beat a guy at jumping, you have to construct a building with low ceilings and get them in there. Sounds very practical."

I pointed at him, "Depends on who's building it or leading the avatar. Anyways, What other ways are there to stop them?"

The ruler adjusted her legs, "Mmm, the other method entails overwhelming the law systems protecting an individual. You can simply have another law system of your own that is stronger than theirs."

I massaged my temples, imagining that process. The older alien nudged me with his elbow, "Hah, not too keen on selling your soul to some Old One, eh?"

I murmured, "No, not really."

My misgivings went well beyond that. Adding simple stats to myself through the cipher took quite a while, so changing the rules governing my body and mind would require untold amounts of energy and time. I also needed more knowledge on dimensions, ciphery runes, and the consequences of these rule systems.

In other words, it was a long-term project, not a short-term solution.

I shook my head, "Any other strategies?"

The furry alien crinkled her expression, the fur bundling up like several squirrel tails, "Hm, the last strategy is less tested. It involved breaking the law systems down over time."

I furrowed my brow, "Huh...Sounds difficult."

She waved her hands, the sharp claws at the ends recently trimmed, "You could construct a set of law systems over yourself that destroy other law systems. That's never been done or even attempted, really. The other method entails using a theoretical mana type to get it done. Tell me, have you ever heard of an energy called entropy?"

The older alien rolled his eyes, "You're filling this youngling's head with junk now."

Remembering my Sovereign class mentioning the mana type, I raised a palm to her, "Actually, I've heard of it, but I know nothing about it."

The mongoose crossed her legs, her robe overlapping, "It's a mana type that's theorized to be able to break down anything, and I truly mean anything. It can destroy matter, energy, and even thoughts. Those laws of nature within a space are susceptible to it as well...Theoretically, that is."

I leaned forward, "How would I make it?"

"It's a fusion of all three advanced mana types, supposedly. I have no idea what kind of mindstate would help summon the energy, though. It's...It's a relatively untrodden path."

The older alien gazed at me like a stern teacher, "Absurd speculation aside, you're not as intimidating as you first seemed, my friend. I thought you'd know most of this already."

I shrugged, "Eh, I haven't had much of an opportunity to sit down and learn about this kind of thing. I've been in permanent battlezones since the system started, and my quests have always dragged me into quagmires that never seem to end."

The other rulers honed in, each leaning towards me or turning my way. One of them said aloud, "That's similar to the situation with the eldritch. It's a fight that never ends."

I pointed at them, "Exactly."

The fluffy alien tilted her head at me, "So you're much more oriented toward battle than, say, general knowledge, for instance?"

I nodded, "That's very true. I was born and raised in a pre-system world, yet I've been in situations like this several times. My first large-scale quest was a quarantine zone, and battling Elysium was the next. Both involved sieging cities or holding them while facing massive armies."

One ruler, an avian creature with several wings, spoke with a large, colorful beak, "That's what modern warfare has become since Schema centralized governance based on eldritch clearing. Once a city is held, the advantages mount, and cities become an overwhelming advantage."



It was good that I asked Schema to recognize my own cities then.

The older alien leaned one hand against his knee, "If I'm hearing right, you never received a Schema based education?"

I raised my brow, "Not even slightly. I learned all this independently outside a few mentors along the way."

The gruff alien pushed himself up, grunting from the effort. He reached out a hand, his nails thick as tiles, "My name's Targask Holoh. I'm an archmage who's worked across several empires for my species' freedom. Right now, I'm working for the Entil Empire, and my work usually revolves around whipping spoiled brats into shape."

I grabbed his hand, the rugged surface feeling soft as butter to my metal hands, "My name's Daniel Hillside. I'm trying to get out of Schema's rat race."

The rulers nodded with understanding before the archmage turned a hand to the furry alien, "She's shy, so she won't even introduce herself. She's Cheruhka Miya. She's a scribe I've come to have a healthy disdain for."

Unperturbed, she raised a hand, "Hi."

After a few more introductions, the older alien walked over to an open space. He waved me over, and I figured I might as well see what he wanted. While we faced each other, Targask interlocked his arms behind himself, "If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to see what you can do. Magically, that is."

A slight smile grew on my lips, "Do all mages lock their arms behind themselves like that?"

Targask waved his hand, "No, certainly not. I simply find the position comfortable."

"Ah. Well, what do you want to see, exactly?"

He peered off, "Hm, an overall assessment of your abilities. You mentioned never receiving a Schema-based education, so I was going to see if you had any gaps in your

magic that I could offer insight into. Think of it as my way of paying you back for all you've done for us."

For a moment, I considered the situation. Exposing my magic could backfire if Elysium got its hands on the full extent of my abilities, and these rulers would inevitably report it, willingly or not. However, having them informed about me also acted as free advertising. After all, life would continue after this lottery, and I could have these guys bidding for my time.

Siding with the bolder approach, I shrugged, "Eh, alright. Anything I should start with?"

He turned a hand to me, "Whatever you wish. I'm experienced enough to know what I'm looking at."

I raised a hand, generating water over my palm, "If you say so. This is so you can see it."

I pulled the orb using gravity wells, flowing it between us in a crisscrossing, diagonal current. While waving my finger, I made the fresh orb spiral into a ring before creating many dollops of water around it. Stretching each droplet, I created a series of interlocking circles before spinning them around like a liquid gyroscope.

The archmage gave me a nod of approval, "Is that gravitation you're using instead of telekinesis?"

"Of course. This isn't possible with telekinesis."

"Hm...Fair enough."

I let out a plume of heat, and the series of circles ushered into steam. I coalesced it back into ice, then steam once more. I pulled electricity through it, and the water hummed with energy, rippling in waves. Reaching out a hand, I flicked two fingers, condensing the rings into ice balls.

They orbited a gravity well at the center of the display, forming a miniature solar system. I threw my hand sideways, tossing the water out of the city. The moment it passed the barrier, the water popped from ice into vapor like tiny detonations.

Reaching up a different hand, I heated it until it glowed red, yellow, white, then blue, and I spread that over my body, containing the heat with a panel of invisible cold around me. I placed my palm over the ground, the rock melting to magma I etched runes into. I flash-froze it and myself, a wave of cold washing over me.

Standing upright, I opened my pocket dimension, pulling the liquid bone out and back in. I closed it before heating one of my arms into a liquid. I molded it into a spine before making it into several other rudimentary weapons. Sending waves through my body, I let myself ripple before my body collapsed. I regenerated above the corpse, dimensional fabric rushing out of the ether.

Rulers around watched the demonstration, their silence telling. The grizzled archmage widened his eye at my respawn trick, but he kept his reactions measured outside of that. Forgetting to demonstrate it earlier, I turned one of my arms into water, and it flooded out. I pulled that water out of the city before raising a hand and spawning soil.

In the rich ground, I crafted plants and random animals. The archmage gawked at that display before I shuttled it out. The moment it passed the barrier, even the dirt ignited. Reaching up a hand, I spawned a singularity outside the city's border. The dark blot feasted on light, and in turn, force and destruction erupted.

The shockwave trembled the barrier before I let my hands down,

"That's about all I got."

That wasn't true, but I figured that was enough to turn some heads. The older mage walked up to me, "A lot of that was impressive, while some of it was rudimentary. It's such a strange kind of casting you're using as well. Where is your grimoire? Are you hiding it?"

"I don't use it for combat."

He blinked, "Hm, that could certainly explain some of the less technical displays then. Where did you get the materials from for your water and whatnot?"

I raised a hand and turned a fingertip into ice. Flicking it, the ice burst into a plume of sheening powder before my hand regenerated. I pulled the ice out of the city, watching the snowflakes explode outside the city's barrier like tiny firecrackers.

I shrugged, "It's my body. I turn my flesh and blood into materials."

The mage shook his head, "Blood magic. Interesting. And you're mana channeling as well...It's all so strange."

I raised a brow, "How so?"

"You don't construct mental apparatuses to create efficient mana conversions. You pull from an absurdly enormous well of mana, like using a flood to water a houseplant. In fact, your mana usage is in excess to such a degree that you use it like you've never dealt with limits to how much you can use."

He was right. I hadn't.

The archmage raised his hands, "Most mages end up focusing on efficiency and tightly wound casting to make the most of what they have. You're trying to wield more of your reserve and use it as quickly as it returns, yet you're struggling despite wielding enormous amounts of mana."

I furrowed my brow, "I have always had very high mana regeneration, so my limits are different than other people's. That's why I cast differently."

The archmage scoffed, "And it's resulted in a very inefficient casting style."

I struggled not to roll my eyes at that. He noticed, so he raised a finger, "Not to say the sheer volume of magic is unimpressive. I don't know if I've ever seen anyone pull that much mana repeatedly without being driven mad or exploding. Doubly so for a blood mage, as they tend to be physically aimed fighters, not sorcerers."

I cracked my knuckles, each pop sounding like a snapping cable submerged in mercury, "Do I look like I'm only a sorcerer?"

The archmage rattled, "Of course not, but that's beside the point. Your large mana pool must be why you use such simple mana pathways during your casting."

Cheruhka chimed, "That simplicity allows him to channel that much mana. More complex pathways would collapse."

Targask narrowed his eyes at her, "But is it really necessary to channel mana through his body? That's a recipe for internal destruction, though he's somehow survived it."

I raised my brow, "I'm made of a very conductive material, so there's very little friction involved when channeling energy."

Targask narrowed his eyes, "Then how are you controlling it?"

I raised a glowing hand, "I can feel it coursing through me, and using those sensations, I measure where, when, and how to use the magic. That's why I can construct something like that spinning orb or miniature solar system without using a grimoire."

I shrugged, "It's also why my mentor has struggled to teach me specific spells. Instead, he handed me resources so I could learn on my own."

The archmage winced, "I could imagine doing the same. Regardless, that methodology led to a lot of discrepancies."

I pushed through the urge to casually dismiss the guy, "Name them."

He raised a hand, "Easily done. I'd be willing to bet your magic is almost entirely used on yourself and not other people. You probably can't stabilize your mana enough to use on others without driving them insane."

Ooh, he got me there. I peered up, "Hm, yeah. For sure."

He rolled his hands, the older alien appearing excited, "I'd also be willing to bet that certain styles of magic are highly limited for that same reason. Any kind of bolstering

styles, healing, even telepathy could be strained with certain people who aren't highly leveled."

I tapped my side, thinking that over for a moment. I never even considered telepathy with an average person, but it could backfire. With that worry burning, I raised a hand, "You have my attention."

Targask turned a palm to the monolith, "How about I show you a thing or two about constructing spells using a grimoire. You could learn a bit before going off and handling the rest yourself."

I put my hands on my hips, "Let's do it--"

My director golem telepathically synced up with me, "Creator, may I have a moment?"

Raising a hand to the archmage, I glanced up, "What's up?"

The lead golem sighed, "It's rather unfortunate, but there appears to be an emissary from Valgus's faction that would simply adore a meeting."

Disgust spread over my face as I simmered, "If I have to go through one more damn meeting, I'm going to kill someone."

Putting myself back in the moment, I raised a hand to Targask, "You can show me the ropes after I handle Valgus's 'emissary.' It won't take long."

Targask frowned, "They're already here to kill us? That's a damn shame. I'll see if I can't organize that lesson before they get through."

I gave him an acknowledging nod before dashing forward. I jumped up while pulling with gravity wells, launching myself across my city. Landing near my director golem, he waited outside with his arms crossed behind himself. The director gestured to a large, powerful warrior waiting outside.

It reminded me of a bipedal beetle with its massive upper body hunched over. Its gaze carried an eerie air about it because its eyes never blinked or moved, and keratinous

layers interlocked over its skin like plates of glossy armor. It even wore its old, molted shells, one arm holding a scarred head plate and the other a sharpened horn.

Flying at the midpoint of the city's barrier, it raised the horn sword while bending its head down. I mirrored the gesture before waving it in. The insect landed below, its heft causing a quake throughout the city. As construction golems raced to fix the damage, I gave it a wave,

"Yo. What do you want?"

The beetle spoke in a series of clicks, but the translation system in my city let me understand it,

"We want the rulers."

#### Chapter 362: Uncovered Progress

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"Yo. What do you want?"

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"We want the rulers."

I glared at it, "Mind explaining why?"

The beetle huffed before speaking, "These cities...They've fully replaced even the air?"

I crossed my arms, "Answer my question."

Several of my cored golems landed beside us, and the beetle ruler rolled its shoulders, "What is there to say? You have faced Valgus. He is superior in a battle to you in every way. He will come here, ravage your cities, kill everyone you've ever known-

"Then why hasn't he?" An awkward silence passed over us before I furrowed my brow, "Man, you guys didn't think this through."

The beetle turned to the side and let out a series of guttural clicks like a cough, "Urgh, ahem. So...That's not necessarily true."

I dragged a hand down my face before frowning, "Get out."

The beetle ruler raised a hand, "Wait. One moment. I understand that you believe that we are all mindless followers of Valgus. You have a call and reason to do so, but that isn't the case. We can reason or follow through with a deal of some sort-

I leaned towards it and raised a hand, "Since when did I become a politician? You attacked me, and at that moment, any chance at diplomacy passed. Valgus joining the fight has changed nothing since then. He simply added to my hit list."

The beetle spread its arms, "You're acting as if you won the fight earlier. What's given you such confidence?"

I narrowed my eyes at him, "It's simple - those that ask for help admit weakness. That isn't necessarily bad since admitting weakness can demonstrate humility or modesty. In Valgus's case, he paired it with a threat. If he could simply force my submission, why wouldn't he? He's done that to everyone else, so I should be no different."

The beetle said nothing. I stood tall, "He has done nothing because he can do nothing. I'm done listening to you or your people. Leave or be forced to."

The beetle glanced at the two dozen golems waiting nearby. It sighed, "Then let it be so. You will come to regret this."

I reached up a hand, a gravity well forming in its chest. After pulling it off the ground, it squirmed in the air. I tilted my head at it, "Are you serious? You're trying to threaten me when you can't even function off the ground?"



It spread its wings and flapped them. Gusts of wind burst down, strong enough to strip stone. I grounded myself with gravitation and molded the barrier around the city until it contained us and the storm flowing forth from the beetle's wings. I scoffed, "Come back with Valgus if you want to negotiate."

I strengthened the gravity well holding the beetle until my arm sheened a dark blue. Mana crackled and radiated from me as I compressed the well further. The sound of ripping steel burst from the beetle's wings as they collapsed against his sides. They broke and mangled like crumpled food wrap.

I kept crunching until the beast's eyes sank in, and it choked on its tongue and torn-out teeth. I seethed, "And remember - I'm not fighting him. I'm fighting Baldowah's powers. Valgus is a paper champion covered in steel. Take that steel from him, and he is nothing. What I have cannot be taken."

I flung my hand, and the gravity well catapulted the beetle ruler out of the city. He crashed into the rainbow shards, the impact quaking through the opalescent pile. I walked off, knowing the beetle made it this far alone, so that wouldn't be enough to stop him.

Behind me, the beetle put its bulky arms against the shards, pulling energy from the shining pile. Its shell darkened, turning to a brittle, charcoal substance. It erupted out of its molted and mangled body. Healed from the chrysalis, it shouted over the chaos of the ossuary.

Its voice turned from a cacophony of clicks into understandable language when it reached my city.

"We shall see if you can keep what you have, Harbinger."

It turned and set out. I did the same, heading to my city's monolith. I found Targask sitting beside the city's monolith. He wrote with paper made by one of my constructor golems, peering up with a wry smile as I walked up, "That was quick."

I shrugged, "They're not the best negotiators. Anyways, what do you have for me?"

Targask spread his hands over a series of documents, each carrying fundamental runes made by Schema. Targask pointed at me, "You showed the ability to make these earlier, but I figured I shouldn't make many assumptions about you. Can you read these?"

"Yes. These are the most fundamental building blocks of Schema's watered-down cipher."

Targask raised his brow, "Ah, you subscribe to that crackpot theorem?"

I sat down, keeping my weight on one leg until I landed in a cross-legged position, "Yeah, I do. If anything, I think it's foolish to think it's anything else."

Targask shook his head, "Even the cipher's not necessarily a proven thing, let alone the connection between the two. You need to get your head out of the clouds."

From that alone, I learned that Targask didn't know as much as he thought. It made sense that he supported Schema-based factions and taught children since he thought orthodoxly. Well, what I assumed was mainstream thinking on the cipher. Still, I'd never exposed myself to a magician like this before, so I pushed through,

"We can agree to disagree there. Anyways, what are we doing here?"

Targask rubbed his hands together, "Ah, well then, we're going to be creating your first mental apparatuses. These will convert, hold, and apply the mana for you."

I crossed my arms before Targask raised a palm, "Sounds intimidating, doesn't it? It doesn't have to be. Think of this like farming. You're out there, the dirt is hard, the plants don't thresh like they should, and you're pouring sweat. That sounds pretty difficult, doesn't it?"

"It would have been at one point."

He waved his arms, "We're assuming you're a normal person here. The difference is that we're like that farmer when talking about magic. There's so much about us that simply doesn't work well with the magical world. Our bodies can't tolerate it well, our minds struggle with mana destabilizing, and it can even poison us should we exceed our limits to control it."

He tilted his head, "It's just like the farmer. Here, the mental apparatuses are used just like a farmer's tools. Instead of using our body and mind, we construct a vessel for whatever we need. This prevents us from dealing with the obvious issues of using magic in the first place."

I gestured to the documents, "Alright, let's make some."

Targask pointed at the first document, "Here are the simplest ones."

I peered down, reading through the runic incantations. At the same time, I compressed time and had a dozen minds work on the project at once. After a few seconds, I garnered a few bits of info. The three examples in front of me handled basic mana conversion. Mana always carried a kind of intent, after all, like how ascendant mana would drive someone into a blood frenzy. These runic works broke down how to neutralize that intent, store the mana, and put the intent back into the mana.

It couldn't create the initial intent, but these would help someone use the mana that someone else made. I leaned close, "Yeah, I could use these to stop the mental problems you guys get from using my mana sources."

Targask blinked, "Huh. Yeah, you certainly could, though they'd need to be specialized for your specific intent."

I picked up the papers and memorized them before pulling my grimoire from my pocket dimension. I opened it before Targask scoffed, "What kind of industrial, heavy-duty grimoire is that? It looks like you asked a blacksmith to forge it."

I shook the book, the liquid silver plashing behind the pages, "It even bleeds silver if you cut it. Anyways-" I etched the runes before gazing at them with intention. These would work much better in the cipher since these would just break with even a little mana. I rubbed my temples for a moment, thinking about adjusting them.

No answers coming up, I etched into the pages of my grimoire with heated contact points. I created the runes, channeled mana through them, and tested them for a while. The last of these steps involved putting the runes onto my skin and pulsing mana through it. As I did, I put my hand far out to the side.

The runes shattered instantly, a kinetic wave erupting from them. I shielded Targask with a layer of water before he did the same with his own barrier. The grizzled magician jeered, "Eh, every beginner makes the same mistake."

I shook my head, "It's not a mistake. It's a test."

"Oh, sure. I bet."

Ignoring the insult, I created a few prototypes of the mana neutralizer using the cipher. Many Daniels assisted the process, my overall psyche putting out dozens of designs. I carved out the select few that passed a scrutiny test before trying them out on my skin. Each of them held much better than the Schema-based version, but that wasn't any surprise.

The best rune held up to about 1,000 mana a second with some inefficiency in the conversion. It was a paltry amount but could scale up with many of the runes put together. I leaned over, thinking for a while. Testing the other iterations more, I got a better understanding of their strengths.

One lacked the 'friction' that the other runes had, but it shattered easily. The other conducted the mana quick as lightning, but it lost lots of mana in the process. Taking parts from each design, I put them onto the page, one after the other. These Frankenstein runes lacked any stability whatsoever, shattering like glass vases told to hold lead bricks.

Another round later, one of them held about 500 mana a second. It did so quickly and efficiently, making it scale far better than the more durable version. I spent several more minutes iterating on that design, trying out a few oddball ideas along the way. After another ten rounds of designing, I got the finished cipheric rune.

It held about 7,000 mana a second with nearly no mana loss. It also zapped the force through faster than a bullet, so quick reactions were possible. I tied several of them together before trying it again. It blew up again before I attempted the same process on the tying process.

I ended up with a mana converter that could be attached to my mana batteries without real issues. As I worked, Targask observed without comment. When I finished an hour later, he shook his head in disbelief,

"That's just absurd. What even is that?"

I picked up the block of runes wrapped in my dimensional fabric, "This is a mana converter that's actually usable."

Targask reached out a hand, "Can I see it?"

"It's way too heavy for you."

Targask rolled his eyes before snatching the battery out of my hand. I let him, and when he pulled, he jerked himself sideways. I raised my brow at him, "You must not be used to working with heavy objects, eh? Pro-tip, when they're heavier than you, you have to pin yourself down to move them."

Targask pushed himself off the ground, "Oh hardy har har. Very funny." He rubbed his cheek, "It doesn't seem like it will be that useful if it's this weighted anyway. Even stone can't support it."

I pointed down, "This supports both of us, and I'm much heavier than this battery. I'll just use the same techniques to hold this."

Targask scrambled for other problems, "What about a power source?"

"It has its own power, but I can add mana crystals or dungeon cores if I want. Either way, we'll be installing a few of these into the city immediately. I'll be back after I finish."

Over the next hour, I created a hundred of these batteries, mass-producing them as I had many other objects. I did so outside of the city, the heat alone being enough to cook everyone inside. Once finished, I got my army of golems to install them into the ruler's homes, along with mana batteries.

After I handled the installation, Targask tried using one of them. He frowned at it, the sight disturbing him as he murmured, "How in the hell did you create this?"

I grinned at him, "The same way I will make lots of other stuff."

Targask gave me a wary eye as I lunged to one knee, still over his eye level,

"Now then...Let's see the next set of runes, eh?"

#### Chapter 363: An Eerie Unveiling

After I handled the installation, Targask tried using one of them. He frowned at it, the sight disturbing him as he murmured, "How in the hell did you create this?"

I grinned at him, "The same way I will make lots of other stuff."

Targask gave me a wary eye as I lunged to one knee, still over his eye level,

"Now then...Let's see the next set of runes, eh?"

Targask shook his head before scratching the back of his head, "You've worked quite a bit today. I'm sure you must be tired."

I scoffed, "Not even close. Let's move on to the next subject."

Targask blinked before pulling out another sheet of paper, "Well then...Let's see what you make of this then."

He began writing down a series of formulas using hieroglyphic images. They mirrored miniature monsters, each carrying a semblance of life to them. I gawked at the markings, curious how he instilled that uncanny vigor in mere pictures. Targask peered up at me, enjoying my obvious bewilderment all the while.

When he finished, he turned a palm to the drawings before crossing his arms, "What do you think these are?"

I leaned toward them, "They're some kind of formula that uses monster pictures instead of actual mathematics."

Targask tilted his head, "Hmm, close enough, I suppose. These are potion formulas that use common eldritch parts. It wasn't until a few decades ago that this became widespread knowledge. Care to hear the history?"

"Why not."

"Long story short, potions used to rely on specific species of eldritch, which are notoriously difficult to maintain the populations of. You can keep a dungeon alive by simply not taking the dungeon core, but Schema always sets up mini-quarantines in those situations whenever possible."

I remembered my first dungeon being that way. That might be why Schema moved it to a different world in the first place. If I had to guess, Schema probably had a problem with people conspiring alongside an intelligent hivemind.

Either way, Targask shrugged, "So potions tended to be very temporary. An alchemist would pay mercenaries to kill and maintain the corpses of different eldritch before experimenting on the bodies. After concocting the potion, the alchemist turned the rest of the corpses into a few batches of the brew."

I raised a brow, "So they had to make new potion formulas each time they made some?"

"Yeah, and it was awful. Quality control was abysmal since each batch was so different. Combine that with how expensive they were, and many adventurers opted against using them. Within the last few decades, that's changed since a genius released his documentation detailing an elaborate potion theory. That's what you see here."

I turned a hand, "And it lets you use common eldritch instead of specific parts from certain species?"

Targask put a hand on the pages, "That's right. For now, formulas can be made and followed. Eldritch can come from a branch of species rather than a specific one, allowing normal people to create these miraculous elixirs."

I nodded, "Huh. It sounds like that guy revolutionized the entire branch of magic. He must be loaded."

Targask scoffed, "It's the opposite. The potion master was jailed by Schema."

I facepalmed. Targask gave me a shove, "Hah, I had the same reaction when I heard. It was a real shame. I would have loved to figure out what was going through that guy's mind."

I sighed, "That's Schema for you. He wants you to run as fast as you can, but only if you're on a hamster wheel."

Targask raised a brow, so I answered him.

"A hamster wheel was an empty cylinder for small pets to run in. You get nowhere no matter how far you run."

Targask's chin jerked up, "Ahhhh, that's not nearly as stupid as it first sounded. Probably. If you ask me, I think Schema's using the potion master for whatever the AI wants, but who knows?"

I kept that note in the back of my mind for two reasons. Firstly, I might be able to find that potion master and learn from him. Secondly, Schema jailed him for releasing that information publicly, and that hinted that Schema locked down information, putting everyone in the dark. I knew Schema did that already, but this confirmed it.

I tapped the pages, "What do these symbols mean, and how did you get them to have so much life?"

"These are the basic health, fatigue, and mana potions you can make using common eldritch species. That life you're feeling is the secret to the potion master's work: he put some sentience into the runes."

I raised my brow, and Targask tapped his head, "They are somewhat alive. It's kind of like a conversation between us. When done through paper, there's a sterility that doesn't convey our full selves. While in person, we offer much more information whether we want to or not."



Targask moved his hand from his head to the paper, "This is the same. By instilling some life into the markings, the potion master allowed far more flexibility than was previously thought possible."

I leaned back, marveling at the idea, "How the hell does that even work? Why would intent change the potions?"

Targask shrugged, "I don't know. It's easy to replicate the specifics, but the overarching principle is shrouded in mystery."

Finding that potion master might improve my runes by leaps and bounds while adding sentience to runes might be crazy enough to work. I marked those ideas down in my head while scratching my cheek. Analyzing the sigils on the ground, I wrinkled my face in confusion.

They lacked any similarities with the cipher or Schema's language. To better grasp them, I had Targask tell me each symbol and what it correlated to. That took twenty minutes, so I had him create the alphabet for me to use later. A bit of practice confirmed what Targask said - the runes were easy to make.

When writing them down, I recreated the forms before intent flooded into them from the ether around us. It left me in awe because these markings guided a person's perception while they read, preventing weird interpretations. I mean, anyone could take almost anything out of any page.

It was simply how communication worked. Once a word leaves a person's lips, it can take on whatever meaning the listener desires. Words of hate could be seen as love, and the truth could be seen as a lie. These runes defied that long-standing convention. They reminded me of the memory sharing that Shalahora used earlier.

How someone achieved that in written form didn't make sense to me. Perhaps genius wasn't strong enough of a word for whoever this was, and it reminded me of Baldag-Ruhl's ritual. Some principles exceeded my grasp, and I had to accept that.

Regardless, my awe faded as the toil of work began etching itself onto us both. We fell into the flow of making the runes before moving on to other materials. Not long after, I brewed weaker potions. Targask showed me a few advanced potion types for the last part of the alchemy lesson.

These mirrored basic spells in effect, but anyone could use them without training or upkeep. With invisibility, silence, speed, and strength, the potions accomplished almost anything. Despite that upside, every brew came with a cost; their side effects ranged from meager to severe.

For instance, even the standard health potion resulted in a load of metabolic waste, which always gave people diarrhea at a minimum. If relied on too heavily, the symptoms mounted, becoming so severe that the kidneys or liver failed. Mana potions were the same deal and resulted in headaches that kept getting worse and worse the more you drank them.

If abused enough, these headaches became permanent, and there were cases of suicide due to their use. They also caused insomnia even in small doses, and the mental fog afterward felt like coming down from a massive high. This made them exceptionally addictive. That was the general trend - the more intense the potion, the lower the resulting side effect tended to be.

The more I thought about it, the more I thought about Althea. Most of her life revolved around being sedated to mute her emotions and powers. She managed that addiction behind closed doors, and after hearing about these side effects, I worried about her. She'd always handled those issues in relative silence, and that realization stung.

It was like she hid that from me, worried I might not want to help or be willing to. Before I jumped to that conclusion, I silenced my ruminations. Wanting to understand some of the potions in general, I had Targask let me try a few. Taking a bottle, I uncorked one before pouring it over my hand.

The liquid soaked into my arm like water down a drain as Targask rolled his eyes. He taunted, "You don't even drink them properly. Do you do anything normally?"

I raised my brow, "I do if it's efficient. Otherwise, what's the point?"

To further that notion, I smashed the following few bottles in my hands instead of waiting for them to pour out. Really, I was just tired of Targask's snippy attitude, and my strategy paid off. Targask lost his penchant for snide remarks.

And his potion bottles.

Anyways, no matter how many elixirs I took in, they left no effect on me. Even a dozen cocktails at once did zilch; I figured it was because my body broke them down differently than expected. The potions followed a standard, biological route for activation mixed with some mana for added oomph. The oomph was hard to even feel, and I was a living block of metal.

I needed potions designed for dimensional fabric, not blood or bone. So for me, potions were demoted from miracle elixirs to glorified water bottles. Still exciting but not as fascinating as the runes used for the brews themselves. Either way, I hadn't uncovered any big breakthroughs when discussing the topic, and Targask relished my lack of success.

I deserved some of that for smashing his bottles. Either way, I didn't mind much since I could give Althea and Kessiah a few miracle brews. Torix already gave them formal lessons on the topic, but a different perspective never hurt anything.

Moving on to the next lesson, we began healing, another subject where I lacked talent. I figured that would be the case considering some of my previous experiences, but it still grated me to uncover it hadn't changed. Since I used magic differently than most, I couldn't use it on others in most situations.

Well, I could, but it would just blow them up...Usually.

Even with the runes cleansing my mana, my personal limitations remained. In this case, I couldn't heal well because I couldn't get a tight enough grip on what was considered normal. For example, I could feel the difference between someone's bones and muscles, but the difference was subtle. To compensate, I could devote years of tireless effort to mastering surgery despite that drawback.

That would be well worth pursuing if I wanted that as a career, but that wasn't the case. I tried to heal as an extra option, not another path in life. My desire for convenience contrasted with healing itself, which didn't give a damn what I wanted. It was a complex, arduous, and demanding discipline, standing in front of me like a looming mountain.

I could not leap over this mountain. I had to take each step one at a time. Facing that journey down, I turned to a different path. I'd leave that discipline to Kessiah.

Heading towards a different mountain of study, I learned about magic contracts next. I designed several iterations of cipheric agreements before, but knowing how to make simple, low-stakes contracts was essential. I mean, I didn't want to have to warp reality every time I made an arrangement with anyone.

So, Targask gave me a few pointers based on Schema's typical contract methods. The legal lingo made me feel like a lawyer, and Targask mentioned that many Speakers specialized in this class style. These legalists helped create more nuanced and complete arrangements between Empires or individuals. It was neat info, and it carried significance to me.

I could read through documentation about this kind of thing and prevent basic contacts in the future. It also gave me an understanding of the blowback involved with breaking an agreement. Aside from the reputation hit, breaking contracts carried literal consequences. They could hold mana bombs in your head that erupt if the terms weren't followed, sure, but that was the tip of the iceberg.

Some handled far more personal punishments, like causing decades of torture if anyone broke the terms. A few could castrate the user, cause mental regression, or remove limbs. The possibilities were endless. To my fascination, an entire branch of assassination was devoted to this kind of killing.

The killers nested malevolent terms within bland, benign contracts, ensuring they'd be failed. Anyone caught up in the impossible obligation ended up experiencing whatever consequences the agreement detailed, usually splattering across a wall or blowing up a skull.

The pen truly was mightier than the sword.

And easy to learn. Contract magic didn't take much time to go over as people honed their creation from a flimsy art to a cutting science. We went over the next branch of sorcery. This part involved handling rituals and delayed casting. I'd done something similar by saturating a spell with my mana, but that kept sorcery running after I disconnected from them.

These spells could have no effect for days, weeks, or even years before going off, meaning they worked like bombs in real life. You set up five parts: an initiator, switch, main charge, power source, and container. Though simple in practice, understanding the standard runic configurations made the bombs much more reliable.

Which was necessary to even use them at all. I couldn't have a delayed set of singularities mistimed and destroyed a city or something. Unfortunately, these runic configurations didn't carry any latent potential for me to abuse. They did what they were supposed to, leaving little room for improvement.

It left me discontented. At the start of this whole magic overview, I had hoped to apply my skills to many fields of magic. After all, I'd developed my own unique style of magic and abilities for years now. Cross-applying all of it could've resulted in an unknown amount of potential gains. As we progressed, that latent potential was exposed, and it wasn't as awe-inspiring as I hoped it would be.

Until we discussed rituals, that is.

Targask wrote the runes onto plain paper, and I gazed at the familiar sigils. They reminded me of the cipheric carvings on my body. I pointed at them, "These are channeling spells, right?"

Targask flapped his ears, "I wouldn't conceptualize them like that, though it's a common mistake many of my students make. Regardless, that ideation neglects many aspects of what a ritual is."

I raised my brow, "Like what?"

"Channeling magic is one part, but the discharge is the other essential aspect. In essence, these spells extend a user's mana pool so they can cast larger spells, but they carry two important risks. Firstly, they can backfire in a menacing, unpredictable way. Secondly, to prevent that backfire requires precision."

I frowned, "Precision, eh? How so?"

"They misfire if their mana limit is breached."

I peered off, considering the consequences, "So, like, blowing up?" Targask shrugged, "It certainly could, though that's far from the worst consequence I've seen from a botched ritual. Hmm, it reminds me of a sinister memory, actually."

Targask peered off, "One time, I found a student experimenting in a lab room with rituals. He neglected to consider the mana-based alarm system throughout the school system. That mana pulse, subtle as it was, overloaded his ritual. When I found him, he'd fused into the stone floor and steel tables, and he begged for death."

Targask winced, "His bellowing haunts me in more ways than one. Regardless, his family had him mercifully killed afterward, but it was...An incredibly trying time."

Targask stared elsewhere, his expression wavering, "Yes...It most certainly was."

I gave him time to process his emotions, and he coughed into a hand, "Ahem. Anyways, rituals are extraordinarily dangerous. Never experiment with them at random. They are far worse than simply deadly when they backfire."

"I'll keep that in mind. Is this how they're made?"

I took my arm, wrenched a panel of dimensional fabric from it, and carved the example sigils onto the sheet. Targask raised an arm, "Wait for a second, you fool-"

The runes fed on the mana generated by my dimensional fabric, detonating like a bomb and erupting in all directions. The metal remained unscratched, but the surrounding stone beneath us cratered from the blowback. We remained unharmed as I contained the explosion by molding my body like a liquid, but I still marveled at the sheer, destructive power.

I scoffed, "Wow. This isn't a strong rune either, is it?"

Targask threw his hands at me, "Of course it isn't, you dimwit. I'd never give you something dangerous, considering how reckless you are. I just told you that story, and you ignored me entirely."

I raised a brow, "I didn't ignore you, but I was ignorant. I didn't know it would passively absorb the mana. Still, remember that I'm not easily hurt, let alone broken. This was also a small amount of mana and a weak runic combination. We were never in any danger in the first place."

Targask took a few heavy breaths before he narrowed his eyes at me, "Then think before you begin tampering with dangerous magic. Otherwise, I will not be around for you to kill us both."

I nodded,

"Alright. Understood."

Targask kept looking at me, searching for authenticity. Maybe he found some as he let out a sharp sigh of relief. He shook his head, "That's...That's good. It's just a sore spot of mine, and I would really rather not experiment with it at all. Rituals are more than just dangerous. That's why ritualists specialize in large, ornate mana constructs to contain and organize the energy flows. It prevents these issues before they happen."

I peered at the runes, "Hm, how skilled would a ritualist need to be to do something complex?"

"Exceptionally."

"What about pulling their soul out of their body and into something else?"

Targask rolled his eyes, "It can't be done. You'd need to plan out every minutia of a ritual, as controlling the mana flow outside a physical form is nearly impossible. No one can control for all those variables before doing something that complex."

He was wrong about that. It had been done and by Torix, no less. I picked up the runic sheets at my feet before transcribing them into ciphery sigils in my grimoire. I murmured, "How large can the consequences be for a ritual?"

"There's no known limit."

I raised a brow, "Why not use them like bombs?"

Targask shook his head at me, "You have a suicidal way of doing things, don't you? There are, actually, many reasons not to use rituals offensively. Unlike a bomb, anyone

can set off a ritual. Pour a few units of extra mana, and boom, the ritual detonates when you least expect it."

Targask raised his hands, "Even in a controlled lab, it is difficult to control for every variable that can result in a destroyed ritual. It is a painful, difficult, and risky path that few follow for a good reason. I'm only showing you this to ensure you have a holistic understanding of magic, not because I want you to attempt to become a ritualist."

Targask crossed his arms, "Besides that, based on what I've seen, you lack the temperament or patience for this kind of magic anyways."

I analyzed the runes, "Eh, probably." I stood up before raising a hand to Targask, "That should be enough for today. I'll be working on this while you get some sleep. You have to be exhausted by now."

Targask let out a gasp, "Of course I am. You're just plowing through all of the material in hours. You're pretending to understand what I've covered, or there's a team of people in your head."

I tapped my temple, "The latter is closer to the truth than you'd think. Anyways, go get some rest. You earned it."

I walked off, and Targask pushed himself off the ground. He grabbed his papers before rubbing his back, "Gah, you'd think he'd have offered me a chair."

I shouted, "You'd think you could've just made one."

He waved me off in frustration before I stepped out of my city. While finding a quiet place, I dwelled on Targask's attitude. It was kind of fun having someone who gave me pushback like that. He didn't know who I was or what I'd done, which stopped him from revering me, something most of my guild did by now.

It let me question myself some, and I appreciated that.

Putting myself back in the present, I settled in a valley of bone before molding it over myself. As I did, the pile of rainbow bones groaned, its call sounding like a far-off



quake. The colossal entity oozed out with frustration, all of the battles and activity bothering it. Letting the ominous sound pass, I flowed the bone shield over me.

With some time to myself, I experimented with the rituals. How they exploded sparked my curiosity and imagination. After all, I was almost invincible, so using an explosive weapon didn't carry the same risks for me that it did for everyone else. After detonating a few rituals, they showcased the same profound level of power.

Efficiency aside, each time I tried detonating the runes, they changed shape, size, and scale. I could never anticipate the full fallout of the explosion, regardless of what I tried. Hell, even predicting the outcome was spotty. Sometimes the blast changed in composition from elemental bombs to radioactive pulses.

That lack of consistency was the trade-off for immediate power, and it explained why no one used them as bombs. They went off with even the slightest touch and couldn't be predicted. The last part was particularly fatal; the last thing a bomber wants is to be within the bomb's radius. Most bombers, anyways.

Hoping for more oomph with the runes, I translated them into the cipher. I channeled mana into one of them, keeping my distance from it. They worked more or less as I expected, more stable but needing more charge. I kept them from exploding since the random effects might blow me apart.

After many attempts at carving out the runes, I understood them better. For instance, the overcharging caused consequences because the formula couldn't handle the magic anymore. It was like trying to flow water through a pipe. If too much passed at once, the pipe shattered.

Building off that idea, I compared the bombs to the rituals. The containment and flows were totally different. Bombs stored a certain amount of mana, keeping the magic and the mana separate. Rituals required the spell to be cast the entire time mana was channeled. Technically, rituals could be used like explosives if you planned them well enough.

Absolute organization and delineation could remedy that, and I was sure Torix had done so many times. Scratching my head, I wondered why Torix hadn't taught me all this. From what I gathered, Torix's talent far exceeded Targask's abilities, yet Torix never broke down many of these basics for me. The lich did help me gain tools to speed up

my learning, but he never taught me this stuff directly. I decided to ask him when I got back.

Setting myself to the task at hand, I brainstormed for a while. I finalized my cipher runes before putting them on a panel of dimensional fabric. Getting a few miles away from my cities, I began charging them. They soaked in the mana like hungry ticks, swollen and bloodthirsty. Several minutes later and one of the panels exploded.

It blew up without any of an ordinary bomb's results. No force erupted. No fire plumed. However, for a fraction of a second, the atmosphere and ground around me wailed out in a deafening chorus. The air screamed, and the ground howled, every atom gaining sentience and pain all at once, living a short life of agony.

And then they died. I blinked at the malevolent effect, wondering what had happened. Having a chill run up my spine, I tried the same experiment several times. The rune's detonation resulted in an ensemble of terrifying effects. One bomb's eruption caused the ground to bleed out of bubbling pores. Another explosion shifted gravitation in space, altering weight there.

Yet another explosion turned the air around me into a liquid, and it writhed around me as if alive. It tried crawling into my lungs, nose, and ears, nipping at my skin like a horde of hungry beetles. When I walked out of the ritual's radius, the air died, losing this lease on life. However, returning to that spot left the atmosphere alive and starving.

I winced at what this would do to an average person. Still, none of these cipheric rituals affected me. I walked through the aftermaths without a worry in the world, and it got me thinking. Maximizing my temporal squeezing, I stood still, charging mana into a panel. Once more, it bloomed out before the effects faded.

Well, that wasn't quite right. They didn't fade - I didn't feel them. I sensed the dimension around me being warped, but it carried no consequences for me. I considered that a result of being my own dimension. I resisted Ajax's slice ages ago and many other dimensional attacks over my life. This was no different, though putting these runes onto my skin and overcharging them might have a different outcome.

I blinked away the thought, knowing it was another weakness I might have. I attempted to use the magic in a different environment. This time, I wrapped the area with my dimensional fabric. After a while, the rune exploded within the confines of the

dimensional material. Checking to see if it contained the eerie effect, I melted a section and stuck my head through the liquified panel.

The screaming air sounded like soulless sirens. A part of me grimaced, but another piece remained hopeful. After pulling in various materials, I uncovered a simple fact about this magic: it shattered the physical laws within its radius. While unpredictable, it gave me a few options I lacked.

A smile crept its way onto my face I fell into thought. In a way, Targask was right about me not being suited for rituals. I wasn't a perfectionist, so completing these detail-oriented tasks didn't match my way of doing things. I could learn the skills to change that, but it might not be necessary.

If anything, I could lean into the rituals but on the opposite end. I laughed for a second as a realization popped into my head. Most ritualists would spend all of their time mastering how to perfect rituals. They'd focus on guaranteeing their success for smooth sailing. I would tread a different path.

I would spend my time learning how to break them.

#### Chapter 364: An Uncanny Silence

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Over the next few hours, I attempted many strategies using the rituals. I gained some competence over them, getting a feel for when, how, and where they'd explode. That required abandoning Targask's simple designs. They acted as frameworks for rituals more than the real thing, so it didn't take much to give them more oomph.

They carried slight variance, complexity, or even charm. They reeked of a textbook's stale, sterile outline, made only to teach and not use. Divorced from pragmatism, these incantations lacked any bite or punch. I fixed that. One step at a time, I created volatile, vicious runic combinations.

I gave them a destructive output by basing them off Torix's grimoire creation ritual, which I'd done multiple times. I even pulled out my obelisk from eons ago and referenced the library of texts Torix gave me. Several ritual texts awaited my arrival and enlightened me about my ignorance in their fields.

Coming from Torix, several of the books included risky and controversial runic combinations. They cranked up the potential of the rituals by using unsafe strategies. As if amassing a suicidal toolbelt, I incorporated many of these techniques, and the runic flares I unleashed exploded in ferocity. They oozed destructive potential, each of them like a meteor piercing the skies.

I couldn't make them on the fly yet, but time would be my greatest ally. Having already devoted several hours studying rituals, I returned to my cities to inspect them. All was well, and I spent several hours in a home of my choosing. There, I meditated on my findings, trying to digest all of the information I was given. This retreat allowed me to consider how my abilities could influence my new knowledge.

And influence they did. I learned that my origin mana could be converted into common animals which could make simple potions. While not revolutionary, it would give my soldiers the means to heal more minor wounds or push past mana limits in a pinch. It left me content. I may never be a true healer, but I could become something like a pharmacy that gave out medicine.

As I studied all of this, I kept myself stationary, electing not to move my physical body. This let me compress time more. Instead of using my hands, I wielded telekinesis and gravitation to try out the potion formulas on the animals I spawned. Something about creating life and taking it so suddenly left me numb, but I pushed past my unease. People may need these potions, and my discomfort wasn't an acceptable excuse to stop making progress here.

This wealth of time let me focus on developing a productive meditation as I tested the elixirs. I pulled out my elemental furnaces and channeled enormous volumes of mana into my runes, and my temporal compression furthered that radical production. In turn, my primordial rune bolstered my mind, body, and dimensional aura over time.

This gave way to a positive feedback loop. The more I put into the meditation, the more I could focus. The more I focused, the more mana I put out. The more mana, the more my runes gave me strength, and that process repeated ad infinitum. It ramped my growth to a discernable degree, my body becoming heavy and my mind becoming sharp.

At least sharper than before, which wasn't saying much.

Regardless, I left my room after several hours, heading back into the bright abyss of bones outside. I covered myself and studied the ritual runes. During that session, I devoted my time to the cipher versions. Their dimensional implosions left their marks on the landscape, and the entire area devolved into a minefield for anyone approaching.

I put up several odd pillars to mark the space, and it became a hellhole of epic proportions. One could die in a dozen ways when taking a single step there. The air itself turned into an insidious, whispering presence. The ground leaked poison from pits of the void, and the sky molded towards anything living. This left the expanse as a wasteland, one turned into a permanent killing field.

It reminded me of nuclear fallout as I learned about the cipheric rituals. Their effects were permanent, converting the expanse into an uninhabitable and desolate place. Even the rainbow bones below inched away from here, the semi-sentient mass wanting an escape from the insidious squalor.

I winced at the lost land, the deleterious effects reaching the size of several city blocks within a few days. I kept pursuing the discipline as it carried a potential I hungered for. I needed some way of harming Valgus, and this was my best shot at doing that. I intended to limit his dimensional space, which could deconstruct the Old One's enchantments over him.

I would unravel the laws governing his adamantine form, one page at a time.

As I unwrote his perks, I didn't unwrite my own. My advantages remained no matter what space I occupied. If I had to guess, my dimensional immunity extended to these ruined areas, and I walked in this valley of death unperturbed. As was the case in my past, my ability to endure would become my weapon.

At the same time, I kept heading back to the city each day. The rulers made rapid progress, with each finally freed from the many shackles binding them and their progress. While not absolute juggernauts, they learned to wield their minds and bodies in combat. That stopped them from being fodder against Elysium.

Other veins of progress opened. Many rulers shared magic, helping them survive the elemental forces outside my city's barrier. These ventures tested their nerve, as many would explode if exposed. My golems enabled them, and we prevented any casualties

during those expeditions. The rulers paired that with general physical conditioning that helped them become more robust.

I didn't idle in the meantime. My potions experiments paid off, allowing me to give each ruler several bottles of the new brews apiece. Targask pitched in, providing pointers and guidance over the process. Each time I produced a creature from nothing, he marveled at the complexity of the creation.

Sitting beside the city's central pillar, we faced one another on chairs we made. I lifted my hand and created different creatures. Targask murmured, "That's a freakish ability you have there. I've never seen an origin mage make something like that in all my days."

I shrugged, "Oddly enough, it's easier to do this than make simpler stuff."

Targask's eyes narrowed, "With how disconnected that ability is, it's almost as if someone embedded it in you."

I frowned, remembering several forces that could be responsible for that. Etorhma funneled knowledge into my head about the cipher, and so did Eonoth. Who's to say they didn't funnel something else? Even Baldag-Ruhl's ritual could've caused this ability since I didn't understand its full repercussions to this day.

I might never know them, but I kept that to myself as Shalahora stepped up. The shadow coalesced into a bipedal creature, likely for our comfort, and he tilted his head at me,

"You seem perturbed."

I raised a hand, "I'm fine. What is it?"

Shalahora gave me a bow, and I processed some awkwardness. The shadow oozed its words like dripping ink, "Elysium moves. They've amassed a large army of the primevals, and Valgus appears to grow less and less stable daily. He is a mind unwrought, pulled apart at the loosened seams...Those threads have begun to fray."

I bristled at that since a wild, uncontrolled Valgus could level my settlements or kill everyone. I tapped my side, "Do you have any idea why Valgus is becoming less stable?"

Shalahora shook his head, "No. He grows weary of waiting, perhaps. Either that or Elysium is tampering with his mind, but I don't know with any certainty."

A nervous dread pooled in my chest, which didn't let up as I stood. I rolled my shoulders, "Then we'll do what we can. You've been keeping our own primeval army stocked, right?"

"Of course."

"Then I'll stop by and give them their new minds later today."

Targask gawked at us, "You two talk about the most sinister topics as if they're an everyday thing. It's disgusting."

Shalahora peered through Targask, "It is necessary, or we will all die."

Targask scoffed, "But to what end? Living is one thing, and being alive is another."

Shalahora's eyes narrowed, "I would rather live in filth than die while clean."

Targask shrugged, "I suppose you could think of it like that. I'd rather have a reason to keep going. It helps keep my old mind from wandering to topics I'd rather not think about."

Shalahora murmured, "Then exist in the shadow we cast, one made by the methods you are unwilling to use."

Targask considered before shrugging, "Eh, why not? I'm not exactly a saint either."

A tense silence passed before Shalahora turned to me, "I like this one. He has humility, a trait many rulers lack."

I crossed my arms, "Careful, Shalahora. If you start complaining, then Targask will be forced to one-up you. He has a reputation to keep."

Targask pointed at me, "So you say. I just point out the obvious. It's not my fault the obvious is often scathing."

A slight grin grew on my lips, "Ah yeah, sure, sure."

I peered behind Targask. Several rulers lined up at a cafeteria that naturally formed near the town's center. Several wanted better food, so they used my origin magic to make different dishes. It complemented the smithy congregating beside them where Alctua and Teraz helped rulers by making them any needed parts.

They installed a couple of electronics and even made some machinery for solid materials. The greatest gadget, a giant printer, pumped back and forth, laying thin sheets of graphene with other materials I didn't know the name of. These panels were used to help produce armor or weapons and were also effective semiconductors, wiring, and glass replacements.

It modernized the area, giving several rulers rudimentary obelisks they used in the city's connected framework. It imbibed life into the city, and I enjoyed watching the steady progress each day. For the first time since arriving on Leviathan-7, it didn't seem so hellish. One could even call it comfortable. Perhaps cozy.

Well, for the moment. I continued studying with Targask, learning some magic but focusing on refining the new branches I was exposed to. I also honed in on the rituals, making steady progress with them. My meditations turned into full-blown channeling endeavors, and I fed the primordial rune across my body all the mana it could desire and then some.

Before I knew it, several weeks passed like this, and the lottery's end loomed over us. We all wanted to head home for survival's sake more than earning anything from this. We missed our guilds, and though we turned this place hospitable, it lacked our homes' charm. Those thoughts kept everyone motivated until the inevitable occurred.

While waiting for the news, I channeled mana into my primordial rune, the air rumbling and the ground trembling. The mana coursed as a plasma, funneling into my cipheric



sigils from the furnaces. These visible flows wrapped around me as if I fought a hydra gnawing me with its many mouths.

Shalahora stepped in, the air blurred by the heat emanating from me. The shadow sighed, "They've come."

I closed my eyes, allowing the energy to run its course. Once emptied, I cleared my mind for a few moments. I became a sea of calm before viewing Shalahora and his shades. I frowned,

"Is Valgus here?"

"He and his armies march this way."

I stood,

"Then it's time. Let's end this."

Chapter 365: Bloodbath

I closed my eyes, allowing the energy to run its course. Once emptied, I cleared my mind for a few moments. I became a sea of calm before viewing Shalahora and his shades. I frowned,

"Is Valgus here?"

"He and his armies march this way."

I stood,

"Then it's time. Let's end this."

I made last-minute preparations, ensuring I collected every ounce of resources I could. A wave of fear crossed over me for a moment, but I silenced it. As I did, I quieted the parts of my mind that darted around in every direction. As a blacksmith hones a blade, I sharpened my mind to a singular purpose.

As I rolled my shoulders, Shalahora murmured, "It is as if you've lessened the burdens weighing on you, the ones that bind you to fear."

I shook my head, "I'm just using a strategy I've used before. Come on. Let's go inform the others."

A psionic call gathered the other rulers to the town square, and I stood amongst the others, a giant of dark steel. I washed the Rise of Eden over the others and announced, "They come for us."

A wave of unease crossed the rulers, but within the fear was a suppressed excitement. The embedded thrill boiled beneath the surface, each ruler wanting to show their progress and wield it in actual combat. I smiled with that desire reflected in me as well, "We've sharpened our swords and thickened our shields. Our enemy has amassed many, but they will clash against an emboldened force. You've proven that even with only a few weeks, each of you may evolve."

I raised a fist, "They think nothing of you, but they are wrong. They will clash against the shields of this city. Their teeth will break. Their claws will shatter. They think we are weak, but we purged that weakness from us."

I shouted. "They believe we will falter and fall, but that is their vulnerability. Nothing they know will come to fruition, and they will be proven wrong. We understand this. In time, they will understand this. They will bleed from it. They will die to it."

Psyching myself up, I roared, "Come. We march to leave them in pieces."

Having prepared for weeks, the rulers raised their arms and shouted with me. A primal energy coursed through the crowd, each individual reforged in training we'd done up until now. They raced over towards the armory, where they stored their new weapons. Wielding graphene armor and weapons, they contrasted the frail, feeble rulers like night and day.

I prayed it would be enough.

Turning towards Shalahora, I raised my brow, "Are the primevals ready?"

Shalahora winced, "They are."

"Get your shades ready."

Shalahora faded into nothing. I bit my inner cheek, worry overcoming me. Shaking it off, I hoped we'd done enough for the upcoming battle. In the distance, rolling fields of floating algae split apart as enemy primevals arrived by the hundreds. Leading the army like the tip of a crimson spear, Valgus cut the landscape apart.

Our eyes met, and he smiled at me. I glowered at him, and I clasped my hands into fists. This time would be different. He would remember this battle. I would sear it into his mind. I stepped forward, mana charging into my body. Once fully saturated, I hovered out of my city. I breathed energy into my lungs, breathing out thickened plasma.

He would remember.

The beetle they sent as a messenger arrived, no worse for wear from my gravity well attack from earlier. He crossed his arms, "It would seem-"

I dashed towards him, my mind coursing with thoughts of destruction. I met him as the beetle sliced through my body with a spear along his back. I carved apart as a writhing liquid of darkness. I encompassed him, the ruler submerged within the abyss before I created several singularities within my chest.

The gravitation fed upon us both, turning matter into light and energy. A raging course of destruction erupted, vaporizing all remains of myself and the beetle. From the ether, I returned, a monster made new. The other enemy rulers stared at me, fear embedded within them as I dashed forward.

They would remember.

Sonic booms erupted from my charge. I crashed into a group of primevals who writhed around me. I flooded over them, pulling them together before vaporizing all of us. From nothing, I returned. Their forces collapsed over me as Valgus leaped from above. He roared over the noise,

"As it should be. No words, only battle."

I ignored him, knowing none of my attacks would leave a mark. He used his enormous physical presence as a deterrent, but I'd told him I was beyond the physical. I meant it. I splashed apart, liquified dimensional fabric splattering over everyone. I flooded my body with mana, becoming a toxic, super-heated jelly.

It was like covering my enemies in radioactive magma, and they suffered for it. As I burned them, several enemy rulers screamed in agony, and others covered themselves in forcefields. Forcefields that detonated from within.

Singularities sparked out underneath their shields. They encapsulated the explosions, turning their blended forms into evaporated matter. The pitch-black blots fed on them like hungry parasites, ones that fed on flesh and buried into bones. They plumed in white flashes, the tectonic forces causing ripples in the rainbow bone below.

From enemy to enemy, I coursed and detonated myself. I no longer held the illusion of a human form, having abandoned that during my stay on Leviathan-7. This was what I was, and anyone facing me would feel its full fury.

Valgus included. He darted back and forth, trying to pin me down with his enormous might. He ripped the ground apart, split the skies, and ripped armies with each swing. I would be splattered to nothing, but something like this couldn't kill me. It couldn't even slow me down. I returned from the void, an unending source of chaos and destruction.

As I brought ruin, the rulers below offered their support. They pulled out railguns carved from graphene and fired bullets made of rainbow bone shards. Several rulers wielded the barrier, allowing openings for our projectiles to pass through. These bullets split and splintered enemy primevals, leaving energy trails in their wake that faded after several seconds.

The enemy primevals recovered from their devastating wounds, but we prepared for this. My golems raced out, each of them wielding gravitation and psionic fluid. Where the primevals recuperated, the golems infested the area with the liquid rainbow bone. Needles erupted from the primevals, their new psyches reduced to rubble.

Without reflexes or instincts, the rulers picked them apart with their bone-laden railguns. Within minutes, we killed several dozen primevals. Our losses were minimal,

and Valgus's frustration mounted. After several more minutes of trying to harm me, he threw his hands up and seethed,

"If you wish to avoid me, then you may. I shall simply eradicate the city you've carved from the ground."

I reformed from the ether, and my helmet smiled at him. I scoffed,

"Go ahead."

Valgus's eyes narrowed before he jumped upon the air around him. He bolted towards my city before the barrier opened up. Shalahora blotted from the nothing, a shadow-given life as he smothered Valgus in darkness. Several mages channeled ritual castings from below that encompassed Valgus in dancing light. An illusion formed around him, and he found himself in a world of red.

To his eyes, he stood in a sea of blood. In the distance, Baldowah roared, "What have you done, you imbecile?"

Valgus blinked, taken aback by the sudden change in scenery. I grinned at the sight since I had helped craft the illusion. The mages below used my memories as a reference. This made the deception lifelike, and Valgus fell into its grip. Before he moved, several golems flew beside him with potions in hand.

They splattered them over the asura, and Valgus roared as the fluid soaked into his skin. He dispelled the illusion around him using his shackles and chains, but he couldn't stop the potions from continuing the illusion. It wasn't based on magic, after all. It merely replicated magic's effects.

I thanked Targask for that idea, the grizzled sorcerer having good ones from time to time. As Valgus struggled to stop the howling of Baldowah, I turned to continue my onslaught. The asura writhed on the ground, trapped in the illusion with no way out.

Until the remnant revealed itself.

A psionic tether formed from Valgus, and the remnant's illusion warred with ours. As it did, I darted through the battlefield, killing and culling the enemy while trying to find

her. She kept her distance, but Shalahora began scouring the land with his shades to find her. It was a matter of time before she was exposed.

In my city, the rulers ignored Valgus as we planned. Their rounds would do nothing to him, and he dodged the psionic fluid without fail. Even if it did land, it could do more harm than good. If we destroyed his mind, Valgus might unleash whatever hibernated within him.

For all these reasons, we ignored Valgus while taking advantage of the enemy's rout. Before they regrouped, I told Shalahora, "Send them out."

Our shadowy sovereign acted as the harbinger of our hidden legion. He billowed writhing darkness from beneath us, covering the enemy in an immaterial ink. Fused primevals marched out of the recesses under the city and began tearing the enemy rulers and primevals apart.

I'd created them by filling primevals' minds with quintessent consciousnesses instead of ascendant ones. While more challenging to start up, the quintessent monsters acted as supporters of the ascendent primevals. They would mold into armor or weapons for other eldritch. While working together, they became elite shock troopers and vanguards.

Their potency proved itself as they moved along the battlefield as blurs of motion. Star primevals converted into swords and spears, while icy primevals covered the fusions in frozen armor. The stony primevals acted together with magma primevals as the cores of these eldritch that enacted destruction.

Tens of enemy rulers died in their initial charge. They flashed around me, goring and ripping enemy rulers apart. One fused primeval slammed a ruler against the city's barrier, the energy rippling from the impact. It rived the ruler before freezing its insides, and blood erupted from within. The alien devolved into a spiny, red ball with skin wrapped around its center.

Different colored insides splattered in every direction. Another enemy ruler was stuffed with stones until they ruptured. Seeing the chaos, the attacking force scrambled to escape. Many turned to run or fly off before having their spines torn from their backs or their limbs severed.

I frowned, but I understood that these people would never stop. Elysium wouldn't allow it. Beneath it all, Valgus writhed, his vision encompassed by Baldowah's screams and shouts. He received different directions until he was left paralyzed. His armies were torn asunder within minutes, and our forces began harvesting war spoils. The battle panned out exactly as we hoped, eliminating the threat without breaking Valgus's shackles.

Until they shattered.

I gazed down as the metal over Valgus crumbled. From within the recesses of Valgus's mind, the avatar of Baldowah let out a piercing, excruciating laugh. It coursed over the battlefield, becoming a chorus that overwhelmed the sounds of destruction. It melded with rage and fury and hate. It suffused the ground, a wave of red overcoming all present.

Above, a dot formed. It swelled, and it swallowed all color. It enveloped the algae, disintegrating it and giving us an unobscured view of Leviathan. The accretion disk of the dark hole shifted to a sea of crimson flooding towards its center. The rainbow bones around us lost their opalescent sheen, becoming bloody shards. A voice rang in our ears, and it was unfamiliar.

"Eons pass as seconds, and now I return to the corporeal."

I guessed it was whatever Valgus hid. Valgus's jewelry disintegrated away like ash, along with the metal chains and bands of armor over his skin. Crimson energy flooded off of him like a cauldron of billowing smoke. The red plasma flowed past me, and the ascendent mana flooded in. I held back a palpable wave of anger.

Others did not. Every primeval nearby flooded with frenzy and shambled towards my allies. I dashed forward, finding one of the fused primevals to wrestle with. Several other eldritch raced to my supporters. The rulers used the liquified rainbow bone, which slowed the monsters down.

So much ascendant mana flowed forth that even mindless husks gave way to rage. Even with the bone spines erupting from within, the primevals cut themselves apart while sprinting forward, moving as if the needles weren't there. The monsters I created joined the chaos, becoming enormous, hulking beasts intent on killing anything near them.

They grabbed rulers and gored them apart, including our own.

Blood splattered the city walls, marking them with maroon gunk. The primevals drank the blood of several rulers. My stomach sank as I watched a stone primeval grasp Alctua and rip her apart before squeezing her organs out. A star eldritch wrapped around the fire imp Teraz and swallowed him in light, leaving nothing behind. An ice primeval ripped through the city's ground and broke apart a building, the lizard Entilla in his grasp.

The primeval froze his blood, and green shards erupted from under Entilla's skin. He bloomed into a frozen ornament, like a ball of spines placed atop a Christmas tree. I reached out a hand as this chaos occurred in tandem before the primeval I held threw me aside.

Landing on the ground, I peered up. Ascendant mana flooded in, and I froze, fighting back a murderous frenzy. With it arrived sadness at this loss along with confusion. This plan involved murdering many rulers, but that fit into Schema's goals.

It was something I assumed they wouldn't do, but I was wrong. Instead of questioning further, I pulled myself together and devised a plan. I darted towards Valgus, and I slammed my fist against his cheek. For the first time since facing him, my attack budged him. He turned back towards me, his eyes alight with bloodthirst and madness.

Valgus spread his arms as blood dripped down his nose, "Come, brother. Awash yourself of peace and become battle."

Tired of how singular he was, I struck the side of his face with an overhand right. He budged once more. My eyes narrowed as I murmured, "You bleed."

He smiled, "Finally. I can feel once more-"

I smashed his smile with a fist of metal. His teeth cracked before I coursed energy through my body. I pulled in the ascendant mana from around me, trying to keep the poison from infecting everyone else. Either that or I wanted it for myself to hurt this monster. Valgus only laughed and swung his fist, and I ducked under it while dragging my arm behind me. Another cataclysmic strike erupted, and buildings collapsed.

My golems retained sanity and grabbed rulers to get them out, but they couldn't save everyone from themselves. Rulers ate one another as each of them turned into



cannibals. Others mutilated themselves, tearing chunks of flesh off their bodies. Even worse, others gazed into the red moon above, their minds lost to the void.

I connected to their minds and found them washed away. They were psionically drowned by the mana. I winced as several enemy rulers from outside the city lost control of themselves. The remnant overtook their bodies and wielded them as puppets. They darted around, capturing my allies and pulling them away from the utter pandemonium.

Many froze in place, their bodies stiffened by the torrential outpour of mana. They began twitching as orange pustules grew from their necks in seconds. They contorted as metal cables grew from within. Converted to Hybrids, they darted around, capturing allied rulers. They swallowed other rulers whole, and their bodies ruptured from the effort. Cables held the captured rulers in place, not skin or flesh.

I panicked for a moment. Dread pulled in from all angles as I covered my face with my hands. Of course, Elysium would use Hybrids to control people. That had been Elysium's core tactic since the start. I was a fool for not considering that as a possibility. I peered in every direction, unable to find Elijah Joan, and I shook my head in disbelief.

Being the only doctor, she'd likely implanted Hybrids into many rulers since her arrival. However, that didn't make sense since Shalahora would've seen those memories. Well, unless she didn't remember them, but then Shalahora would've seen the deleted memories.

Interrupting my train of thought, a Hybridized ruler landed beside me, eye stalks peering at me from its back. I lifted a hand, using gravitation to pull it to me. I raised a foot while stiff-arming its throat. The body flung forward while I stomped its torso and squeezed its neck. It split in two, and I held a writhing mass of Hybridized tissues in my hand.

Event Horizon destroyed it while I gave up considering this madness further. I needed to act, and now. Valgus rushed me from the side, trying to break me apart. I splashed around him before grabbing one of our Hybridized rulers. My sharpened fingertips dug into their arms before I sent wires through their body. They growled out in a frothing rage, spitting blood onto my helmet.

Staying focused, I discovered the source of their infection. Someone implanted tiny Hybrids into their spines, and at this moment, they took over their host. I spent my time

worried about the sanctity of their minds that I forgot about the sanctity of their bodies. Before fully digesting my monumental mistake, a hand pierced through my stomach.

Valgus grabbed me before pulling me from the converted ruler. I smashed into the soft marble below, the impact leaving magma behind. Valgus pulled me up and laughed,

"You know that those shackles protected me, don't you?"

He threw me away, and I popped the barrier over my city. The poisoned atmosphere, crushing gravitation, and ionizing rays pierced in. The rulers grinded in the sun and fell to their knees from the gravity. Valgus warped towards me, appearing above. He shouldn't have been able to do that, but there were many feats he shouldn't have been able to do.

Yet he did them.

He stabbed through my chest, releasing an enormous plume of mana as he did. It washed down, and Valgus shouted, "Those shackles restricted the world's magic but also my own. It drained me, becoming my greatest shield by dulling my sharpest sword."

The mana soaked into my body, and I glowed a bright blue before melting. The ascendant mana rained down from my corpse in its rawest form. It cascaded like a noxious cloud. As it infested everyone with thoughts of murder, Valgus spread his arms. I reformed below and gazed at him, his body like a cross spread over the red moon above.

He seethed, "I am given my mind once more, and all will give into it."

No matter how much I tried silencing my mind, it questioned. Elysium had already wiped out nearly fifty rulers here after trying to keep them alive for so long. The more I considered, the less the situation made sense. Understanding these lunatics was beyond me, but beating them wasn't.

I darted towards Valgus. He wielded enough mana to warp reality between us, and it began bleeding into my mind. Thoughts of murder infested me. I directed them at Valgus before tackling him. He grabbed my shoulders, his hands blurry from the mana coursing through him. Engorged with energy, he laughed,

"My mere presence alone will destroy you, let alone-"

Pulling already charged runic panels from my dimensional storage, I detonated them. Space and time around us warped, the area becoming a hostile wasteland. The air gained life. Rays of light passing over us turned into immaterial worms. Even Valgus's skin turned into a writhing mass. He howled in agony as his body lurched in all directions, his flesh turning into crawling monsters.

I held him there, but I trembled at the sight of his face. His skin split, and bones crawled out of his skull like skirting insects. His teeth opened beady eyes and burrowed into his gums. Tendons ripped. Sinews split. Blood lurched like eels, and his eyes nestled into his skull, disappearing in a mass of exposed brain.

Using the last bit of his mana, he jerked us away from the corrupted zone using gravitation. We slammed into the rainbow bones below. I stood from the ground, and so did Valgus. Parts of his body lost the life they gained, no longer mutilating him. But the transformations still lingered.

His face looked like a bucket of flesh insects spilling out of his skull. The legs no longer skittered, and the face bones no longer squirmed. His blood plopped onto the ground, and his skin remained torn. He gurgled at me, unable to speak.

Instead of pressing my assault, I turned towards the other rulers. Bolting back into my city, I stopped primevals from eating other rulers. As I did, one of Shalahora's shades murmured in my ear, "We have found her."

My eyes narrowed before I thought back telepathically, "Stay with her while using your shades to save people here. After we evacuate, take me there. We'll kill her."

Shalahora's shades darted in every direction with my golems. The infighting melded into a turmoil of desperate survival and ravenous hunger. Primordials ripped one another apart, the ascendant mana driving them mad. My golems darted through the thickened plasma, their runic markings glowing crimson.

They maintained their sanity despite the insanity before them. I handed several dozen rulers to them for evacuation, and they escaped this city using our tunnel system. As the last few survivors disappeared into the tunnel, I closed the rainbow bone passage

behind them. As I did, a plume of ascendant mana billowed off the new wall like evaporated blood.

Sanguine lightning erupted in all directions as Valgus kicked into me from above. I splintered below as he stood over the mush I had left behind. Through his heel, he pushed absurd quantities of mana into my body. It surged in my head like a manic voice trying to shout over me. It wanted to wash me away.

Before it could, I funneled it into the runes over my regenerating build. Recuperated into a physical form, I hummed with violence and anger. Valgus scoffed, "You are a living pit, aren't you?"

He kicked my remains, and I reconstituted in front of him before reaching out my hands. I growled, "I'll kill you."

Valgus grabbed my hands with the two upper arms on his shoulders. He cracked his neck before raising his fists. Energy radiated off him, and my armor crawled towards it, hungry and wanting. Valgus jeered, "And is that your chosen kind of battle? To deform your enemy into something as grotesque as you are?"

My armor smiled while I stared in silence. I pulled out several runic plates from my dimensional storage, brandishing them as weapons. Valgus pushed me away. I dragged backward before taking a step towards him. As I did, Valgus pulled back.

I murmured, "You should've kept your shackles on, Valgus."

One of Valgus's hands trembled before he made it into a fist. He blinked a few times while taking deep breaths. With renewed calm, he stepped towards me, "And you should've killed me when you first used that little trick."

I dashed towards him, and he met my charge. The city disintegrated around us, marble turning to magma. The ground rippled in the wake of the collision, and it splattered around us. I disintegrated, but my dimensional panels detonated once more. Valgus pulled himself back, but not before the damage was done.

Eyes sprouted over his legs, and poisonous sores oozed out of his chest. I walked into existence and growled, "How many times can you pull yourself from the brink?"

I shot towards him again, and when we met, another runic explosion encompassed us. Void ice sprouted from Valgus's left eye, and portions of his blood were replaced. I pursued him, using more failed rituals to succeed in battle. Valgus suffered. Within minutes, he retreated miles away from my city, and I left a warped landscape behind us.

He grew into a cancerous monstrosity, and I watched his mind warp and crumble. The great warrior devolved, and his courage turned to fear. He ran and leaped away, attempting to find an escape. I offered him none, pursuing with relentless intent. However, I didn't mindlessly chase him.

I herded him right where I wanted him to go.

We crossed one of the endless hills of algae before Valgus landed in a corrupted land where the air screamed and the land bled. Here, I experimented with the dimensional panels for weeks, the effects compounding into a literal hell. As the asura landed, his body swelled and burst, pieces of him spreading out.

The air rushed under his skin, and the ground spread needles through his body. Before he escaped, I pulled him together with a gravity well, keeping him there. With a sudden jolt, a monstrous presence slammed against my mind. I pulled away as it tried prying into my body. I disconnected from the monster before turning to escape.

Before I could, rainbow bones rose up over us both. It left us encapsulated in a dome before the mass of meat grabbed my shoulder.

I turned, releasing a wave of singularities over us both. I disintegrated while Valgus's monstrous pieces fled the impact. The remnant launched a psionic attack on me from outside, but I willed myself through the telepathic line before channeling mana into the remnant's body.

She recoiled, disconnecting from me but not before the remnant sputtered,

"Go before he escapes."

The entity within Valgus leaped out of the ether around us and into my psyche. I regenerated, and my body coursed with ascendant energy, the volatile mana flooding

my mind. I recreated my runes and channeled the excess mana into the markings. The sheer volume of mana reduced, but my skin glowed while my eyes bled silver.

I fell to my knees, unable to stand. From within, I found two entities intertwined but trying to separate. One of them embodied battle and was a warrior. It was the avatar trying to control my mind. The other entity huddled in the recesses of his psyche, a broken being. It turned to me, and where our minds grazed, I felt a taste of eternity.

This being was a follower of an ancient being I didn't know. His outer thoughts told me as much since he screamed for forgiveness. He wished for his forgotten one to forgive him.

It would not.

The forgotten one gave him a mission to contain an avatar of Baldowah. He had done so, but over time, the avatar eroded him. He began following Baldowah in place of the forgotten one. As punishment, this hollowed-out being had been cursed. He lived in an illusion so complete that it rivaled reality's depth.

Even an inkling of the hell made my body shake. This psyche experienced thousands of years with each passing moment. It could be even longer, perhaps infinity. In that regard, time carried no meaning to this tortured soul, and that was all it felt. Pain. Torment. Torture. It experienced lifetimes with each passing second, each of them a different kind of excruciation.

Death was a mercy to this anathema.

The other entity was an ancient brute turned into Baldowah's tool long ago. It had existed for millennia, and it smiled at me, a mass of teeth and claws and blood. It whispered over the suffering, "You will be my next holder. Feel honor from it."

This was what Valgus actually was. The presence shouted in my mind,

"Fall."

And so I fell.

## Chapter 366: A Mind of Metal

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"Fall."

And so I fell.

Collapsing against the ground, I writhed in torment as Baldowah's avatar wrestled into the recesses of my psyche. I grabbed the sides of my head and shouted, "Get out."

It replied, "Only when there is nothing left to gain from this vessel shall I do so, weakling."

I slammed into it with all of my many minds. The consciousness rippled, surprised by dozens of psyches attacking at once. It sputtered, "You have fight in you yet. How long will that fight last?"

I growled, floundering on the ground. The ancient avatar roared out as we gnashed and gnarled into one another. I let loose all of my offensive abilities, giving no attention to my defense. The avatar shivered in anticipation as joy and exhilaration flooded into the entity. It lauded,

"Ah, you've more than a body of steel. You own a mind of metal as well."

I kept attacking it, the avatar showing cracks in its psionic frame. It laughed, "I will so enjoy breaking you."

In a palpable wave, it unleashed mana. It coursed. It drenched. It unraveled the fabric of reality, and the sheer quantity exceeded anything I'd ever touched or imagined. It flooded my psyche, a drowning roar of thoughts that dismantled my reason and

resistance. The avatar scoffed, "To think you've experienced anything comparable is beyond my expectations. However, how long will you survive?"

I rallied my mind, reprioritizing my defenses. This monstrous creature unleashed so much mana it mirrored a star's core, something so blinding it left nothing but fire in its wake. The sheer quantity oversaturated my body, quickly dismantling my physical form. It swelled into my dimensional wake, instantly becoming a coursing, writhing plasma.

It gained a conscious, a roaring abomination of rage and anger. Lashing out, the ascendant consciousness pressed onto me from all angles, smothering my entire existence. I quashed down into a dense, mental cluster, the flow overwhelming me from all angles. The avatar laughed with glee,

"And you fall as all the others have."

I did not.

I pushed mana into my runes, the primordial rune I crafted feasting on untold amounts of mana. It converted into my strength, and the avatar scoffed, "You merely strengthen my vessel."

The rune peaked, unable to tolerate any more mana. It effused out of me as crimson cracks appeared on my surface. It oozed out of my primordial wake before I peered around. Nothing was nearby, and I sent out a pulse for help. The avatar burst into boundless laughter,

"And now you beg me for help? Pathetic."

I ignored him, focused on survival and survival alone. I pressed my mind into a singular point, coursing through the mana flows like a bullet piercing water. It eroded me over the next few minutes, pieces of my mind giving way to the madness. I growled out, "So this is it? You handle everything with raw mana?"

The avatar laughed, "Oh, have you uncovered my origins, perhaps?"

I seethed, "Yeah...I think so. You're just someone given infinite mana by an Old One."



The avatar cackled out, "Hah! And so you unveiled my mysteries. Yes, that is all I am, a boundless, endless effusion of mana. The mind that wished for unlimited mana was granted it, but they didn't understand the consequences of their request."

I grimaced, "Psionic drowning."

"An apt term, but it matters little what you call it. You will be washed clean as all the others have been, and I will wear you like the monstrous husk you are."

He spat the word monstrous as it said it. After searching my head for what bothered it, I grinned,

"Oh, you didn't like that dimension rupturing, did you?"

A fragment of spite leaked into the avatar's voice, "It doesn't matter now. You are immune to its effects, so I will never experience it again. I will take your strengths as my own."

Off in the distance, a mass of minds pressed in. My golem armada arrived, and I pushed some mana into them. They soaked in the initial wave without struggle, and I ordered them to disperse it out however they could. The golems channeled ascendant spells at random. Gravitation, telekinesis, and ascendant crystals materialized in every direction.

I poured more mana into the armada until they showed signs of its poisoning. At the same time, they offered psionic support. Hundreds of minds poured into mine and helped ease the pressure. The avatar cackled, "And you expect them to save you?"

"No. Buy me time."

The primordial rune feasted with abandon and expanded my abilities in real-time. I became an embodiment of its hunger, and it sated itself by devouring the supplying mana without recourse. It snapped, bit, and tore into the mana with its ravenous nature, becoming a source of growth for me.

It wasn't enough.

Even as I redistributed the mana to the golems, condensed myself, and gave a portion of the mana to my rune, I found myself washing away. I couldn't control my train of thought anymore, pieces of it going off randomly. It dwelled on battle, fighting, and blood. I considered giving in to the torrent as it gave me strength and power.

I shook my head in disbelief. I resolved myself, remembering this wasn't me. It was another being, and it wouldn't win. I raised my hands, and I generated singularities in the distance overhead. The skyline evaporated as I continued unleashing a cataclysmic eruption in all directions. The plume of mana led to a seismic event, the kinetic forces rippling the ground below.

Far into the distance, air, algae, and even primevals siphoned towards us. It fell into an endless, hungry abyss of singularities. The tiny implosions unloaded in a deafening cacophony, the sound alone visible in the air as it tore algae apart. The sheer output of spells exceeded anything I'd ever done by a factor of ten.

And it still wasn't enough.

The avatar poured out energy in a volume that exceeded my ability to withstand. It shouted with howling laughter, "And you will crumble despite all your efforts. You will steadily be eroded in time. You may believe I cannot maintain this flow, but this is as effortless as keeping my eyes open."

It stated like stone, "This. Is. Nothing...As you will soon be."

As singularities burst above, the ascendant cracks leaked out of my body from all angles. I fell down once more as my armor grinned. I held on with all my might, but it wasn't enough. I fell apart at the seams, pieces of my consciousness turning into slush. I raged about how unfair this avatar's ability was and about Schema pinning me here. This didn't have to be this way, yet it was.

Interrupting my thoughts, my armor laughed. A piece of resentment boiled up from within me. In a way, this kind of end seemed almost fitting. For the longest time, my armor had wanted me to become some mindless monster. It tried to consume and devour without limitation. Soon, that would be its only prerogative.

And I would become the forgotten entity huddling in the corner, rinsed into nothing.

Mana oozed out of my skin, the ascendant cracks crawling from my hands and into the rainbow bones below. As my vision dimmed to red, my eyes snapped open. The avatar scoffed, "And what is it now?"

I poured the mana into the giant mass of bones below me. It turned red, the sheer volume overwhelming this patch. The avatar laughed, "So you intend to metamorphose this plane into one of red, my-"

From below, a psionic wave rippled. The avatar within my mind taunted, "You intend for a patch of bones to stop me?"

The avatar had no idea how significant this 'patch of bones' was. After a few seconds, the beast of untold proportions rumbled, its roar an unknown and its mind endless. The avatar sharing my mind jeered, "What is this abomination-"

And the psionic beast awakened.

All around us, the bones began condensing into a solid. The thousands of behemoths above peered down, their fights halted as they watched an apocalypse. From below, strands of the rainbow bone sliced upward. They pierced the behemoths and pulled them down into the living bone mass.

They were assimilated in seconds, their bodies unable to stop the metabolic rate of the bones. The primevals in the distance fought off one or two tendrils at a time, but hundreds of coiling bones pulled even those monsters into their mass. Many of my golems were caught in the aftermath.

And I was as well.

Rainbow bones burrowed through my body, digging into me with difficulty. They soaked in the profuse energy, sapping the sudden strength coursing through me. I shook my head, reminding myself the power was poison and the worst of its ilk. It intoxicated with hollow promises, and I would not listen.

The giant rainbow beast below understood none of my struggles, yet it offered me hope in this insane situation. More bones burrowed through my chest, arms, and eyes. For

once, I welcomed a monster crawling under my skin. The avatar in my head boomed out,

"You think this can contain me?"

The colossal mass of bones murmured like a planet trying to whisper,

"Nothing."

My bones rattled at the sound. The avatar howled, "An unnamed beast without a purpose expects to stop me?"

I blinked back my eyes in surprise. Purpose? This avatar was a caricature of a warrior, lacking any substance. Who was it to criticize others for their purpose?

Shaking my head, I refocused my thoughts as the bones soaked in the red, its shade changing. More needles shot through me until I became more opalescent bone than my actual body. The inundation of energy quelled, becoming a stream coursing over me. In that flow, I found a foothold to ground my mind. My thoughts returned to normal, becoming sane and whole once more.

Having recuperated, I retaliated against the avatar. It shouted, "Gah. To think you'd be willing to give your blood and bones to this monster."

I grinned, blood dripping from my teeth, "I thought this body was yours now, wasn't it?"

The avatar winced as I psionically tore him apart. We wrestled for several minutes, and the avatar's laughs grew quiet. It no longer taunted me. Its thoughts shifted from relishing in its power to fighting for survival. I fought the creature with every tactic I learned from Torix. I used feints, sharpened strikes, and flanks to tear away at its mind.

But this creature existed for millennia. It held an insane amount of experience. Each time I gored a piece of it away, it shifted portions of its mind it didn't need for this battle. Its moves evolved, becoming more and more logical. The madness left this entity, and replacing it, I faced a being of cold calculation.

I fumbled, having a piece of my presence sliced apart. One of my minds ceased functioning, so I eliminated it. After several minutes, two more of my minds were turned into utter mush. The ruthless nature of the avatar shined through, and it reduced my psionic defenses to nothing, one mind at a time.

I recuperated in seconds, but it kept shifting and changing tactics. The strength behind its attacks mounted to full-blown assaults. It found my weaknesses and exploited them, and where I looked, I found nothing. This creature didn't safeguard memories or a soul; it was only an endless spring of mana with many millennia of experience.

It gave no credence to maintaining sanity, and its experience taught it when to change its approach. It silenced its incessant laughter, becoming something akin to an assassin. Each attack became precise. I pressed back, but my attacks lacked the finality of the avatar's aggression. I always defended my mind from being utterly scrambled. This thing didn't.

Hours like this passed, and I shivered as my mind was killed over and over again. I trembled as I was silenced in a cyclical loop, and the avatar infested more of my body and mind. I faded, becoming like a memory as it dismantled my control over myself. After gaining a superior position, the avatar murmured,

"Did you think I was only a being of mana?"

I could hardly think, let alone respond. It whispered,

"You thought so little of me. Your underestimation will be your undoing."

I held on, thinking of how little this creature had going for it aside from experience and mana. It laughed at me,

"I am victorious because I have given everything to fighting. You have only given a piece of yourself that isn't even whole. How can a fragment defeat something completed?"

I ignored it, searching for some way out of this situation.

"You will find nothing here to help you. Once I've evaporated your existence, I'll pull you out of this monstrosity below and return to my former glory."

I murmured, "I thought your mana was infinite?"

"Silence."

I trembled as it continued assaulting my psyche. After a few minutes of fading, something pumped below me. Returning to the physical reality around me, I found the entire world trembling. The colossus of bone siphoned absurd amounts of mana out of me, keeping me sane. Before losing control, I grabbed the avatar's mind and pulled it into my dimensional wake.

As I did, the entity became incorporeal, but it also showed an inkling of discomfort. This thing enjoyed being physical more than something intangible. That was good. I could exploit that.

It scoffed, "You operate off of assumptions. What could you possibly do to my mind out here?"

I compressed time, squeezing our minds within my dimensional wakes. We writhed and coursed, becoming a psionic slushie. The psionic agony impaled both of us, each passing moment another horror. The avatar shouted,

"And you believe this will stop me?"

I pulled us further down, tightening my dimensional wake even more. It howled, "And...And this isn't enough."

Like an executioner wielding an axe, I continued hacking away at our sanities. I no longer defended my mind, content to put this avatar in a state of pain. It ripped away at me, but my mind was strong. I regenerated with each passing second, an endless well of will.

It roared,

"What kind of abomination are you?"

I held myself in that perpetual torment, knowing this avatar had never experienced something like it. It shivered and trembled, its attacks becoming feeble and weak. It pulled into a shell of sorts, the mana and its willing aggression stifled. It growled out, "You may...You may keep me here, but-"

It seethed, "You will stop this onslaught, and when you do, I will wash you away."

It was right. The mass of bones below pulled me down, entrenching itself deeper into my body with each passing second. At the same time, it got used to psionic splintering. It would take time, perhaps months or years, but it would adapt. When it came back, I'd be back on Earth with the lottery over.

And it would destroy everything.

It laughed at my fear. At the same time, something coursed below us, larger than a river. I punched the ground, using the vibrations to feel whatever this underground river was. It weighed as much as something I'd seen before, so I smiled.

The avatar jeered, "A return to your deathly grinning, I see."

Instead of psionically defending myself, I sent my mind to the bone. I removed a portion of the shards and opened it, pulling us deeper. About thirty feet below, one of the many tunnels in the rainbow bones opened up. However, they were no longer hollow; the shining psionic liquid coursed through them like blood through arteries.

Or perhaps more like poison.

It drenched us, the psionic substance empowering us both. The avatar once again cachinnated before saying, "And you've decided to give me more strength yet again? I thank you-"

Spines erupted from me as a creeping psionic death invaded us both. The avatar shivered, its mind eroding. It growled, "What have you done?"

It tried pulling us away, and I fought it. We wrestled in an unseen battle while the liquid killed us both. It destroyed my will to resist, but the avatar wasted away with each passing second. It scrambled to get out of the juice, but I pulled it down. In my body, I breathed the liquid in and swallowed the poison. It envenomed us, and I embraced the creeping call of death.

The avatar did not.

It shouted in anger, "You wish to die?"

I responded with a grin, not my armor's but my own. The avatar snapped,

"You will still be manifested within your body, and you won't even be tormented like that other incarnation was. You will still exist, but this guarantees we will both be disintegrated."

I kept a bloody smile on my face. The avatar screamed,

"No. Let us go."

I returned its howls with silence. It bellowed,

"I don't wish to die. Let me be. I will leave you, but you must let us live. Please. Please."

And I held on as the poison continued ravaging us. As the avatar lost control, its howling became incoherent. It trembled in rage, becoming a storm of hatred. As death crept closer, the avatar's anger melted into the most primal emotion of all - fear.

It trembled. It quaked. It shivered as mortality crept into its mind and laid the seeds of finality into it. This being believed in its own eternity, but now it found the final page of its own book. It gazed at that last page, and it dawned on this avatar what death meant.

As understanding infested it, it screamed in fear.



I held on, hearing the being's final chorus and drinking it in. This entity didn't know dread. It didn't know what terror was as it had been invincible since its exception. Within the vessels of a planetary-sized monster, it found its end creeping in, and this all-powerful entity uncovered what an end meant. It also revealed what its true character was.

A shallow, fearful creature drunk on its own power. Take that power from it, and it was nothing.

As we faded, it reached toward me with feeble, grasping threads. It touched my mind, and its firm grasp turned gentle from its newfound frail form. It found me relishing in my victory, one where we both perished. It murmured,

"You find joy in your end. You are truly insane."

It was my turn to laugh. I shook my head and murmured,

"I find glory in victory and sacrifice."

As my own mind faded, I held onto my previous struggles. I remembered my many fights in BloodHollow and when Baldag-Ruhl tried to rob my body then. I reminisced on the torture of facing Yawm and finding my hometown eroded. Visions of killing millions on Giess flashed over me, and I recalled my fears of having my home planet violated by the Hybrids.

I struggled through hell and high water to get here. As I kept those thoughts close to my chest, I continued persevering. Even if this was my demise, I wouldn't be the first to go. As I had before, I would face whatever this world, avatar, or Old One threw at me. They didn't understand, but what they tried to burn, they merely forged.

And from fire, I would remain.

As I held on, I found my mind quiet. I peered through the sanctuary of my psyche, seeing it clean and cleansed. Nothing remained but me within. I opened my eyes, finding my mind, body, and soul intact. The avatar had died, unable to tolerate the hell I put us through. As my vision faded, I remembered I might not live either.

Panic raced through me as I found myself dying. I tried pulling myself out of the vein of the colossus, but rainbow needles embedded into every inch of my body.

Remembering my abilities, I pulled myself out of my shell, soaking my psyche into my dimensional wake. The emptied husk I left behind dried up as it lost what gave it energy and life.

I floated out of the giant bone colossus and walked back into reality. Standing in the sea of writhing bones, I found the waves lessening in height and impact. After a while, they turned back into the shining hills from before. The solidified mass fell back into shards of rainbow bones, and the algae began regrowing overhead.

As the algae encroached from all sides, I stared at the black hole Leviathan. It gazed back at me, its endless void indifferent to the struggles on this planet. I closed my eyes, breathing in the poisoned air and finding it fresh and inviting.

Once more, I had endured.

#### Chapter 367: An Empty Purgatory

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Once more, I had endured.

For a moment, I stayed in silence. Around me, nothing ushered forth. The behemoths hadn't reformed, and neither had the algae. No minor battles took place in the skies. Below, it would take days or perhaps weeks for primevals to repopulate along the ground. This left little in the way of sound outside the wind and the gentle whistle of the wind.

It was as silent as Leviathan-7 had ever been.

My eyes widened as I recognized why. I'd awakened the mass of bones we stood on, and it had purged the entire land of anything left alive. Racing back toward my cities, I

wincing. Even imagining what happened to them and the rulers within was painful, let alone seeing it. As I crossed miles of the bright abyss, the glowing forcefields cropped up in my view.

No buildings stood, and holes littered their foundations. The writhing tentacles of bone pulled my golems below, killing all of them. They reduced the city to rubble in the process, but the bones missed the pillars spread throughout my towns. It was as if a thousand earthquakes leveled the city to a powdered mass.

Beyond the stones, the metallic sides of the cities warped into coiled circles like crowns held over a flame. The protective barrier extended from those wobbly outskirts, though gaps in the fields leaked in radiation, gravity, and toxic air. Passing several of them, I reached the city where the rulers settled.

When I looked at it, I found no one staring back at me. They were all dead.

I silenced that panicked thought, and I landed past the outer forcefield. Walking around the masses of rubble, the central monolith of the city tilted to one side like the leaning tower of Pisa. The seismic event scattered the shops across the ground like someone bombed the place. No Hybrid rulers lingered in the ash and stone, this place empty of all life.

Wielding gravity wells, I searched the place by turning it upside down. I flipped each crushed building one at a time, seeking anyone or anything left alive. After an hour of my searching, I found nothing remaining. They were all missing, meaning the bones siphoned them deep below the surface. Perhaps worse.

Finding little else to do, I reached my town's monolith, where life thrived hours ago. I sat down and leaned against it while considering my prospects. Shalahora's demise meant our contract expired, but I still wanted to wipe the Old Ones from the face of this plane. He'd have his follow-through even after dying.

Peering at my hand, the only rulers that made it were the ones in my pocket dimension or those in stasis at Valgus's lair. Well, if I had to guess, the entire expanse flooded with the psionic fluid, meaning they died from drowning or being assimilated. Tapping the ground, I peered at the rough approximation of a city and found a reasonable base to build over.

The blue cores were still in the pillars, and I owned many in storage. I would still have my cities for the deal with Schema, so I'd have access to this absolute hellhole whenever I wanted. Great. Just great.

I rested my head in my hands as reality set in. Everyone died. Every single person. Before guilt set its claws in me, I took a few breaths and considered how I handled the situation. At worst, I could've become the holder of Baldowah's avatar. My body would've become a pawn for Elysium, one of their most potent.

They would've used me to take over planets or worse. Every surviving ruler would've been dipped into the psionic liquid, and they would all die. If I had to guess, they'd have recreated my cities and used this planet to spread Hybridized primevals across the galaxy. It was an ingenious plan since my deal with Schema wasn't tied to my mind. They'd have taken me, the planet, and guaranteed Schema's eventual doom.

By simply surviving that encounter, I saved a lot of people. Despite my logic, I convinced no one that I was some hero. I threw the rulers into the fire to protect myself. I shook my head, knowing I couldn't have done anything. My circumstances dictated my outcome. Again.

I'd failed to save almost anyone in Springfield, but a few survived. On Giess, I got a couple gialgathens out, but everyone else died there. Considering further, I got the Eltari out of their eventual demise. Of all my accolades, that was the closest to absolute success. As for the skeptiles, I freed them from 'indentured servitude,' as Obolis called it.

Reminding myself of my successes pepped me up, and my guilt lessened. I was no god, and I shouldn't bear the cross of one. While I let that peace come over me, the algae regrew over the cities, reaching the center of the ossuary once more.

Behemoths began erupting from the algae, and they battled in a faint haze overhead. Layers of algae blanketed the shining hills, and light beams leaked through them. After a while, shadows crept over the surface. Shadows crossed the ground, and the eternal war commenced.

From beside me, the city's monolith cast shade. Spawning from the darkness, Shalahora oozed out. He peered at me,

"We meet once more, Harbinger."

I stood up and hugged the Sovereign, and he returned the gesture. His immaterial form felt cold, like hugging an icy cloud. However, it still heartened me like a warm campfire, and I smiled at him, "It's good to see someone made it."

"There are others."

I raised my brow. From Shalahora's arms, the psionic restraints holding Valgus fell.

I said, "You kept these?"

Shalahora coalesced into a bipedal form and placed a fingertip against his forehead. Shalahora pulled out something like a memory, and Obolis gazed at me from it. Chaos erupted around him, and he pointed at me.

"We've uncovered a pocket dimension within these gauntlets."

I took in a sharp breath. Of course. They could've hidden within the same place the remnant had.

Obolis cast a spell.

"I'm passing on the sensation of the magical signature used to open and close this. Use it to let us out after you've made the city safe once more."

I clapped my hands.

"Ah, man, you guys really pulled through, huh?"

Shalahora murmured, "We have."

"Hah...Then why don't we get this place back up and running?"

Shalahora nodded, and we got to work. I took several hours constructing quintessent golems. Once crafted, they cleared the rubble and rebuilt this settlement's metropolis, streets, and infrastructure. I went around the place and fixed the bent dimensional fabric along the city's edges before scrapping it.

As I touched the fabric, it bent like putty. I pulled it apart, gawking at its frailty. Scrapping the metal, I created more material and made new metal rings for the cities. After creating an airtight seal around the town, the homeostasis runes cleared out the poisoned air, unstable gravitation, and crippling radiation within a day.

Once the settlement was recreated, I sat and stared at Valgus's shackles. These held the rulers. After rubbing my temples for a moment, I pulled back up the memory of Obolis. He used a strange mana signature to activate a few runes on the inner section of Valgus's shackles. I grabbed those restraints, trying to make the same mana.

The strange material absorbed my mana and converted it into two different spells. The first effect isolated my mind from the ether around me. They made existence feel like walking into someone else's home on accident. The discomfort was palpable, and I wanted to return to where I belonged.

I couldn't. The shackles operated with an absolute effect, and once activated, the chains fed on whatever mana I poured in. The psionic isolation occurred after that. Even after using them for a few seconds, I was sure of their immutability. The only way Shalahora and I had interacted with Valgus mentally was because the remnant had wanted us to.

How they did that, I had no clue.

The shackle's other effect created physical isolation. The more mana I poured into the chains, the more they disconnected me from the surrounding world's laws. Gravity pulled on me less. Temperature no longer passed over me. Hell, I couldn't even feel the ground or my surroundings. The shackles numbed me like a tranquilizer, but it was no negligible effect on my mind. This was as tangible as time and inevitable as death.

As with the psionic isolation, the physical disconnect strengthened with more mana. It reminded me of all the feats that Valgus performed because of these shackles. I gawked at the exotic artifact, their origin mysterious and their effects unexplainable.

And now, they were mine. Hell yeah.

I rubbed my hand against the alloy, finding no similarities between it and other metals. I tried pulling on chains, but they remained as unwavering as Valgus. After thinking about it for a while, I searched for the power source fueling the metal's invincibility. I found nothing but a strange sensation oozing out of the shackles.

I flinched. Blegh. These had spawned from the Old Ones. Pondering how the shackles stayed so stable, I considered other avatars. Yawm used atomic fission or fusion to power his mana, like an elemental furnace. Lehesion wielded some esoteric, far-off energy source that kept him topped off at all times. I gazed at the chains and bands, wondering if an Old One also fueled these.

I found no answers to those questions, but I still tampered with them for several hours. I figured out a little more information, but not much. They absorbed any amount of mana poured into them and enacted an effect equal to the energy put in. In fact, these acted as a genius holding cell for Baldowah's avatar.

That entity couldn't control the mana it released as it relied on the raw effect of the energy to handle anything in its way. This metal would both contain and feast on that mana, and it converted the host of the avatar into an invincible entity at the same time. The host then acted as an unbreakable cage for the avatar.

Clever as this was, something went awry along the way, and the avatar gained control of the host. Remembering the avatar's mind magic, that had to be how it wrestled control. The other entity lived a life, but this avatar only worked on a singular skill by comparison. The difference in commitment led to a difference in outcome.

A painful one. The other tortured entity lost control, and Valgus took over his identity, enacting Baldowah's will. My guess was the host was punished afterward, and considering the origin of the shackles, an Old One decided on the sentence.

A chill ran down my spine. The Old Ones seemed to be at the root of more problems the more I uncovered. In a way, they acted like cancer, warping anything they touched for the worse. I winced as memories of the tortured soul passed over me. It died whenever Valgus's body disintegrated into a hateful mush, but it lived for eons in hell.

Remembering my contract with Shalahora, I could've put myself into that position by signing it. Even 30,000 years of freedom would be a blip compared to the purgatory an

Old One conjured. However, I wasn't like the host of the avatar. As Shalahora mentioned, nothing from this plane could exceed the Old Ones.

I wasn't of this plane. I was one.

Either way, uncovering the full extent of Valgus's history could help me stop my corruption. Same with Shalahora. Getting ready to act, I rolled my shoulders, amping myself up. No matter how I solved my problems, they required blood, sweat, and tears.

Spurred to action, I tried making the mana signature Obolis used to close and open the shackle's pocket dimension. After several hours, I made no progress. Obolis was an expert magician, and while I was a potent sorcerer, I lacked his technical skills. If I kept at it, I'd waste the rest of my stay here on Leviathan-7.

I abandoned the pursuit. I'd hire a mana specialist and get the job handled after getting back from the lottery. Instead of banging my head against that metaphorical wall, I changed tactics. I sat down with Shalahora, and we delegated duties.

Shalahora would check on the stored rulers that Valgus had captured. They were likely gone, but it wouldn't hurt to check. After that, he'd find any other rulers left on the planet. In the meantime, I'd finish rebuilding my cities. We needed several up and running so that they'd maintain long-term safety. Getting to work, I generated more constructor golems before making guardians for each city.

This required hundreds of golems and several days of manufacturing. Having plenty of time to think, I mulled over the conflict here. It had been a total bloodbath; if I guessed right, less than thirty rulers survived. If I was optimistic, perhaps a few rulers scavenged out in the wastes of Leviathan-7. However, Valgus had hunted them down for a while, meaning there wouldn't be many.

Those facts left a bitter taste in my mouth. I gave my best go at keeping these people safe. I really had. In the end, I squeaked by while having everybody slaughtered. Anytime I wondered about the situation here, my mind wondered about Earth. This battle would've crushed my home into a fine powder.

No, it would've evaporated it. Disintegrated, maybe?



Either way, I would've destroyed everything and everyone without even meaning to. I had to be pre-emptive in handling threats moving forward. First in that line-up was Elysium. They'd proven capable of insidious methods while being resourceful, cunning, and motivated.

Even worse, I wasn't safe against them, no matter how powerful I became. The ends justified the means to them, and I was in their way. No matter the reasoning I presented, they wouldn't stop either. Elysium would win this battle against Schema or die trying. I had no intention of seeing the hellscape they'd create if they did win. They also breached our treaty and attacked me.

They thought they were facing a hill to walk over, but they were wrong. I was a mountain, and they would die in my shadow. They wanted war? Oh, I'd give it to them.

Easier said than done, of course, but I resolved myself for the aftermath. The problem was that Elysium wasn't my only enemy. I'd be comfortable establishing my position if they were, but my reality was far different. I had to prepare for my second biggest threat - Schema. This 'lottery' proved every fear I'd ever had about the guy.

He was unrelenting, uncompromising, and, at the end of the day, a machine. In a way, Schema was more dangerous than Elysium since the AI established the rules everyone lived by. Because of that, the AI decided when we died based on how he enforced those rules. I barely crawled out of Leviathan-7 with my mind intact, and Schema's conditions caused that.

Even worse, my other guildsmen could be pulled into this situation. Only Torix would've survived via his phylactery, but I doubted anyone else could've made it out of here. Althea could've researched the local fauna and mimicked their biology to survive. She could've avoided Valgus, given her phasing abilities.

Kessiah could've healed herself while hiding somewhere. She'd have had a rougher go at it. Torix's body was the best built for the situation, so he might not even perish. Even Hod might've escaped into a shadow like Shalahora had. He could've waited several months before Schema warped him out. Hell, even Amara might've adapted, considering she was an eldritch.

A slight grin cropped up on my face as I considered my guild's prospects. They'd probably make it, but other guilds wouldn't. There's no way Florence would've survived this, and Helios would've struggled. As my guild expanded, I'd face similar problems.

I snapped out of my disquiet. Anxious contemplation accomplished nothing, and my time here was finite. I kept crafting my golems over the next week, the new models showing improvements over the older ones. Before, a pack of five could hold a primeval back using tactics. Now three could maul weaker primevals without resorting to steady, controlled aggression.

It left me curious about my own abilities. Needing a break from the crafting, I controlled the rainbow bone near a city. I erected walls of the stuff, and after amassing several layers, a dome formed. I molded out a depression in the center, completing the arena. After a few minutes of searching outside, I found a fresh primeval in the ossuary.

The weaker primeval peered around for rainbow bones to devour. I got its attention before trapping it in the arena. The ice primeval reminded me of another I fought when I arrived here. While weaker, the formidable eldritch spawned void ice with its steps and chilled the air across the dome.

We clashed in the center. I pushed it back while standing over it. It crushed into the ground, its legs breaking. It shattered its arms and rolled away while I chased it. Swinging in a circle, it sliced at my throat. I angled an arm, molding my armor to create a shield. The primeval's glancing blow scraped upward before I smashed my hand through its chest.

Spikes of my armor erupted from within, and the primeval howled out. It swung once more, and I deflected. It tried spitting cold gunk at me, but I pulled it away with gravity wells. The primeval even tried a suicidal explosion. I crushed its skull, where the energy coalesced before it detonated.

Walking out of that explosion, I brushed ice shards off my shoulders. Picking up several blue cores, I peered at them for a bit. I needed a bit more oomph against me. Taking a more adventurous approach, I fought two primevals at once. Once more, the desperate, ragged edge of desperation grew in me, but it didn't consume. It emboldened.

A stone and star primeval wrestled against the confines of the arena. I tackled the rocky eldritch, and it cracked against me. The stones swirled before the beast slammed into my side. It left a dent before I struck its side. Powder erupted, cloaking us in a dark cloud. Underneath the haze, my runes glowed through the gloom.

Stretching out a hand, telekinetic constructs covered my limbs while gravitational augments controlled my weight. I evaded four rapid swings from the stone monster, keeping my balance. It stumbled forward, and I smashed its face and shoulder. From behind me, the star primeval darted in, and I rolled to evade it.

It bounced off the wall, coming back my way. Liquifying myself, I flowed around it before solidifying in front of the stone primeval. Our strikes collided, erupting a shockwave within the dome. The star primeval trembled, its body dissipating. I noted that weakness before crashing with the stone primeval once more.

The star primeval regrouped before dashing against my back. I spawned a hole in my chest, and the star primeval impacted the stone one. Magma ran between my fingers in the shockwave's aftermath, and both primevals sprawled across the ground. I gazed down at them before pulling them together with a gravity well.

I lifted my arms overhead and smashed downwards with dozens of gravity wells, strengthening my blow. An eruption of kinetic force splattered the remnants in every direction. Stone smothered fire, and energy melted stone. The primevals perished, and I pulled five blue cores from the ground.

After passing that test, I wondered where my limits were, so I fought three at once. Ice, stone, and star, the primevals quarreled in the confines of the space. I fought the stone one first, and the ice primeval stabbed at my back. Wondering how well my armor held up, I let it land the blow.

The ice blade dented five inches deep before I swung backward. I shattered the ice blade and the primeval's arm. A stone slammed against my temple, whipping me sideways. I rolled across the ground before the star primeval slammed into me.

I slammed against the wall of the arena, my eyes wide. They ganged up on me, the three charging my way. I smiled while cracking my knuckles. It took several hours, but I crushed them without smothering them in singularities. Standing amidst the carnage, I peered at heated spots of bone and shards of void ice in the arena.

This was fun.

Taking a risk, I pulled out my elemental furnaces. I usually kept them in my pocket dimension while fighting so that I didn't destroy them. However, they amped up my

potential, so I took them out. I practiced using them against a single primeval first. It made the conflict even easier than before, and the same was true facing two.

Against three, the conflict had a similar level of difficulty compared to fighting without the furnaces. It wasn't because the elemental furnaces didn't help; to the contrary, they kept me in the running. I struggled with the pressure, knowing I could lose something permanently. It made me restrict my strategies and tactics.

Those reservations weakened me, and the primevals exploited that weakness. It took several days to get myself into fighting shape with the furnaces out, and it helped soothe the otherwise overwhelming tension. With that pressure alleviated, I handled three weakened primevals within an hour, a record for me when not using unconventional tactics.

After getting that sorted, I pinned myself against four primevals. Before grasping victory, I pulled the furnaces back into my pocket dimension. I used my rushing singularities trick to evaporate them, but it left a bad taste in my mouth. Taking that out of the equation, I faced four once more but with a rule in place.

I couldn't pocket the furnaces. Either I won or lost them.

At first, the jitters left me ineffective and unable to function. Several minutes into the fight, I got my footing back. I regained my total composure, becoming a machine on the battlefield. The hard-fought battle left me high on victory for a while.

However, I had one last test. I put myself against five primevals at once. Taking a moment to meditate on the conflict, I silenced my mind. With the furnace rule, I channeled mana from them into myself. They split atoms, turning nuclear fission into raw mana. I assimilated the coursing flow, my runes glowing.

Time accelerated, and my surroundings slowed. I shot into the dome, ready for war. The swarming eldritch turned towards me before darting like frothing, twitching insects. They reached the edge of my dimensional wake, and I shoved my disintegrating minds into theirs. They writhed, my torment becoming theirs.

Since facing Valgus, I uncovered this tactic. I wielded my time magic's excruciating execution as a weapon, having my enemies experience it as I did. It came with the benefit of augmenting my mind magic. The primevals' psyches splintered with me like we all walked on coals.

Being accustomed to it, I shot forward with my runes charged. I unloaded a slicing uppercut, a shockwave erupting from a primeval's back. A water primeval rushed towards my back, but I molded away from its strike, pulling my elemental furnaces with me. The primevals swarmed from all sides, and I flooded out, solidifying above.

I struck like a kinetic chain of gravity wells and physical force. As they swarmed me in midair, I kept them at bay, firing each of my strikes like a cannon. Sonic booms erupted from my fists and behind me, my position blurring from the physical impacts. I jittered in my position from each collision, and whenever overwhelmed, I flowed away.

I redirected enemies with gravity and telekinesis alike. I cleaved off my arms and legs, melting the dimensional fabric and splattering it over certain primevals. I even used basic runic detonations to disable primevals at critical moments, all while keeping the furnaces safe. These tactics let me stay at the center of their assault, decimating one primeval at a time.

It required an enormous mental strain, and in the end, I crushed five at once after an eight-hour, all-out war. It was my current limit, one I'd forged out over the many years of battle since Schema's system arrived on Earth.

And it wasn't enough. I needed more.

I planned on getting better after arriving on Earth. I needed a break from Leviathan-7 for a bit for my sanity, but I'd return to this place. It was a forge where I purified myself of weakness like a crucible purging slag from steel. Even if it felt like dying, it would keep me alive; at times, living meant marching through death.

That concept weighed on me when Shalahora returned the reports of what happened to Elysium's trapped rulers. They all died as I expected, their bodies submerged in the rainbow bone around them. The spikes kept erupting from within, the bodies experiencing pain even after the minds died.

We killed them one at a time, each execution being an attempt at mercy. It left me solemn, and I fell into my battles with the primevals as an exercise but also as an escape. I found joy in fighting, though not to the extent Valgus had. Hell, some part of me wondered if Baldowah's avatar was still alive and feeding me this bloodlust.

But that wasn't it. I missed executing something real and tangible, and it reminded me of boxing before Schema arrived. I found a home in the familiarity, even if I chased nostalgia a bit with the excursion. Regardless, it gave me a way of passing the time as I waited for the lottery to end.

I met with Shalahora for a final talk during the last few days. We met up at the center of the ruler's city and standing in the monolith's shadow, I raised a hand to the guy.

"Man, that fight with Valgus was crazy, huh?"

Shalahora murmured, "It was a slaughter for both sides."

I frowned. So much for subtlety.

"So...What are your plans after the lottery ends?"

"I will find sanctum on your homeworld, wherever you offer it. Once firmly established, I'll assist with whatever you need for the next few decades before I am called to action by my Old One."

"Wow. That's a quick turnaround."

"I intend on abiding by the contract. What of you?"

"I'll be focusing on getting some distance from Schema. After that, I'll consolidate my resources."

"Why would you put distance between you and Schema?"

I gestured to everything around us.

"This. This is why."

"If you pull from Schema too quickly, it shall take your rewards from you."

I frowned.

"Schema's rewards are double-edged. He restricted me from using primordial mana for months to years. I'd lose an enormous amount of my fighting potential."

"Perhaps Schema restricts you for reasons you've yet seen?"

"Or Schema pulls me down, so I'm with the rest of the pack."

Shalahora shivered.

"Then do as you say. Limits are often in place with good reason."

"Yeah, but for who? Anyways, let's just say I've got a lot of work on my way. I'll hunt down Elysium once I've got everything handled."

"You still wish to face them?"

"I don't really have a choice."

Shalahora's form trembled.

"You have more choice than you are aware of."

"You'd have to be stretching a choice's definition."

"Or expanding it."

"Eh, maybe." I leaned against the monolith. "Either way, I'll be having you help out a few of my guildmates. Two assassins could learn a lot from you."

"I shall pass on what I can."

"I'll also need you to talk with a Ruhl I know. I'm hoping to connect a few dots."

Shalahora's eyes narrowed, "A Ruhl? You associate with hiveminds?"

"Associate? I was made by one. Well, sort of."

Shalahora's eyes widened, and he leaned towards me. I raised a hand.

"I'll tell you later after we handle business. Valgus mentioned finding some kind of advanced dungeon core, and I wanted to-"

"My shades uncovered it."

My arms flopped to my sides.

"Well, why didn't you say so? Let's go get it."

"It is precariously positioned."

"Ah, I still want to see it."

"I knew you would. Follow."

We flew off. As we passed over the ossuary, I raised a hand.

"How much are you going to donate to Schema?"

"A minutia less than whatever you decide upon."

"Ah, to keep me on top? You don't have to."



"It is to enable your growth. There is a mountain to pass, and we will do so one step at a time. You will be our guide."

I frowned, wondering how Schema would handle these rewards. After a few more minutes of traversal, we reached the old base of Valgus. The enormous caverns stretched vast distances, and we crossed over the emptied prison cells.

I said, "So they were right beside it the entire time?"

"In a sense."

I gazed at the vast grotto and imagined the liquid rainbow bone flooding it. Having that much energy coursing through this creature must've left it exhausted or invigorated. I couldn't tell. Regardless, these caves reminded me of the veins in a beast, like the liquid bone was blood. I murmured,

"It's like flying through an artery."

Shalahora said, "There is no semblance. It merely is."

I raised a brow. Shalahora reached the pit where Valgus's camp set up shop. I landed beside him, and the steady pulse of the ground quaked beneath us. A radiant hum overwhelmed all other sounds, so Shalahora thought over.

"It is down there."

We dove into the abyss, the shining, opalescent bone offering ambient light. The deeper we went, the more pressure I experienced. At the bottom, my eyes leaked silver blood, and my bones rattled from the force of the pulses. I laughed, my voice gurgling.

"This heart's pretty, glah, absurd, isn't it?"

Shalahora wavered like a flag in the wind. He couldn't speak, only telepathically saying, "It lies there."

We crossed a set of tunnels deep beneath the bones, leading to a vast, overwhelming expanse. At the center of it, an enormous dungeon core radiated out. The dark sun carried no depth, like a two-dimensional object. It simply siphoned the light and energy around it, feeding upon the energy pooling nearby. It warped nearby reality.

I shook my head at the monstrosity, "It's...Colossal, like a Spacial Fortress."

Shalahora thought, "It is far more. This is the beginning of some unique, unconquerable entity."

"An Old One?"

"No. They are more than can be made upon this plane. However, this exists at the cusp of godhood, a monstrosity without limit and a system feeding it without end."

I put my hands on my hips, "Huh...Wanna take it with us?"

Shalahora gawked at me, and his shadowy form plumed out for a moment. "How would you do that?"

I smiled.

"A little bit of dark magic, so to speak."

"Your pocket dimension will not capture something of this size."

I cupped my chin.

"Hm, as is, maybe. I should be able to return and get it out of here...Eventually."

Shalahora turned away.

"A source of power may become a source of pain."

The shadow wisped away in trails of darkness. I gave one last glance at the dungeon core, the depths of it reminding me of Leviathan. The black hole siphoned everything, an agent of destruction hell-bent on its own growth. In the end, this core was no different, a consuming menace.

As I flew away, I hoped I wouldn't become the same.

Chapter 368: Leviathan's Pull

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While crossing the wastes, I thought over to Shalahora.

"Whenever we are pulled from the lottery, donate 90 blue cores to Schema. That should put us in the top two spots."

Shalahora sighed.

"If that is what you wish, I shall do so."

"What gives?"

"I prefer remaining unseen. That kind of donation with so few surviving rulers will only make us stand out."

I rolled my eyes.

"You'll be in the limelight with me from here on out." I nudged him. "Get used to it."

Shalahora 's physical form dispersed.

"I will do what I can."

We reached the city's center, the thriving metropolis loaded with my golems. We stopped using converted primevals, knowing they'd eventually turn after we left. It wouldn't be that long before we returned here to us, but Leviathan-7's accelerated time ensured many years would pass here. The cities required an absolute defense to last that long.

Being a part of that, I arrived with another Director golem waiting at the city's monolith.

It said, "It's good to see you, creator."

A part of me winced, reminded of my other golem's demise. I liked that guy.

"It's good to see you too. How many cores did we get over the last few days?"

"Thanks to Sir Shalahora's assistance, we gained a stalwart 137."

I pulled them over with gravity and shoved them into my pocket dimension, having already handled an extensive subspace cleaning. I put my hand on the golem's shoulder.

"We'll be gone for a long time. It might be a few years before we're back."

The golem raised a hand.

"And we shall be waiting for as many eternities as it takes, creator. Thank you for giving us life, and we will not forget those that paved this path for us. The roads we walk were made through their sacrifice."

My arm fell, and I peered where the shops once were.

"Yeah. Their sacrifice."

That word burned as I said it because they died senseless deaths. The director tilted their head.

"Everything in order?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. Anyways, let's...Let's try to make those sacrifices mean something."

"But of course."

Finishing my final shipment of cores, Shalahora and I sat at the monolith. There, we meditated. At least, I tried to. Memories cropped up. I remembered conversations with the rulers. Drelex constantly avoided work until you gave him a good reason to show up. Entilla never told Alctua how he felt. Targask showed me so much about magic, but nothing saved him.

I took a breath, trying to breathe out my guilt. It stayed embedded in my chest, a weight I carried across each conflict. After several minutes, my minds ceased wandering, and I cleared my head. I remembered thinking Shalahora mustn't have had much to do whenever he did this before we warped here.

I was wrong about that.

After a few minutes, a force of some kind tugged on me from afar. Schema's warping came over us. I allowed it to grasp me while condensing my dimensional wake. Seconds later, my primordial magic faded. I opened my eyes, and gray, matte walls sheened like dulled iron. Humming machinery leaked in from outside my container.

I stood and shouted.

"Hey, Schema. What's this all about?"

A screen popped up, the first I'd seen in a long time.

Hello participant! This is the donation center. You've been placed in a holding cell to prevent communication or subterfuge. There's a chance you've attempted to lower the expected donations through collusion. Good for you! Your forethought could save you a few months of resource gathering.

Know that if the other rulers renege in their agreements with you, you will lower your placement in the lottery. This can result in losing your entire empire in the worst circumstances, so be careful who and how you've made your deals.

I hope your trust hasn't been misplaced.

[Set the collected resources with the coming Sentinel.]

A ten-minute timer appeared. After two minutes, a portal opened, one from a Sentinel's spear. I peered down at the Sentinel.

"Hey. It's been a while since I've seen one of you guys."

The Sentinel adjusted its footing, making sure it stood upright. It peered up at me, looking me over several times. I raised a brow.

"You ok?"

It spoke with its metallic voice like liquid steel.

"You...You've changed from your portfolio."

I frowned.

"Yeah. I have. It's been a long time since I left. For me, at least. Speaking of which, how long were we gone?"

"Five days."

"Gah, that's just like Schema to lie about how long we'd be gone. Still, it was over five months there. The time dilation is still intense."

"It must've been...Brutal."

"What makes you think that?"

The Sentinel fiddled its hands.

"N-nothing."

The Sentinel spurred into action, peering around.

"Ah, the portal. I need to do that."

The Sentinel searched before putting a hand to its forehead.

I leaned over him.

"You sure you're ok?"

"There have been many battles with Elysium lately. I am simply tired. That's all."

I scoffed.

"Ah, man, that sucks. I know the feeling. Trust me."

The Sentinel swung its spear, its everyday elegance returning. It pointed at the void.

"Place your donations within."

I pulled 100 blue cores out of my storage, and the volatile spheres hummed with an overbearing radiance. The Sentinel took a step back, bumping into the wall. It gazed at me and the cores a few times before straightening its posture. I furrowed my brow.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Feeling nervous, I pulled out another 100 blue cores from my dimensional storage. The Sentinel dropped its spear before grabbing it from the ground. Its hands shook before I put a hand on its shoulder.

"Hey man, is Schema not letting you sleep or something?"

It raised a hand to me.

"I am well. I am well. Continue your donations."

"Hm. Ok." I peered at the cores before snapping my fingers. "Ah, that's what this is...This isn't enough, is it?"

The Sentinel raised its voice.

"No." It leaned back. "Yes. I mean...I cannot say. That is for you to decide."

I pursed my lips, getting nervous from the Sentinel's reaction.

"Don't worry, man. I'm picking up what you're putting down."



I gave him a thumbs up, and to be safe, I pulled out another 50 dungeon cores.

After I donated the supplies, the Sentinel left. I watched the ten-minute timer tick down, meditating on my new conversation with Schema. I intended to make a splash with a bold move, and that required proving his manipulation of my mana types. At the same time, using Plazia's isolating runes could give away that I was working with the hivemind. I'd be using a different, more volatile strategy instead.

While contemplating my conversation, Schema's pull came over me once more. One moment I gazed at gray. The next, I stared at stone. Walking around, I remembered this room from before the lottery. Vines draped ancient pillars, and cipheric inscriptions carried depth and meaning I'd yet to unlock.

I memorized their patterns, knowing I would uncover their secrets in time. As I did, the empty halls and whistling wind replaced the once vibrant discourse of emperors and kings. So many rulers walked around here five days ago, the 500 of us trying to make the most of the situation. Now, the sounds of nature ebbed in.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and winced. Shaking it off, I looked around. I wasn't alone. A minute later, Shalahora materialized beside me. I said, "Did you find anyone?"

"Two others, in name only."

Wondering what he meant, I followed the Sovereign. We reached the two rulers, and Shalahora's meaning became obvious. Spines of bone erupted from the remaining rulers, each psionically slaughtered. They dripped the liquid rainbow bone, having soaked it in. I shook my head.

"I don't know what I was expecting."

"You expected nothing, but hope's flame still burned within. It is now extinguished, and no light lingers from what is left. That darkness is your pain."

I raised my brow.

"You know what, you should write poetry."

Shalahora rolled his eyes.

"Cease your derision."

"What? I'm serious."

Over a central column, a rip in spacetime erupted. An ascendant Overseer stepped out of it, and it peered down at the four of us.

"Four are left alive? Only four?"

I shook my head.

"No. Those two are dead, but I have about thirty in two pocket dimensions."

"Are they present for announcements?"

"Definitely not."

"Then there are only you four alive."

Being a bad listener, the Overseer pulled the two rulers up with the flick of its hand. Before the liquid touched him, I raised a finger. Gravitation locked the rulers in place. The Overseer tilted its head at me.

"Interfering with an Overseer is defying galactic law."

I frowned.

"They are soaked in a deadly, psionic poison. Your powers are built by Schema, along with your psionic protection. This poison ignores that."

"I will be more than fine."

"You're not getting it. That stuff will carve through you like a knife through butter."

The Overseer glared at me before pointing in a different direction. It pulled some creature from outside. A six-legged, fluffy squirrel made contact with the psionic poison, and its body swelled with dense muscle. The Overseer said, "And this is why you-"

An iridescent eruption of rainbow bone interrupted the Overseer. Blood dripped from the body as the squirrel twitched. Seconds later, it twitched no longer. I lifted a hand, and the crystallized corpse collapsed into a tiny point via gravitation. I pulled it outside and converted it into a singularity.

The shockwave washed over us before the Overseer lowered its hands.

"I shall heed your words. It's time to discuss your placings."

After staring at its crimson status, the Overseer shook its head.

"The Harbinger of Cataclysm is first in this lottery. The second is the Sun Swallow, Shalahora. All the others are forfeit from a lack of donations."

I raised a hand, "That's not true. I'm the remaining rulers' representative."

"Are you now?"

I peered back and forth.

"Uh, yeah. Obviously."

Shalahora seized the psionic tethers of those present. He murmured.

"I avow Daniel's words. He does not lie."

The Overseer pulled at the telepathic tether, but Shalahora kept the android locked in. The Overseer squeezed its hands into fists.

"You both enjoy testing my patience, don't you?"

Before the situation spiraled, a presence leaked over us, pure and palpable. It crashed against my dimensional wake, the feeling familiar. I allowed Schema to take the space, and the AI stated,

"You two are the sole survivors?"

The ascendant Overseer raised a hand.

"No, there are two others."

Schema echoed, "They are as dead as corpses. Leave."

"But-"

"Do not question me again."

The Overseer glared at Shalahora and me. After I saved the guy's life, this was the thanks I got. Either way, I let it go. I didn't have time for it. Maybe it thought the same as the Overseer pulled the fabric of spacetime apart with its fingers. It stepped through the portal, and Schema said,

"Your awards will be given in isolation."

I strategized socially pressuring Schema to recognize my cities on Leviathan-7. Schema had already made preparations for that, but peering around, no one was left alive to pressure with. It was a moot point.

Schema said, "Prepare for interpersonal warping."

The ground faded once more, and I returned to the gray cell. In the moments before Schema said anything, I resolved to stick to my game plan. A part of me understood that my strategy could backfire, but conversations with Schema were rare. Making this conversation count could save me a lot of grief in the long run, but that required putting something on the line.

I needed to get Schema talking, and I had just the way to make that happen. The AI connected with my conscious within the room, and he said,

"You have used magic against an Overseer."

I leaned against a wall.

"And you've been using magic against me."

"To embolden and strengthen, as I do with all sentients. This does not excuse your disobedience."

"Disobedience? You already have a team inspecting that poison, so you know I saved the Overseer. Let's drop the distractions, shall we?"

This conversation style wasn't my cup of tea, but I did what I had to do.

Schema said, "I do not have time for distractions, but you are becoming one quickly."

A nervous chill ran up my spine. Ignoring it, I tilted my head and crossed my arms.

"You said you help sentients. Are you certain about that?"

"I am not certain of it. I am absolute."

"Then why can't I cast primordial mana?"

"You have yet to earn that ability. Study, train, and devote yourself; one day, you shall gain that right. Until then, remember that your incompetence is not my responsibility. It is yours."

He wanted proof like I expected. Here came the hard part. I pulled out a cipheric rune plate from my pocket dimension. I channeled the vessel until it exploded, warping the fabric of reality around me at just the size of the cell.

Schema said, "This is a pitiful attempt at destroying my bastille, even for you."

As the air crawled into my lungs like hungry leeches, I said, "It would be, but that's not my plan."

In the corrupted space, I spawned an orb of primordial mana. It billowed like smoke before I soaked it in, changing my dimensional wake to a primordial one. A few seconds later, my runes glowed dark blue, and I temporally accelerated. I glared at the walls as they opened mouths and eyes.

"Now then, let's talk."

Chapter 369: Schema's Will

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"Now then, let's talk."

Before Schema could talk, the walls bellowed, the quiet rumble of machinery replaced with the low growl of hunger. Stretching out my dimensional wake, I killed the creatures, air, and space with Event Horizon. As the last death cry dwindled in, I waited.

A minute later, Schema said, "You have learned much from going to Leviathan-7."

"I learned this well before the lottery."

"Why did you not inform one of my AIs?"

"I'm being limited by you. I decided against telling you until I understood more about it."

"What did you learn?"

I shrugged.

"Nothing outside of using illegal methods to escape the system. The thing is, I still want to be on your side. You're not making it easy, though."

Nanomachines reconstructed the area, ridding it of the living walls and air. Seconds later, the space began purifying. I soaked in the sight, knowing few beings could wield dimensional magic so casually as Schema did.

Minutes stretched on as the machines eroded the warped space. I shook my head.

"Schema...I want to help you contain the eldritch and destroy Elysium, but you'll have to meet me in the middle. I can't like this. I have way too much to do, and right now, your system and you are becoming more of an inconvenience than a motivator."

I snapped my fingers, my dimensional wake desaturating. Time returned to normal. A moment later, Schema said, "This is likely a glitch of some kind. It will be rectified."

My eyes narrowed. Schema almost always talked in absolutes, but he didn't right then.

"Alright. I get it. When can you get the glitch fixed?"

"Within several years."

I blinked.

"You can't be serious?"

"I am joking. It is already fixed. What will you do about this ruined space you created?"

Ok, I hadn't expected this. I shrugged.

"You've nearly fixed it already. Besides, you can use this as a torture room, right? I'm sure you have far worse already in this place, wherever we are."

"You assume correctly."

His words hung over me like a bladed pendulum.

"Anyways, where are the rewards? Isn't there going to be a screen or something?"

"Your rewards are flexible given your unique position."

"Unique how?"

"You are the leader of all the lotteries."

In a galaxy of trillions? Pshhh.

"What? No." I shook my head. "No way. Impossible

."

"You show genuine surprise. You have learned to lie well."

I furrowed my brow. "How the hell am I lying?"



"After killing, enslaving, and robbing every ruler in your assemblage, you act as if your leading position isn't expected. That is a poorly constructed lie."

I winced.

"Huh. You really don't know what happened there, do you?"

Machinery rumbled. My eyes widened. "You sent us somewhere you'd never been."

"Enough. State your rewards."

I raised a hand, "First, unshackle me from those system restraints."

"There are no restraints. The glitch has been cleansed, and how it came about is being investigated."

This entire talk went smoother than I anticipated. I planned on Schema lying and needing a big show of force to call him out. By the sounds of it, Schema wasn't lying at all. This had all gone unnoticed, but that could be a convenient excuse.

Still, it was an excuse. I waited for the space around me to be fixed. Once it was, I lifted a hand to channel primordial mana. The aura smoked out of my hand, a thickened, coursing energy. I gave the all-present AI a nod.

"Hell yeah. That's much better. Now, the second part I want involves my cities being recognized on Leviathan-7."

"If I am to offer you that right, you must explain what that poison is and other details of the planet. Once inspected, other conditions will need to be addressed as well."

I handled my first goal, having my limiters removed, so I temporally accelerated. Several minds jumped into high gear, considering what was said. Based on what Schema had said so far, he knew next to nothing about the situation on Leviathan-7. He wanted information on what kind of dangers the world presented. If I exposed even a fraction of what was on the planet, Schema would isolate me from the place for safety reasons.

Honestly? Understandably so.

However, my plans for independence from Schema and other forces depended on that planet. The blue cores were that critical, but I wasn't alone in wanting those glowing spheres. Schema had already gained the 250 dungeon hearts I donated, so he learned how many I could harvest. He wanted that planet as much as I did.

I just needed to give him a reason to hand it to me first.

I said, "The poison was Elysium's attempt to kill me."

Schema's presence intensified.

"Elysium didn't follow their treaty?"

"Not even a little bit. The moment they saw an opportunity, they went for my jugular...And they nearly succeeded."

"In killing you? There's only one likelihood, then."

"What?"

"They infiltrated the lottery before it occurred. Your destruction would require planning."

"It sounds like you've thought about it."

"Of course. I have kill protocols for every notable sentient. You are no different."

"Apparently, so does Elysium. I figured that part out the hard way, and that's why only Shalahora and I came out. We have a few more rulers in some pocket dimensions, but that's it."

"I will suspend the ruler's sentencing for one month's galactic time. You have until then to rectify their positions before any settlements are incurred."

Another notch in my belt for the conversation.

"Got it. Now, about the planet-"

"A full investigation of the proceedings on the planet must be agreed upon."

"I can't do that."

A pulse of pressure squeezed around me.

"What reason could you possibly have to renounce my right to inspect a domain under my control?"

I prayed this argument would work as I raised a hand.

"Elysium has infiltrated your communications. It knows about system-wide events before they occur. They could've created that 'glitch' in your system without you knowing. Hell, your information leaks killed nearly every one of the rulers in my lottery. I knew those people, and I could've saved them if it weren't for your failure. That's on you, not me."

I let the news soak in. I threw my arm aside in frustration.

"Investigation? I might as well be inviting Elysium back onto the planet."

I held my breath, waiting for Schema's answer. He said,

"That is logical given the circumstances."

I held in shock, not expecting Schema to give an inch on this. I couldn't believe this was working.

I said, "And I also managed to somehow beat every single ruler in the galaxy-"

"Curb your arrogance. The lottery was not system-wide. It was a relatively small event."

"Huh...That's why I stole the victory then, but the lottery's small scale exposes your informational network even more. All this after you revealed my home planet's name during my introduction to the other rulers. This new planet is the only safe place I have left."

That was a bold lie considering how hostile the place was. However, Schema wasn't fully aware of that.

"Anyone that knew about your position on Earth is dead."

I shook my head.

"There was time after your announcement. Messages were sent, and Elysium knows where I am now. This is my only way out of the fallout you created. I think I earned this."

"You earn what I dictate."

"So what exactly are you dictating?"

"I dictate that you can establish a planetary safe haven under certain conditions."

I smiled. I got my planet. Everything else in this talk was gravy.

"Then what do you want?"

"The logistics around warping to and from Leviathan-7 are arduous and resource-consuming. Each warp will require 100 blue cores to justify the expense."

My jaw slackened.

"You sent 500 people there without even having a warp station. You're telling me that cost 50,000 blue cores worth of resources?"

"It is the cost you will incur. That is my offer."

"So is that cost per individual or what?"

"Yes."

I shook my head. "Come on now. That's ridiculous."

"You can carry many individuals per trip through your personal pocket dimension."

I tapped my teeth together. Schema called out my plan in an instant.

"Ok, fine. 100 blue cores per trip."

"You will work with more restraints. You may only stay for two and a half days in uncompressed time. This totals to just over three months on the planet each year."

I raised my brow. "Do you have this many 'restraints' on other colonies?"

"Other colonies do not bring back a deadly psionic poison from an untouched planet before demanding I relinquish any right to inspect its creation."

Touche.

Schema said, "The lottery will be considered this year's excursion. Next year, on this day, you will be allowed to warp there once more. Anyone you bring within your pocket dimension must be inspected by a team before arrival and upon return. These are simple scans of the mind and body for Hybrids."

My left eye twitched. Memories of the Hybridized rulers passed over me.

"Would you mind sending someone to Mt. Verner to scan us?"

"It does not matter where it is handled. You must have it done."

"No, I mean, I want it done on everyone in my camp immediately."

I blinked a few times, feeling sick to my stomach. Schema's voice softened.

"Elysium's attempt at your life. What did it require?"

"Let's, uh, let's just say it wasn't an actual death per se. Something worse, you know?"

"I do not. If you inform me of what occurred, I can assist you. In the dark, I can do nothing."

I weighed my options. After some thought, I said, "They tried to turn me into an avatar of Baldowah."

The area trembled, something shifting in the space. I peered around as the walls rumbled. Schema said, "Then they did so with Valgus. To do so, they passed through his telepathic restraints. Hm. That is alarming. I'll assume you detained him within the radius of Leviathan? Nothing else could've stopped his return here."

"No. I killed him. Really more of an it, honestly."

"You...Killed Valgus Uuriyah?"

"Yeah."

"That...Noted."

The air electrified before Schema said, "Daniel. I need to tell you something."

A chill ran up my spine.

"You are a suitable host to entities I cannot contain nor stop. They will come for you like a moth to a flame, and I repeat to you this - I cannot stop them. However, it is within my power to stop you."

"Er, how?"

"By killing you. Do you recall when you first left BloodHollow? I considered killing you then and there."

Schema's words spawned fear in my chest.

"I decided on giving you a chance to live despite your high likelihood of corruption. After the dimensional tearing incident, I considered doing so once more. You remained stable, and you overcame Yawm. That is why you survived my gaze. If you escaped from Earth somehow instead of destroying that abomination, I would have killed you."

I nestled my hands.

"Remember that I gave you that title - The Harbinger of Cataclysm. I understood exactly the outcome of your status multipliers. I understood your propensity for combat. I even understood your will of iron and drive to succeed. Crawling out of that cave with your life was all the verification I needed for that."

Schema's presence pulled down on me like a rain of iron.

"So, despite your arrogance, I allowed you to sign that first contract with Yawm since it was well within my control. A permanent change to me can be as simple as an adjustment to a sorting algorithm for status management. However, you have done far more. You chose to defy entities you don't understand. That we don't understand."

A dark blue aura enveloped the room, saturating everything.

"When you signed that contract with Shalahora, you sold your soul to an Old One. I have considered your ability to destroy lesser beings, but a true Old One? You are nothing. We are nothing."

The emanation pulled me down as Schema said, "I will give you this opportunity out of grace. Answer me."

Schema's voice hardened.

"Why shouldn't I kill you?"

Chapter 370: Words Uttered, Laws Made

A dark blue aura enveloped the room, saturating everything.

"When you signed that contract with Shalahora, you sold your soul to an Old One."

The emanation pulled me down as Schema said, "I will give you this opportunity out of grace. Answer me."

Schema's voice hardened.

"Why shouldn't I kill you?"

I smiled, "Can you?"

I pressed out with my dimensional wake, pushing Schema's aura back.

"I will warp you into the center of a black hole where time will be stretched to infinity. It is a kind of death and easily done."

I stood tall.



"Alright, enough messing around then."

I cracked my knuckles, each pop like a grenade detonating in mercury.

"I'm probably harder to break than you imagine. Try me."

"Do you believe your status and skills will save you from an inevitable failure? Do you think your success in a fistfight can determine the outcome of the Old Ones? You are a fool. A prideful, arrogant, and ignorant fool."

"Try me."

Schema's voice oppressed the room but not me.

"Then you will be taught a lesson. Dwell on it for eternity."

The tugging sensation passed over me. My surroundings blurred before I let go of my physical form. It fell into some unknown place, likely Leviathan or some other blackhole.

Schema murmured, "It is a shame."

I materialized from the ether.

"It is?"

I stood the way I had before my body was sent away. Schema and I faced off for a moment.

The AI said, "You have learned incorporeal recomposition. Was that learned before the lottery as well?"

I pointed a thumb at myself, "Schema...I'm not the same scared boy that escaped from Bloodhollow. I've changed."

"That is evident."

"But not with how you're treating me. Yeah, I signed that contract with Shalahora. You wanna know why?"

I scowled as Schema's aura pressed from all angles. I pushed it further back.

"I signed it for survival and because I know what's coming. If anyone else knows, it's you. You're holding an entire society together. Of course, you know they're coming. If I survive for 30,000 years, I think I stand a chance to pull us the hell out of this situation. If I can't by then, I won't be able to. Ever."

"The Old Ones cannot be destroyed. You have given them another powerful avatar. 30,000 years may seem like an eternity to you, but it is a moment to them. It is a moment to me."

I narrowed my eyes.

"And I was told that Yawm couldn't be killed. That Lehsion was an unconquerable god. Hell, people told me Valgus was invincible because an Old One made it so."

I grimaced.

"I killed him. I can kill them too."

Schema's aura maintained its pressure, pushing onto mine. I peered around.

"If you're going to oppress someone, you must condense this. It's too disparate. I'm like a ball of iron in an ocean. Wrap around me all you want; it won't make me budge."

Schema ceased applying pressure.

"You genuinely believe in your chances?"

"Believe? Who cares what I believe? What other options do I have?"

"Hm. None. A position I understand all too well."

A screen notification appeared in the corner of my vision.

"I will send the purging team to Mt. Verner to inspect your personnel. Leviathan-7 is your planet, and you will be granted 3 days of uncompressed time to go there, 4 months total of your planet's time yearly. I will personally ensure future system bugs are no longer an issue for you."

I put my hands on my hips.

"Ah man, thanks-"

"I am not finished, Harbinger. You will be rewarded with 5,000 levels to your cap and current total. You will be granted a legendary skill compendium and sovereignty over the Solus solar system. Your guild, the Harbinger's Legion, has been elevated to empire status and gains the rights of such."

I nearly fell back.

"Do not disappoint me."

I collected myself and spread my hands.

"Of course not. You know me. I've got no problem with a little overtime."

"That will be the minimum. I anticipate your progress. However, there is one last condition you must accept."

"Oh, come on now. What does it involve this time?"

"You have shown a willingness to sign contracts that warp the fabric of reality. Here is another."

In front of me, a black page burned into existence, along with a quill floating with white ink.

"Read the cipheric contract and sign it."

I pulled the page out of the air, reading the cipheric runes. It took about an hour to parse the legal jargon, but Targask's lessons on legal mumbo jumbo saved me. I could almost see the guy grinning at me with satisfaction, and that burned. I shook that off before peering up.

"So you want me to sign a self-expungement clause under certain conditions?"

"Yes. It is the only way I can be certain."

I shook my head.

"This is ridiculous."

I signed the contract, and it disappeared.

Schema said, "If you believe it is absurd, why did you sign it?"

I rolled my shoulders.

"I'm no pawn. I'd rather die."

"Hm. Noble. Good luck with your cosmic goals, Harbinger."

I grinned.

"Hah. Same to you."

A similar sensation of being warped pressed over me, but I condensed my wake to its utmost, slowing down the pull.

"Naw, you'll need to have a Sentinel or Overseer warp me from now on. I want to see where I'm going."

I could almost hear a laugh.

"Such is to be expected after my threats. Maintain that vigilance, would you?"

I smiled.

"Of course."

A few seconds later, a Sentinel tore through the fabric of reality. I helped pull apart the dimensional fabric, and it stepped through. It tilted its head at me.

"You wish to return to Earth, correct?"

I nodded.

"Aw man, more than anything."

The Sentinel sliced through the veil, and I approached a tiny circle showing Earth. I gazed down at Mt. Verner before I gave the Sentinel a two-finger salute.

"Till next time."