

New World 391

Chapter 391: Normalcy's Might

Finding his cause of concern, Plazia rested on a basalt throne in the middle of the room, having moved a few bookshelves to do so. Torix rested on a leather couch like Diesel, and the lich's metal skeleton gleamed darkly in the lamplight. As he approached, he turned to me.

"Ah, Daniel. You mentioned issues with a number of projects."

His fire eyes flared.

"Perhaps we may be of assistance."

I walked over, flopping down into a gravity. I drifted in a cozy posture.

"So here's the problem: the golems are wrecking balls. If the whole expansion program is going to work, I'll need to give my guildmates golems for protection. However, it's like handing over a walking nuke to hundreds of people. I can trust most of the guild with them, but having even one of these things freak out would be beyond horrific."

Plazia cackled.

"They carry the potential of their maker? That must include your intelligence as well."

Several of my minds joined the conversation.

"Ooh, that must count for your bugs as well. How many tests are they passing these days?"

Plazia leaned forward.

"Several. I have quite a few underlings that expand my knowledge along a variety of subjects, the least of which involves pacifism."

I snapped my fingers.

"Dangit. I've lost this round of banter. Curse you oh so smart, hivemind. Anywho, when I went to a town, one golem obliterated half of it to eliminate a few rats."

Plazia tapped the edge of his throne.

"It would seem they mirror their maker's restraint as well."

Diesel coughed into a hand.

"Ahem, not that I question your judgment, but uh...What am I here for?"

I raised my hands.

"You worked with me when I first made the golems and their iterations. I figured you could help brainstorm some ideas."

Diesel nodded.

"Ok...But you guys look like you have it locked down. Especially with these two ancient world eaters."

With his hands raised, Diesel turned to Plazia.

"No offense."

Plazia stared through the mortal.

"The truth does not offend me, engineer."

I rolled my eyes.

"No one's eating worlds here."

Plazia's voice echoed in the frame of his Sentinel.

"No one is as of yet."

I narrowed my eyes. The hivemind steepled his hands.

"You humans do have a sense of humor, or was I wrong to assume as much? Everything is taken so literally. It's stifling."

Diesel lowered his arms.

"Ah, thank god that's a joke. If that's the case, I'd like to add that you are scary as hell, uhm, sir."

Plazia leaned on his throne, his posture lax.

"Scary, hm? Fear is merely an awareness of a threat. The forces you put yourself near are all capable of killing you, yet they choose not to. All societies exist within this framework. I am no different in that my incentives take away my fangs and claws. They are aimed elsewhere since my obligations override my desire to kill those around me."

Plazia tilted his head.

"What evokes that fear is simply the transparency of my threat. The pretense of safety has been peeled away, but you should know you were never truly safe. Despite that, you lived without fear mere days ago. Life is odd in that regard, isn't it?"

Diesel stammered.

"Uhm. Sure."

Plazia laughed.

"As your scholars would say, you have nothing to fear but fear itself."

Torix gave Diesel a knowing look. The necromancer said,

"Rest assured, this hivemind is more intimidating in appearance and posture than in his personality. He's gained an admirable and nearly perfect control over his insidious nature. While it is true that he grapples with a relentless hunger and desperate desire for growth, he has conquered it."

Torix scoffed.

"How has he done so? It's...Somehow. To be frank, I still haven't understood how he's done so."

Diesel frowned.

"Is...Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

Torix turned a palm to him.

"Of course. Someone of good nature simply acts as an animal would; they follow the path of least resistance. Their goodness is a situational trait, one that can shatter given a difference in motive. In fact, I have often seen people mistake their harmlessness for true virtue. When given power, their actual nature seeps out like a poison."

Torix pointed at Plazia.

"He is a different animal, figuratively and literally. Despite compelling reasons to kill, he has chosen not to. That demonstrates self-control, and even when given other reasons, he still decides against it."

Plazia let out a slow laugh. He raised his gaze, peering down at Torix. The hivemind said,

"That you know of."

Torix steepled his hands.

"And I know more than you may imagine."

A competitive flame flared between the two. I pointed at them both.

Did you know this text is from a different site? Read the official version to support the creator.

"Which is why you're all here. I need someone to help me fix these golems."

With quiet desperation, Diesel leaned forward.

"Yes. Please. What's the issue?"

I frowned.

"They are annihilating everything I get them close to. I'm talking utterly pulverized."

Diesel's heart rate spiked.

"Ahem. Is that issue a problem with the golems around here?"

The poor guy probably lost a few years of his life just from this conversation alone. I shook my head.

"I used blue cores to help stabilize them. It gives them more finesse. For the golems heading all over Earth, I'm trying not to use the same strategy."

I explained how they worked and my material limitations. Plazia tapped his fingers on his throne.

"These radiant blue cores are a limited resource?"

I nodded. Plazia rolled his head, gazing at the ceiling.

"Only so much meat on the bone? You may harvest more, but a hunt of such magnitude requires time to enact. Hm."

Torix tapped his index fingers together.

"Time we haven't had considering our plethora of distractions. Hmmm."

Diesel crossed his arms.

"Have you tried making them smaller?"

Plazia shook his head.

"An ounce of him is like a mountain. The golems need control, not weakness."

Diesel tilted his head.

"I don't know about that."

The hivemind and necromancer turned to him. Diesel gulped before he leaned forward.

"Hear me out. I know a carpenter isn't supposed to blame his tools, but bringing a jackhammer to nail down a board does more harm than good."

Plazia leaned towards him.

"You believe this planet's safety is the nailing of a board?"

Diesel frowned.

"No. It's the building of a house. We need people and supplies, not walking nukes, as the guildleader put it."

Torix pointed his hands to me.

"What if we used our own members as pilots of sorts?"

Diesel's eyes widened.

"Like giant mechs?"

I grimaced.

"That would require connecting them psionically, and the mental output of the golems is more than enough to drown the minds of anyone using them."

Diesel bristled.

"Like, drowning in water? How does that work?"

My eyes grew distant.

"It's more like...Flooding. Your mind washes away in a sea of thought."

Torix sighed.

"That's a false equivalency. It's much more akin to being lost in a relative infinity."

Diesel pointed at me.

"His explanation makes more sense."

Torix scoffed.

"Of course it does. He's described only a portion of the concept."

Diesel met the necromancer's eye.

"It's the part we need right now."

Torix glared down, and Diesel paled. Torix nodded.

"That's very true. Apt observation."

Plazia rumbled through the ground.

"What of using our enemy's tactics? We could use psionic implantation as Elysium does. Perhaps human consciousnesses could supplant the golem's minds."

My gaze sharpened.

"Anything from Elysium's off the table."

Diesel crossed his arms.

"It sounds like they need more settings."

I raised my brow.

"Settings? Like a game?"

Diesel shook his head.

"No, more like a blowtorch. You can twist a knob on most to blow hotter or cooler flames depending on what you need, how much protection you're wearing, or where you're using one. You wouldn't want it to be on full blast when making a creme brule, for instance."

He winced.

"I'd know. I couldn't even recover the bowls. Like, they were burnt so bad."

I leaned back, mulling over the idea. I let my arms flop to my sides.

"Why didn't I think of that?"

Diesel shrugged.

"When was the last time you used a tool?"

Torix pressed two fingertips together.

"Since a pre-Schema era, I'd imagine. Now, I believe that's an excellent idea and should be implemented. However, I'd like to advocate for my academy."

I leaned forward. Torix waved his hand around us at the students.

"I've been investing my time and effort into this place for several years. Quite a few different classes have graduated with different fields of knowledge. I could access their readiness for this project before sending them off in teams."

I nodded my head.

"You do know them better than I do."

Plazia tilted his head at me.

"You are what you do and have done. You wage war, so you know little of peace and prosperity."

Diesel's eyes sharpened.

"Yeah, that's because he's too busy shouldering the war while we work on the peace. It's a give and take, really."

Plazia laughed. He oozed his words from the walls.

"Who is giving and who is taking?"

Diesel furrowed his brow before looking at me.

"Keep doing what you do, and we'll stick to what we know. I can develop the list of settings with a few of my engineering buddies. Torix can get the right people on board for the job. We might even have Ophelia help-

Diesel peered away, wincing.

"Oh, man...That's right. She passed away in the lottery."

A piece of me hollowed out hearing him. My hate for Elysium grew greater.

Diesel sighed.

"We'll manage. I'll need Amara's help for the cipher, but we'll get it done. I got a pass from Schema to work with the language, which is great. I was worried I'd be stuck at level 1,550 forever."

My eyes widened.

"Wait a minute...You were exiled from the system?"

Diesel blinked.

"Well...Yeah."

I tilted my head.

"Why didn't you say anything? I might have worked around it or something."

Diesel raised both hands.

"People's lives were on the line. We didn't have time to brainstorm complex ways of managing communication like that. The team and I decided to bite the bullet to save time and a few lives. Cipher legality or not be damned."

His eyes hardened.

"Getting exiled was worth every life we saved...But I wish I could've gotten the golems operating a bit earlier."

Sights of spilling blood, sounds of breaking bone, and screams of death passed over his eyes. Diesel nodded, his voice cracking.

"Yup...Just a bit earlier."

Torix placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Such is life. It is frail, and we do what we can to preserve it."

Diesel scooted up in his chair while wiping his hands on his pants. Plazia turned a hand to them.

"Your plans are built on a trust in humanity. Perhaps too much."

Torix gestured to me.

"You've seen what humanity can do."

Plazia droned.

"I'd hardly call him human. As for the others, those that are weak...They are the ones you should fear. They may devour one another with glee given the chance."

His words stung like breaking open an old wound. Diesel furrowed his brow.

"You've had a problem with us from the start. What's the problem with us humans anyways?"

Plazia hummed his words.

"Your kind are disjointed, unorganized, and desperate. If you put starving lambs together, even they will devour one another should their hunger grow great enough. And I know of hunger. It drives all mad in time."

Diesel spread his hands.

"We're not lambs. We're people."

Plazia leaned forward.

"And people break."

Diesel stood up with a fire in him.

"I'll be happy to show you what humans can do when we put our minds to something."

Plazia laughed. He leaned back into his throne.

"I'll believe you when I see it."

Diesel turned to me.

"Do you mind sending me the golem specs over messages? We need the references."

I pulled out my grimoire.

"I'd be happy too."

As I did, Diesel pointed at Plazia.

"Remember this."

Plazia's voice rumbled.

"I never forget."

Diesel walked out of the library before Torix stood up. A hovering ball of dominion mana supported him as he said,

"I'll collect the needed people. We'll call off a few of the projects I have planned, especially around a few odd dungeons, but we'll adjust as necessary."

My curiosity peaked. I stood up with the sorcerer.

"Odd dungeons. How so?"

Torix waved his hands.

"Oh, that? It's nothing worth your time."

I shrugged.

"Maybe. Can I hear about it at least?"

Torix turned to me.

"Oh, certainly. A few of our dungeoneering brigades have returned from Chicago talking of an 'uncloseable dungeon.' I'm almost certain they merely lack the required competence to close the rift, but I'm sending scouts to assess the situation. This would lead to their demotion if their claims are proven false, after all."

A chill ran up my spine. Something was off.

"Did they say why they struggled with the dungeon?"

Torix rolled his eyes.

"Apparently, the dungeon does not end."

I scratched the back of my neck.

"Interesting. Do you mind if I handle it?"

Torix leaned back.

"A dungeon? I'd hate to waste your time with something so drab and trivial."

I let my arm drop.

"I remember visiting Chicago a while back. I'd like to see if they made any progress since I last went. Besides, I have to wait for Diesel to finish the limiter on the golems anyway."

"Then consider the task sent." Torix turned to Plazia. "Ah yes, hivemind, do know that insults to these people's competence are also insults to my teaching."

Torix's eyes flared.

"And I am the Harbinger's Erudition. Perhaps you need it proven."

Plazia stood from his throne, basalt sinking into the floor and leaving no remnant of it ever having been there. Plazia menaced.

"Then show it or feel the weight of your inadequacy."

Torix turned, floating through a warp leading to his research center. As the portal closed, Torix clapped his hands together.

"Listen up, younglings. We have much work to do, and I have a task none of you shall fail. None of you."

As the jaws of the warp snapped shut, I linked my mind with Plazia.

"What was that all about? Are you trying to piss them off?"

Plazia laughed aloud but thought in a whisper.

"At times, a man only needs a monster, and he will find his fury. And I have no alms with being a monster if that is what is needed."

I tapped my side.

"Ah. You're giving them something to fight for. Be careful with manipulating people like that. You lose people's trust."

Plazia's words echoed in my psyche as if many voices resonated.

"Noted. What of your plans?"

I cracked my knuckles, the sound like cables snapping underwater.

"I'm going to see what makes a rift uncloseable."

Chapter 392: A City Alive

Plazia laughed aloud but thought in a whisper.

"At times, a man only needs a monster, and he will find his fury. And I have no alms with being a monster if that is what is needed."

I tapped my side.

"Ah. You're giving them something to fight for. Be careful with manipulating people like that. You lose people's trust."

Plazia's words echoed in my psyche as if many voices resonated.

"Noted. What of your plans?"

I cracked my knuckles, the sound like cables snapping underwater.

"I'm going to see what makes a rift uncloseable."

Turning to walk off, my dimensional fabric orb slammed into a bookshelf. The orb, more like a wrecking ball, crushed the shelf into splinters and ripped books into confetti. After catching the disaster with gravity, the devastation hovered in a stasis as if time stopped.

I gawked at the destruction.

"I need a better solution for this size thing."

Plazia cackled.

"Mass doesn't simply disappear."

The hivemind took his Sentinal spear before swinging it in a few circles. With a quick swipe, he ripped apart space-time, revealing a vast ocean before him. The familiar smell of Blegara funneled into the room, the water world resplendent in its sunset.

Plazia stepped through the void.

"Good luck, Harbinger."

As the warp resutured together, an idea popped into my head. I reached out with my arm, stopping the warp from closing. With my hand in Blegara, I took my other hand and wrenched the warp open. Plazia peered down at his spear before gawking at me.

"Was there something left unsaid?"

I shook my head, pointing at the rip.

"No. Would you mind if I kept this open?"

Plazia lifted his dimensional slicer, and it radiated with violet energy.

"This spear is maintaining the calculations for the tear. It will shatter and decay if it is forced to maintain a portal."

I snapped my fingers.

"Dammit. Cya later then."

I pulled myself out of the warp, cursing a bit to myself. As it snapped shut, I peered at the minced library. I called over a few guildsmen to handle the repairs and rewrites of the books. After spending a full hour helping with the cleanup and apologizing, I passed the tunnels of Mt. Verner like a dark ooze.

Weaving through the dusty shafts, I flowed out into the wider world, the crisp air brushing against me. Man, I loved Earth. There was nowhere else like it. With the coordinates locked in, I rose high into the atmosphere before turning myself into a tiny harpoon. Gravity wells jerked me toward Chicago like a high-speed railway line, and I passed the sound barrier twice on the way there.

As the spires of Chicago soared in the distance, I slowed down, not wanting to leave people in a panic. After flowing to the rooftops, I glided along the metro area. The place changed a lot in the last couple of years. Torix sent a group of our guildsmen to help the area recover from the culling, and the team handled their task with aplomb.

Even from an aerial view, the changes carved across the cityscape like an artist giving new life to an old painting. The city of spires still stood over the lower city, but its grandeur and luxury contrasted with the hobbling lives below. Fresh marble covered the city tops, and artisans remade the bridges with glass and gold.

That gold lined the rest of the upper city's architecture, a beacon to those coming close. Or so it seemed. Closing in, I could tell by their weight they were a shiny bronze made to imitate gold. Mirroring the architectural imitation, the people here wore expensive fabrics and precious metals.

In my opinion, it was pointless material signaling. They lacked enchanted gear or powerful weapons, which were actual markers of wealth. As I saw a monocled man walking, I changed my mind in an instant. I was fool. The man sported an incredibly full and luscious mustache. He waxed it and shaped it into a curl, and as I saw it, I rubbed my own jaw.

I hadn't grown any facial hair since I molded together with my armor. Of all the benefits the metal gave me, growing a beard wasn't one of them. I cursed my limitations before peering below. A line of scarred, ragged, or struggling people carved a line through the opulence. They waited on the gilded rooftops like a string of mold growing across smooth, polished marble.

These less mustachioed members queued up by the hundreds, their single lane crisscrossing two entire bridges of the skyscrapers. They ended where my guild's encampment began. I recognized it instantly atop the Sears Tower. They built an outcrop of stone supported by beams of steel and saturated gravity wells below.

It gave the architecture an alien appearance. That stemmed from the defiance of nature. hilariously enough, the gialgathen warmed the entire visage since they felt more like fantasy creatures. Still, the overbearing pressure was undeniable, and the gialgathen lounged along the wall, soaking in the light.

Its red and blue skin sheened in the sun. It set the scene like a coral reef popping out under the ocean. Adding to the effect, a layer of water kept the gialgathen hydrated. Beside him, a man in camo towered over the others close by, his combat fatigues and medals still shining from a war fought in the old world.

He organized the distribution of supplies, keeping a stack of papers nearby to help him keep changes documented. He interacted with his status in a confused, helpless manner that only the elderly could imitate. As I landed beside him, our members gawked at me. I loomed over them, my shadow more significant than the gialgathen, who narrowed his eyes at me. I spread my hands.

"Hey, is this our encampment?"

Soaking in palpable fear, the lined-up refugees gazed at one another. The military man met my eye before giving me a single nod. He paced over to the edge of the encampment, facing the endless refugees. He raised his hands. His voice boomed.

"This is the guildleader. I told you guys he's real, eh? All those days of talking behind my back. 'Is he actually real? Did Neel get back on drugs again? Maybe Neel's having another flashback from Nam?' Ha ha, well, now look who's sitting pretty."

Neel raised two fingers, sending a crude gesture their way.

"Suck on these nuts. Please don't mind how massive they are. It comes with the territory."

Neel put his hands on his hips, a grin plastered to his face.

"Ah, you have no idea how good that felt. Can't know. Maybe. I don't know."

I raised my brow.

"Probably not. What's the name?"

I reached out a hand. He grabbed the tip of one of my fingers.

"Neel Strotman. A member of the First Cavalry Division in Nam. I'm old enough to be your dad. You're strong enough to end mine."

He gave me a wink.

"Not that there's much to it these days. The system did do him some good though, just like it did me. But enough chatter, what brings you this way?"

I gazed around.

"I'm looking for an unclosetable dungeon."

Neel peered off, fury flaring on his face.

"Oh, I am gonna kill Jake and Gordan. Oh, they're done for. They'll be cleaning toilets with their toothbrushes." His eyes narrowed in menace.

"And they ain't changing 'em out once they're done."

I hoped he wasn't serious. He turned to me.

"I sent Torix a message about all that. Not all of our guildmates are cut from the same cloth, yah see. I think I'll need to have a long talk with them about not over-alerting our superiors."

The gialgathen eyed us from the back. It spoke with telepathy.

"They left for weeks. There is good cause for their concerns."

Neel raised his hands.

"Oh looky here, the hoity-toity cat lizard finally stretching his paws and started meowing now that the guild leader is here."

The gialgathen raised its horned brow.

"These cats you speak of sound more intelligent than your kind."

Neel turned to me.

"Tell that to the Chinese. They eat 'em up by the pot full."

A glint shined in his eye.

"If you know what you're doing, they're not too bad. Had a few meself."

A bit overwhelmed, I blinked.

"In Nam, I'm assuming?"

Support the creativity of authors by visiting the original site for this novel and more.

"No. Thailand. There was this cat infestation, and I couldn't let the meat go to waste. You learn a thing or two in a crisis. In my case, it's how good a cat can be with prawns, bamboo shoots, and mustard. Anyways, those two boneheads came back after a few months in a rift, saying it couldn't be closed. I'm just glad they came back, but if their report made you come here, well-"

He smirked.

"I've got to have a few coarse words to say to them."

I shook my head.

"It's more so I was curious rather than them raising a fuss."

Neel's eyes narrowed.

"I can smell the mercy on your breath, but I'm still reviewing the report. Hell might have to be paid in full, but I can wait until after you're finished with your inspection. Anywho, do you need directions?"

"I have the coordinates. I was stopping by to see what was going on here."

Neel snapped his fingers, glancing at the other members.

"An impromptu check-up by the Harbinger himself. Wow. Who'd have guessed it?"

The other members avoided his gaze.

Neel pointed at himself.

"It was, in fact, me."

Neel reminded me of a disappointed drill sergeant, one that used my name as a means to get a fire lit under the recruits. Apparently, my arrival helped Neel in more ways than one. The veteran spread his hands.

"Let's face it, I'm two for two today, and it's getting better by the second." Neel walked over to the gialgathen. "This here's Kaiayga. It's hard to spell, I tell you. He keeps tabs

on nearby threats while ensuring we aren't blindsided by eldritch, enemies, or commie bastards. You can never rule out them commie bastards."

Kaiayga tilted his large head.

"You still believe they're coming to get you, hm?"

Neel rolled his eyes.

"What? Hell no. I used to say that out of irony, but eventually, it stopped being that way. Now, it's a warm, nostalgic phrase. Ah, commie bastards are gonna take me out. Doesn't it roll off the tongue?"

Kaiayga winced.

"It's as pleasant as biting into a fish full of motor oil."

"Some of us like it in the grime. I digress. Kaiayga also keeps tabs on our inventory. He's like one of those old dragons guarding his treasure horde."

Kaiayga narrowed his eyes.

"Your endless comparisons to dragons are demeaning."

"At least I don't call you frog dragon, eh? Eh?"

Kaiayga sighed, peering at Lake Michigan.

"You make me wish to leave this place and settle in the sea."

Neel hit the gialgathen's side.

"Hey, it's only a couple more decades of servitude before you're free."

Kaiayga pulled himself up to get an even better view of the lake.

"Then I'll find my home there."

I crossed my arms.

"You don't want to settle down in Blegara?"

Kaiayga shook his head.

"No. It's a beautiful world, one well-made for us, but I despise the eldritch there. They taint the fish and air like an unseen miasma that infests under the surface. I find that this world reminds me far more of Giess. It does so more and more every day."

I swelled with pride. Kaiayga's tail whipped behind him.

"Though the fish taste stranger as well. So do those beasts that run through the forest."

Something about that didn't sit right with me. Neel caught on to my unease.

"Don't worry about him. He's a picky eater."

Kaiayga rested his head back on his front paws.

"True enough."

Before I questioned further, Neel paced over to the many rings and other enchanted gear they imported from Springfield. Neel put one of the rings on his hand. From it, an outpour of water, seeds, and crabs flowed down into a pile. Neel kicked some seeds off a crab before holding up the crustacean.

"You see these? This. This right here is the lifeblood of these people."

I held down a laugh, but I desperately struggled to hold it in. As if on cue, the crab pinched Neel's nose. Neel squealed before Kaiayga and I burst into a roaring laughter. Kaiayga beamed a toothy grin.

"Yes. Again, please."

I spread my fingers, opening the crab's claw and hovering it away.

"I hope that isn't the only thing they eat."

Neel rubbed his reddened nostrils.

"Ack, certainly not, but it is a firm backbone, I tell you."

We sat down on gravity wells and talked for a while. It took a solid hour before Neel calmed down about the gravitation, and he told me about the supplies, procedures, and overall progress of the encampment. They served thousands of people a day, offering necessities to the masses. I watched them disperse the goods, and they dispersed the goods efficiently.

In general, it was a solid protocol. The most obvious sign of their consistency was how the populace handled the charity. A local economy formed around them, and caravaneers used these free gifts as a source of trade. Dungeoneers and hunters passed through with them to restock and gather their own free resources.

Many of those wallowing below were putting up an act to look the part while pawning off our supplies for wealth. In all honestly, it didn't matter much to me. We didn't come here to make money but to make a difference. It was as cheesey as it sounded, and the people selling off the supplies helped distribute what we had to give.

Those struggling entrepreneur came from nearby towns, villages, and isolated homes. They wanted a better life, and my guild offered them one. It left me spirited for my venture into the undercity. Offering a goodbye, I flew off to the rift's coordinates. I passed the congregating masses. As I did, I cast a long shadow.

That shadow instilled horror in most but ease in a select few. My reputation spread far beyond Springfield by now, and a few of the disparaged people out here knew my name. More would know soon enough.

Hovering over the city, I passed skyscraper after skyscraper until I found the strange entrance to the dungeon. It rippled between several tall buildings in the middle of an intersection. Crashed cars and rotting monster corpses littered the area. At the center, the portal to another world shifted in place.

It was an open type, the kind without an orderly entrance. The spatial tear omened a strange, menace as it caused an unnatural silence throughout the city's downtown area.

Outside of the booming thunder, of course.

Bordering the rift, dark electricity zapped out in searching sparks. These sparks hit nearby stone, steel, and glass. Everything it touched warped in odd, deranged ways. Pieces of granite molded into screaming faces. Panels of clear glass moved like water at sea. A Fire hydrant hummed along to a catchy tune.

Following the madness, a strange oscillation waved at the edges of the rift. It was as if the dimensions around it were two seas clashing, each fighting to overcome the other. It thrummed with an undeniable violence, and it made my stomach sink. To think dungeoneers walked in through this.

I'd have to change the labor laws of the guild at this rate.

Either way, I'd ensure they were adequately compensated for getting close to this thing. Sending that message to Torix, I squared that away before stepping closer. A different world unveiled itself in the rived space-time.

Walking around the rip, it was a two-dimensional object in a three-dimensional world. The portal itself lacked any depth. At its side, the warp disappeared into a tiny black line, and from the back, it disappeared entirely. In other words, it was fully visible from only one angle but invisible from another. Weird.

The surreal scene grated my nerves. It was as if someone opened a portal but never closed it. Before stepping in, I pulled out a rod of my dimensional fabric. I bent it into a

circle and wrapped it around the portal's edge. Like a chain link, it would stop the rip from mending while I explored deeper inside.

As I snapped the link together, I gawked at the strangeness of it. From one side of the rip, my chain link floated in the air on nothing. On the other side of the portal, it wrapped into the dimensional void. It was an impossible object, like staring at a set of Penrose stairs in real life. While tripping me out, I'd seen plenty of impossibilities since Schema arrived.

This was likely some eccentricity of portals I didn't know about, and that's part of the reason I took safety precautions. Being trapped in a rift was a nightmare, and I didn't feel like discovering what terrors it hid. Having thoroughly scared myself, I made a few extra links before feeling safe enough to step into the tear.

Inside the portal, a Serengeti spread out in all directions for miles. Tall grasses waved in the wind. These grasses all bent toward a single orientation as if the wind only ever blew from the East. As I stepped in, my dimensional wake changed that. The greenery pulled toward me at its center.

I didn't like that at all, so I pulled my wake inward. The plants turned towards their standard direction, one I followed. As I stepped onto the soft earth, a constant rumbling quaked below, mammoth creatures burrowing underground. Above, islands floated with a few clouds spotting between them.

The drier world lacked trees and the like, leaving wide-open views for many miles in all directions. As I dove deeper, I ensured my minimap worked in my status. Considering how similar this all felt, it was an easy place to get lost in. Still, my map operated well, though it maintained an extended lag as I was in the dungeon.

Crossing over to my minimap's edge, I reached a shadow. One of the floating islands crossed overhead. As it did, the rumbling roared until a fluffy worm swarmed out of the ground. An eldritchian horror, the worm's mouth opened with teeth circling its innards deep into its body.

Peering closer, it lacked fur. My skin crawled as I beheld the thousands of legs on its frame writhing about like nests of spiders. Before it reached me, the shadow over me deepened in its darkness. An enormous, flying pterodactyl flowed down from above. It was a far less grotesque creature, lacking the many legs all over its body. Instead, it sported eyes on every surface.

By now, I hated this place deeply. I digress.

The pterodactyl stripped the ground bare with the flow of its four wings, and it cawed with enough force to uproot trees. With a sword-like beak, it sliced the worm apart. The two worm halves tried crawling into the ground, the many legs squirming and scittering. One half escaped, but the flying behemoth stripped the other half from the dirt. The giant bug writhed in the even larger pterodactyl's beak. As the worm slapped against the pterodactyl's skin, it stripped scales, skin, and scabs off the monster.

The bird reptile didn't seem to mind, and its eyes gazed toward its home on the floating islands. Done watching the spectacle, I stomped my foot into the ground. A wave of force flowed through the region, silencing the rumbling below. I spread my hands, a gravity panel pulling the territory into two pieces.

As if parting a sea of soil, I sliced a thousand feet into the ground below. Dirt billowed up and out, exposing the disgusting worms and their larva. They bundled up into furballs that feasted on enormous, underground root systems.

Oh yeah. They were all dead.

Growing their young around glowing ores of mana, they expanded at unnatural rates, and their flesh writhed. They screamed out in hunger like the wails of the damned. Wanting to figure out what they were hiding, I came close to some before vaporizing the grotesque creatures with Event Horizon.

The mana crystals exposed themselves, their blue glow mirroring origin mana. They could be mined, but my mana crystals were superior in quality and stability. As for the animals, I hated looking in their direction, let alone finding a use for them. Leaving them alone, I headed deeper underground, eventually hitting the planet's mantle. Endless magma spread below.

Welp, this wasn't the dungeon's end.

I turned towards the islands far above. I bolted up, passing all the churned magma and disgusting worms. I flew over the islands, and they were resting spots for the pterodactyls. They nested with eggs while slicing up worms to feed their young. Inspecting closer, I found no dungeon core atop the islands.

Diving within, each island carried dense clusters of mana crystals, allowing the island to float and the creatures to grow so large. Alas, still no dungeon core. I checked a dozen islands, finding nothing among them. I searched for miles upon miles, the day dragging on in an endless hunt. As the sun settled, a darkness draped over the world. I gazed at the absolute darkness above and below, the planet lacking any moons or stars.

Shattering the darkness, a swarm erupted from below. Fireflies, or more like fire moths, coursed into the sky and enveloped the world in a frenzy of light. Like an ethereal cascade of yellow lanterns, they flocked in all directions, brandishing eternal dark in a limited imitation of day. It was a quiet kind of beauty, and I floated in it for a while, the droning sound like cicadas.

As one of the fire moths landed on me, I recognized the source. It was one of the detached legs from the worms. The legs split over its back to form wings, and they revealed the dark moth and glow hidden during the day. Furry and far cuter than it had any right to be, one moth nestled into the palm of my hand.

A spark of guilt struck through me. Something like this found shelter in the ugliness of this world. The war the worms waged let these creatures live the night, yet I had judged them. I considered them hideous and ugly and vile. As I raised my hand, the moth flew into the horde.

They did what they had to do in order to survive. We all did.

Floating over the expanse, I flowed through the endless swarm in all directions. Endless. Hm. I opened my status, wondering how far I drifted during the day. So far, I crossed three hundred miles in this world. Despite that, no discernible end appeared, and this dwarfed the size of most dungeons by orders of magnitudes.

Heading back to the entrance, I found the links still holding strong and the rip in space-time oscillating. The fire moths flew into our world by the hundreds, and I stood, watching them wander around. They darted from one territory to another, escaping into another dimension. My eyes widened as the solution popped into my head.

This wasn't a rift. It was a genuine tear in space. I flowed a distance from the entryway before sending a message to Helios. Minutes later, he opened a portal and walked out in sleeping wear. He pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Ah, what do you want in the middle of the night, your majesty?"

I gestured behind me.

"You see this, right?"

Still groggy, Helios wiped the sleep out of his eyes before a bolt of dark lightning snapped into the ground beside him. The boom and thunder woke him up seconds before Helios tilted his head. He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples.

"What have you done now? Running an experiment to see if you could collapse the fabric of reality?"

I shook my head.

"What? C'mon. Cut me some slack."

I peered at the portal.

"But I am wondering if someone else is."

Chapter 393: The Weight of Worlds

Still groggy, Helios wiped the sleep out of his eyes before a bolt of dark lightning snapped into the ground beside him. The boom and thunder woke him up seconds before Helios tilted his head. He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples.

"What have you done now? Running an experiment to see if you could collapse the fabric of reality?"

I shook my head.

"What? C'mon. Cut me some slack."

I peered at the portal.

"But I am wondering if someone else is."

Helios pulled up his sleeves.

"Gah, and I was praying this was a source of your stupidity."

I gazed into the other world.

"If only."

Helios channeled mana through his gauntlet, the cipheric runes sparking to life. Primordial strands of mana stretched out onto the corrupted spacial rend, and Helios murmured.

"This...This is nothing like Schema's normal dungeons. Do you have any idea what happened here?"

"We don't know."

"Hm. Neither do I. This is...I've never seen a true spatial rip like this. They often open up to some dark, other dimension. This...It's eerily similar to another world."

I let a fire moth land on my hand.

"Then how do you actually make portals?"

Helios wrestled with the warp, parsing out its secrets.

"I take two instances of space and fold them together. Once they touch, I fuse the dimensional spaces so that a warp appears. It's a tunnel, in essence. Schema's spears actually tear the space between two places rather than fusing them, but they still don't open warps to the abyss beyond the observable universe."

Helios winced as dark lightning deformed a nearby stone.

"This does. Ugh. Grotesque. What a genuinely disturbing thing you've shown me."

I pulled my wake over the dimensional disturbance. It recoiled from me, but I wrestled it down. It shivered as if alive, but it felt more like a reaction akin to oil rising above water than real movement. Helios peered at me as if I were insane.

"What are you doing?"

"Sensing it."

"You shouldn't-"

I reached out a hand in front of Helios's face. As I did, a dark streak of lightning bolted into my arm. My skin absorbed the streak with immense hunger, like a starving beast. As I peered at my hand, Helios scoffed.

"Never mind."

He toiled for several minutes, the tear shrinking by tiny increments. I watched him like a hawk, ensuring he wasn't zapped and I didn't miss any other threats. An hour passed before Helios grabbed his mane.

"This is just what I needed. A laborious task awakening me in the middle of the night. Technical. Difficult. Ooh, and I'm even learning about magic I've never heard of."

He turned to me.

"How delightful."

I smiled.

"I'm glad I could give you a challenge."

Helios took a breath and raised a hand.

"If I'm honest, I didn't even think about the time. I never sleep, and it's easy to forget about after all these years. We can handle this later-"

He raised his gauntleted hand.

"No. I'm finishing this. I simply require venting my frustrations from time to time."

Several more minutes passed before Helios murmured.

"It wasn't as if I was resting regardless."

I furrowed my brow.

"Struggling to sleep?"

"Are you attempting to micromanage your guildmates, perchance?"

I pointed beneath him.

"Alright, snarky catman, I can make you a chair if you tell me what's up."

Helios's eyes narrowed.

"Hm. Deal."

I generated a stone seat with a thin gravity panel over it. Acting like a cushion, Helios sat on it. He sank a little before peering down.

"Interesting. I must say I much prefer this to the usual floating. The seat offers structure. I always feel as if I'll fall when floating-"

"The sleep thing?"

Helios peered off.

"Ah yes, it's...It's something I've struggled with since I revived. I dream that Elysium succeeded in their goal and that I am nothing more than a shell of what I once was. I question my every thought and goal. I wonder if I am still alive or their puppet."

I grimaced.

"Damn. That's a lot. It reminds me of after I killed Valgus. I was worried he was still in my mind, too."

My grimace deepened.

"Eh, I still am."

Helios shrunk another edge of the split in spacetime.

"You don't trust your mind then. I am the same, and this is merely the beginning. My family is all but dead, with only my idiot brother still breathing. My uncle used me to accomplish his twisted, imperial goals, and I wasted my life on the pursuit."

He grabbed his mane with both hands.

"Now I toil on an underdeveloped, backwater mudball that's in the sights of Schema knows what."

I raised a hand.

"I'll have you know this mudball has water on it, which makes it pretty cool in my book."

He seethed.

"Emphasis on mudball. Mud. As in wet dirt."

I sighed. What he said did sum up his situation. I scratched the back of my head.

"I don't know what to say. Uhm, I'm sorry that all happened."

Helios snarled.

"You're why I'm alive. Why are you, of all people, apologizing?"

He stood, throwing his arm to the side.

"Obolis should be crawling on his knees, begging for forgiveness. I wouldn't even meet the cretin if I didn't have to attend so many funerals. No bodies, by the way. They don't trust that anything could remain untainted."

Helios glared at me.

"And who can blame them after what's happened? I still go for their memory, and Obolis speaks with me each and every time. He has the audacity to ask for my return. I wish I didn't find it so tempting."

I sat down on a gravity well.

"Why don't you go back?"

"Pride. Fury. And I understand he used me. I understand that his aims end in nothing. It is meaningless. As all feels as of late."

Helios sat back down.

"I do wish that I still had that. Meaning. It's a hard thing to find. Even harder to keep."

He reached out his hand, closing it to a fist.

"It slips between my fingers like holding glass sand. The harder I grip, the more it cuts into my skin."

A Pang of shame shot through me. I thought I could help him, but my guild offered a harbor, not a home. I reached out to say something before lowering my hands. Even with a dozen minds, I still didn't know what to say. A part of me hated myself for that.

Helios leaned his elbows onto his knees.

"What did you do after losing your home and family?"

I blinked.

"Who? Me?"

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the violation.

Helios let his arm flop to his side.

"Is there another thirty-foot-tall darksteel titan?"

"Did that even happen to me?"

Helios leaned back.

"I spoke with Torix. He informed me of your past in detail. If you'd rather we didn't discuss it, simply say so."

I waved my hand.

"No, I, I didn't think about it like that. I guess that did happen. Uh, hm. Springfield was leveled. My friends and family died. Michael and Kelsey turned into monsters, and we couldn't save them. In the aftermath, I formed my guild and built Mt. Verner."

There was no emotion in my voice. I recounted the details like a historian. Helios nodded.

"After watching one home burn, you built another."

I remembered the deformed wasteland Yawm turned Springfield into.

"Yeah. I did. I didn't have another option. I think that's where my healing started. Probably."

I oozed uncertainty, my words discomfoting even to myself. Helios sighed.

"Hm. Maybe that is the path for me as well."

Several minutes passed as Helios worked. He grunted.

"Thank you."

I coughed into a hand.

"I did nothing."

"You listened while I hurled insults your way, yet they bounced off you as everything else does. Your fortitude...It's impressive."

I blinked, feeling blindsided by the compliment. I stayed silent as Helios continued his work. After a while, he gazed at the last inklings of the warp.

"Let's drop the gloomy topic, shall we? Now, this warp isn't possible without intervention. Something is causing it to destabilize. I can't tell if this otherworldly force is blocking Schema or if the AI didn't bother to heal this scar in space."

I stood up, staring at the door-sized hole.

"I have a few ideas. I'll be having a few people check it out."

Helios raised a brow.

"Who, exactly?"

"More like a how."

I reached my hand into the portal while it shrank. It cuffed onto my hand like a shackle, burning into my skin. A cosmic kind of pressure erupted over me, oozing over my entire body. I bent my knees, shaking as it tried cleaving my body apart.

Helios reached back.

"What are you doing, you idiot? I'd have stopped closing it if you wanted to return."

The pressure mounted as if mountains rested on my shoulders. Perhaps they did.

"I'm not going back. I'm taking it with me."

Helios's eyes widened.

"You... You never intended to close it."

"Bingo."

The portal shredded into my dimensional fabric, its size no longer sustained. My body stopped the warp's collapse, but it applied immense pressure. It ground down my arm like a serrated saw blade. The oscillations cut through me until I condensed my dimensional wake over the area. That slowed the dimensional cutting.

I pulled more of my wake over the dimension, and it bore down on me like I held a sofa on my back. Pre-system, that is.

Helios gawked.

"You aim to mutilate yourself to carry it? You could have the others come."

I shook my head.

"You'd have to warp some more. I can't say anything that'll help, but I can do this much. Besides-"

I poured some of my dimensional fabric through the warp. I shrank down to only a head taller than Helios. After remolding myself, my arm returned with the runes intact. I grasped it, finally able to breathe again. The ball I dragged around disappeared into the warp, and no one could even tell it was there. The invisible side of the portal faced outwards, after all.

Though requiring some serious effort, I gained a way to manipulate my size at will and indiscriminately. Helios shook his head, a smile showing his sharp teeth.

"I see you're still a reckless fool."

I smiled back.

"Always will be."

Helios snapped his fingers, a warp to Mt. Verner appearing.

"Need a lift?"

I tried pulling the portal. It didn't budge.

"I'm stopping by the guild outpost first. Thanks for the offer."

We said our goodbyes, and Helios left. Standing by myself, I took a step. As I pulled myself forward, the warp chained me down. Even with all my physical strength, I struggled to move this even an inch. The ground crushed underfoot, the Earth splintering for well over a mile below.

I kept applying force before the ground rumbled. I didn't want to cause an earthquake just to move this damn portal. Kicking it up a notch, I channeled mana into my runes. Empowered with energy, I took another step. I put the rebounding force into my pocket dimension.

This time, I shifted forward in a slow drag. Shaking my head in disbelief, I contemplated my situation. This portal was bolting me to the floor, and dragging it was like tugging a continent. Physically moving it took untold effort, so I tried a different approach.

With a bit of maneuvering, I swelled a portion of my dimensional wake into the other dimension. With it holding firm, I pulled all of my wake forward. The immensely heavy warp moved this time, and I followed along with it. I tried to stop, and it slammed into my back.

I stammered forward out of surprise. It kept going up, eventually stopping thirty feet in the air. Hanging like a puppet, I gazed down while my dimensional fabric ball held me up from the other side of the dimension. It was an immutable anchoring point for my entire body. Hell yeah. Taking a moment, my mind danced with possibility.

This unveiled a new world to me, but learning to move took precedence. I saved that tidbit of potential for later. I kept moving around with the dimensional anchor, and it dragged me around with an unmatched momentum. Hardly able to stop myself, I wielded my dimensional wake to shift around.

It took serious effort, four minds devoted to that process alone. Considering the drop in mobility and processing power, I questioned this whole portal-dragging process

altogether. My status popped up in my vision, interrupting my thoughts. I tried dismissing the notification, but it didn't budge.

Weird. I opened it.

Skill level gained! Dimensional Saturation |87| -> |88|

Now, that was interesting. I kept moving around, and the skill leveled up at a consistent rate. After a while, I smiled. This process gave my dimension further stability and control. Considering how useful those skills were for defying any Old One, I'd be devoting a lot of time to this.

It looked like I just gained a new hobby.

After a couple minutes, I got myself up over Chicago. In tandem, I moved my physical self and dimensional wake. When I moved, I usually did both, but the passive effort lacked this same level of force. If that was moving myself, this was like moving an army. The intense concentration and persistent effort drenched me in perpetual exhaustion.

As I hovered in slow motion, the weight of my task dawned on me. The animas I set on completing the task bristled from the exertion they employed. Their senses of self and continuity crumbled over the next few minutes. A few cracked at the seams, their sheer enervation building to a fever pitch.

By the time I reached the top of the Sears Tower, one of the mind's efforts put all of us in awe. With my hands on my knees, I took a moment to collect myself. I hadn't been this tired since first learning time magic. I checked on the screaming mind once more, and it no longer thought anything back. It rested in a catatonic state for a while.

My eyes widened, and I shook my head in disbelief. I already had to die in order to use time magic. I wasn't about to do the same for another form of sorcery unless it rivaled temporal dilation's power. This didn't, so off to the garbage heap with other useless-

Ding. Another notification popped up. It was another one I couldn't close. Schema had become more overt as of late, so I rolled my eyes before opening it.

Unknown skill unlocked! Dimensional Weight | Level 10 - In this reality, the laws of the universe dictate what is, what has been, and what will be. These constants rule over all with an unseen fist, one we can't even see nor fathom. Within your domain, you wield that unseen fist, and you press your own causality onto everything around you.

+10% to Dimensional Weight

+10% to Dimensional Weight's Efficiency

I rubbed my temples at the status. My psyches discussed this before we came to several conclusions. For one, this portal wasn't working the way I thought it would. I imagined dragging it around, keeping it as a solution to my size issues. Instead, this dimensional anchor was simply that - a literal dimension I lugged around.

I pulled the entire fabric of another reality with me, and it was so, so very heavy. Heavy enough that I pressured one of my minds to a state of comatose by moving it. Shifting the space required far more mental exertion than I envisioned, but the reward exceeded anything I imagined up to this point.

Based on the skills description, I could even influence causality. Whatever the hell that meant. I sent a Daniel to research it in my status. Lugging myself along, I reached the Sear Tower while night loomed over the city. Refugees rested in encampments built near here, a few talking around the fires. Since I only stood fifteen feet tall, only a few of these insomniacs gawked. It gave me a sense of ease I had lacked for a long time.

At the primary outpost, the gialgathen kept an eye on the entire expanse. Its eyes met mine as I landed. A minuscule frown crossed over its face like a glitch. I followed my intuition.

"What's got you up in arms?"

Kaiayga leaned back.

"You cleared the dungeon."

"Not quite."

The gialgathen gazed at the moon reflecting onto Lake Michigan.

"Those two sent to the portal...They won't be silenced?"

"Like...Killed? Hell no."

The gialgathen turned to me, inspecting my face. I met its eye before it gave me a nod.

"Good. I could never be certain."

I spread my hands.

"I've done nothing for this kind of scrutiny."

The gialgathen tilted his head.

"You believe so? Odd. I've heard different tales of you."

My curiosity spiked.

"Like what, exactly?"

"They speak of sieges to other worlds. They whisper of battles with beings that can erase matter and create nuclear fire. Of wars waged against living machines and the terrors they infest."

I lowered my hands.

"Yeah...We have done that."

It shook its head.

"Is it so odd that I question what you're willing to do then?"

I sighed.

"Look, that's true, but the only reason you're even here is because of those decisions. You'd be infested by one of those machines without our intervention. The Eltari, my guild, we all fought battles that we decided on."

It raised a horned brow.

"Or was it you that did so?"

I narrowed my eyes.

"These people have chosen to follow me. They chose to fight. I never drafted or forced anyone."

The gialgathen leaned towards me.

"And what was their alternative? Death? Starvation?"

Neel paced out of a warp from within the Sears Tower.

"Excuse me, Kaiayga. I couldn't help but see you eyeing down our illustrious leader over here. I may not hear what's going on, but I think I've seen enough."

Kaiayga turned to the war veteran.

"Stay out of this."

Neel waved his hands.

"Now, I'm not one to question another man's anger. We have a right to it. But-"

His eyes sharpened.

"Not with him. Understood?"

A moment of tension passed over them. Kaiayga jerked his head aside and snarled.

"Ah. Fine. I'm scouting the outskirts of the city. Goodbye."

The elegant creature jumped off the edge of the building, gliding down to the tops of the trees. As it got outside of earshot, Neel put his hands on his hips.

"Sorry about all that. He doesn't do well with authority."

I raised a brow.

"Authority outside of yours, apparently."

"Well, me and him have a few things in common. I helped him with stopping acetylsalicylic acid. If you don't know what that means, you're like pretty much everybody. It's aspirin."

I leaned back.

"Aspirin? Like...The medicine?"

Neel gawked at me.

"You don't know about aspirin? Your daddy never taught you nothing."

"First off, mind your own damn business, and secondly, yes, I know what aspirin is. It's sap from a weeping willow, right?"

Neel, on edge, shrugged.

"Close enough. The willow bark had salicin in it. They used that to make aspirin. The point is, giving aspirin to a gialgathen is like giving a bear honey."

"So it's sweet?"

"Er, uh, ok, so imagine the honey again, but this time-" Neel spread his hands. "Laced with pounds and pounds of meth. Meth and cocaine."

My jaw slackened.

"It's a hard drug?"

Neel took a breath.

"Yup. As hard as they get. Good old Kaiayga ended up dependent on it after he arrived on Earth. He lost his family and then some in Lehesion's raid on Rivaria. The aspirin took that pain away, and I got him off of it."

My imagination ran wild.

"How in the world did you do that?"

"The same way I quit heroin. Buddhism."

Everything Neel said surprised me. I scoffed.

"Buddhism?"

"Suffering is attachment, as the good old Buddha says. Anyway, I got him to meditating, and he was able to kick the habit. We've been good friends ever since."

I gazed at Lake Michigan.

"Damn. He still seems kind of hostile."

"The best friends you have always are. They have this habit of holding you to account."

I remembered my conversation with Helios.

"Huh. Maybe so."

Neel smiled.

"And before you say so, I'm assuming you cleared the dungeon?"

"Essentially. You also have to let Jake and Gordan off the hook. This warp wasn't controlled by Schema."

Neel blinked.

"How in the hell did that happen?"

"I aim to find out back on Mt. Verner, but before I head out, is there anything you need?"

He walked up, offering a handshake. I returned the gesture. Neel smiled.

"I wanted to thank you for all you've done for Springfield. Michigan. Hell, the world."

I peered off.

"Ah. Thanks."

He pointed at me.

"I mean it. You've done something special. Something I can hardly believe."

I let my hand go.

"I got lucky."

He gave me a knowing look.

"No, I don't think you did."

My eyes narrowed.

"And what makes you so sure?"

Neel scoffed.

"Kiddo, I knew you before the system."

I leaned back. Neel stood tall.

"Daniel Hillside. Certified punk. A tough boxer. And someone who took beatings from his daddy before dishing one back. Good one, by the way. That prick deserved it."

Feeling vulnerable, I took a deep breath.

"You. Who are you?"

Neel peered off.

"I know it's hard to believe but-"

He met my eye.

"I'm your grandfather."

Chapter 394: A Mired Past

My eyes narrowed.

"And what makes you so sure?"

Neel scoffed.

"Kiddo, I knew you before the system."

I leaned back. Neel stood tall.

"Daniel Hillside. Certified punk. A tough boxer. And someone who took beatings from his daddy before dishing one back. Good one, by the way. That prick deserved it."

Feeling vulnerable, I took a deep breath.

"You. Who are you?"

Neel peered off.

"I know it's hard to believe but-"

He met my eye.

"I'm your grandfather."

The shadow of anger loomed over me before I loomed over Neel.

"And you expect me to believe you'd come out of the woodwork after all these years? Excuse me if I find that hard to believe."

Neel kept his eyes on me.

"Hell no. I wouldn't expect you to believe me even if I told you on the moon. If I'm honest, I still barely believe it myself. Besides, I'm sure plenty of people pretend they're your kin."

My words boiled.

"No. So far, you're the only one."

"Well, just because it's unlikely doesn't make it untrue. And I can prove it."

A temptation lingered in my mind. I could break Neel's psionic barriers and check his memories. I guaranteed any information I obtained that way, and I could skip listening to whatever Neel cooked up. Before I acted on impulse, I calmed myself down. Tearing this man's mind apart felt like crossing a barrier. It would be like choosing to kill for the first time.

I had already destroyed many minds before, but this was for a different reason. As the temptation reared its ugly head, Neel raised his palms.

"Alright, let's see. Hm. Your Dad's name was Jacob. He's an alcoholic. He always talked about his bum of a father. Your mother was Angela. The name fit 'cause she was an angel."

I shook my head.

"You could've just known me before the system."

Neel gulped.

"Ok. So, your birthday was August 12th, 2000. You had an O+ blood type. Uhm, you hated cheese while growing up."

I had no clue what my blood type was, but the cheese comment was strange. I, in fact, had hated cheese. Despised it, really. The flavor grew on me over time; as a teenager, I loved the stuff. At the very least, Neel knew me as a child.

"Closer, but not enough to be my good old grandpa."

Neel took a breath, squeezing his hands to fists by his sides.

"You, Jacob, and Angela always went to Ray's Ice Cream shop on every one of your birthdays. You'd play mini-golf there. You didn't stop going until Angela collapsed on your 7th birthday."

I winced. That was very specialized knowledge.

"Ok, there's some substance there. You could've just seen it happen, though."

Neel's face scrunched up.

"You all went to the hospital, and she was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer. She never smoked, but Jacob did. When Jacob held her hand there, he said he'd quit smoking in the house."

Like a bursting oil pipe, emotions flooded out of me. A plethora of questions erupted in my mind. One took precedence.

"Why haven't I ever heard of you?"

Neel sighed.

"A thousand reasons. I wasn't...I wasn't a good man for most of my life. Ever, really."

I snarled.

"That sounds like an understatement. Where the hell were you when Mom was dying? When my father needed someone to help pull his sorry ass back together?"

Neel peered away, shame striking his face like a hammer.

"I'm as reliable as a sundial at midnight."

"Unreliable, sure, but that doesn't explain anything. I need to know why. Why would you leave your family to burn like that?"

Neel turned a hand to me.

"Do you want the short of it or the whole thing?"

I shook my hands.

"The entirety of it. Every last detail you can scrounge up to stop me from demoting you to a janitor."

Neel walked over and sat at the edge of the base's extension. With his feet kicking over Chicago's ruins, Neel murmured.

"Heh, that wasn't too bad a threat there, kid. The thing is, this guilt in my chest, it's heavier than lead. I'd rather spend the rest of my life in a dungeon than live one more day bottling all of it up."

I noted that this was about him. I walked over.

"Then start explaining."

"I guess I'll start with Jacob."

I stood beside him. Neel stared at Lake Michigan.

"I went to Nam for four tours. By the time I got back, I wasn't a man without a war to fight. I got through it by leaning on the warmth and comfort of a needle, and she never failed me. Well, eventually, that's all she ever did. Then I met Betty, your grandmother. She was the warmth I needed so badly."

His eyes went distant.

Stolen content warning: this content belongs on Royal Road. Report any occurrences.

"God...She didn't deserve me. I was the worst thing that ever happened to that woman."

I kept my eyes on Lake Michigan, but I listened to the sound of his heart and felt the moisture off of him. He didn't sweat, and his pulse didn't rise. Either he was a psychopath or telling the truth. Neel rubbed his hands down his face.

"After we had Jacob, I got into using heroin again. Well, more than before. I...I just about killed us both. Betty kicked me out of the home, and I just drifted for years. Years and years. I hardly remember even living during those days. I did see every U.S. state, some of Canada. Even a piece of Mexico."

I raised my brow. My voice was like acid.

"Hm. I see where my father got his best traits from."

He winced.

"I deserve that. But, at least I got back to Betty before she died. We had a few good years before she died of Parkinson's. By then, Jacob just hit thirty. You were, hm, about three years old. Angela was an absolute saint. Even from a distance, they were just like me and Betty. I could tell Angela didn't deserve the man she found either."

Neel gulped.

"It's so strange how life moves in these cycles like that. One day you're doin' something you hate. The next, you see that your family's suffering from the same damn thing. It's like a curse. It never leaves yah."

A piece of me hollowed out hearing that. I grimaced.

"Oh, I'm well aware."

Neel leaned back.

"You know, there's a lot of her in you. Angela, I mean."

I kept calm as I turned to face him.

"Why didn't you come by earlier? We could've used the help."

Neel smiled but his eyes carried sadness.

"Son, where you're at, damn near no one can help you now. You're in uncharted waters from what I've heard."

I bit my cheek.

"I'm talking about before, when mom died."

Neel frowned.

"Ah. Yeah...The thing is, I was still struggling."

I suppressed the urge to slap his skull off his head. Neel didn't notice my rage as he kept talking.

"I kept struggling for another five years, being a bum. I didn't end up getting a job until I found Buddhism. I had to let go of the war and what had happened to me. You know, not let it tell me who I could and couldn't be.

You're father and I got close at that time. As close as we could be. It wasn't perfect, but it was more than we'd ever been. I learned about you. Watched a few of your birthdays. You were a fine young man. I was proud of how Jacob turned his life around too."

Neel shook his head.

"Until Angela passed. That...That wasn't good for either of us."

My skin bristled. I'd heard the same tone of voice from Dad lifetimes ago, but it still scalded against my skin. No, more than that. It spiked my adrenaline and ignited my fury. It was an excuse, the kind that justified beatings from flushed fists or screams shouted with booze-laden breath. I held in my anger as I murmured.

"I'm sure you both struggled."

"We did. I know you struggled the most though. It couldn't have been easy dealing with it all."

My gaze hardened.

"Obviously. That's in the past though."

Neel grimaced.

"That's the thing I figured out. Nothing's in the past. We carry it forward. We all do. I thought I had put the war behind me decades ago. I kept on thinking that even while carrying all the pain with me. It gets heavy. So heavy that you just want to run away from it all. From everything."

I raised my brow, my voice like steel.

"And now you think I'm carrying my pain?"

Neel shook his head.

"I don't think I know you half as well as I'd like. I'm tellin' you what I've experienced is all. Besides, you've done more than I could've ever imagined. You can't know just how proud I am of you. If I died today, my life would have been worth it knowing that I was able to make something good with my life, even if it was just you."

A piece of me warmed when I heard him say that. I wanted to reach out and hug him for saying something I would've loved to hear after Mom died. From my father. From anyone in my life at the time. It would've been a healing salve on an aching wound. But those days were long gone, embedded in a brutal past that I'd never forget.

Another part of me roared out in hate. I hated the part of me that wanted this old man's approval. I hated the fact that after all these years, I'd love to hear my father say the same. I hated how much I wanted to hear my mother's voice again. All these thoughts and feelings I had pushed down rushed out, and they threatened to overwhelm me at that moment.

But I was a boy no longer.

My voice was like ice.

"You think the good I've done in any way relates back to you? That I accomplished what I've accomplished because of you in any way?"

Neel blinked in shock. My words were a hot iron against his face. He peered down.

"I...I guess not."

I squeezed a hand into a fist.

"You mean nothing to me, just like my father. He abandoned me when Mom died. You abandoned me before I was even born. Before I could even remember who the hell you are. What makes you think you deserve redemption from me?"

Neel nodded.

"I haven't done half enough, and you're not wrong. But please, hear me out-"

I swung my hand, wind billowing off my arm.

"You think I have to listen to you? I've already made a life out of the ruins you left behind. I'm not going to be like you or like my father."

Neel stood and stared at me.

"You think I don't know that? You broke the chain. Shattered it. That's not easy to do. Believe me, I know."

I heaved for breath, and I radiated anger. Despite my overwhelming advantage in power, status, and ability, I felt small. I felt smaller than I had in years. I snarled.

"One chance. Talk."

Neel raised his hands.

"It was wrong of me to try and steal your thunder. You're right. Who am I to tell you what you think? To tell you what to believe. I'm an old man who's barely made it this far. You're a young gun that's got the world in the palm of your hand."

A slight smile traced up his lips.

"And that's the crazy thing. You've got a big palm. I'm not worried about you one bit. You got them politicians beat by miles, I tell you. In the old world, they fought tooth and nail to get something they didn't deserve. You seized it with your own two hands. Nobody can take that away from you."

He was wrong about that. I was thrown into this position before accepting it. It was something I contemplated a lot. In many ways, every great leader's power was a burden

they all carried. On the other hand, every great tyrant's power was a burden carried by all. I strove to be different, but I didn't know whether I achieved it or not. For the most part, all I'd done since the system started was survive.

Now, I was trying to make sure everyone else survived with me.

And this man, regardless of what I felt, was a survivor. He wore scars all over his face and shoulders from battles fought long ago. I'd help him, but it wasn't because of sentimentality or newly forged feelings. He helped my guild and these people. He earned a second chance at life.

But a second chance at being my grandfather? Hell no. That well dried up decades ago. I pulled myself up with a gravity well, making sure to drag the dimensional anchor with me. I sighed.

"Thanks for the talk."

He reached out a hand.

"Wait a minute."

I turned away before trying to fly off. The dimension I carried held me back, prolonging an otherwise ended conversation. Neel spread his arms.

"I know I don't deserve a second chance. I left you to rot all your life, and now I'm coming back after you've already gotten everything you ever wanted out of life."

I closed my eyes. Everything I wanted? I wanted a decent father. I wanted a decent childhood. I'd never have those. I stopped flying away.

"We agree on that. What's your point?"

Neel reached out a hand before pulling it back. Words sat on the tip of his tongue, and he mulled them over before clenching his hand into a fist. He shook it.

"I know...I know this is shameful. I just want to learn who you are. Learn about your past. How you became the man you are today."

I turned to him.

"Why would I do that?"

Neel lowered his arm.

"Because I promise you this: no matter how much you try to deny it, a family matters. It will weigh you down and become a sinking anchor in your chest, and it will hold you back in ways you don't even realize. Here's what I mean. I was beaten by my daddy, and I beat yours. He-"

"Jacob beat me. Is your great revelation about how much of a piece of shit you are? Because that's crystal clear."

"That's why I want you to know what happened. To think it over and know what's going on. I think...I think it's important. I don't know why, but I do."

I paused, slowing down time. For a while, I stood still and enjoyed the sensation of having my minds ripped apart. It was better than having this conversation. After a while, my psyches wandered. I thought about everything that happened and about this situation.

A part of me wanted to accept the apology and give this old man a shot at redemption. A far larger and stronger part of me wanted to move on. To leave this behind. I furrowed my brow, and I took a deep breath. This wasn't something I could run away from forever. It was better to leave it settled.

I furrowed my brow.

"How exactly would you want me to know my family better?"

Neel breathed out, a palpable wave of relief washing over him.

"Thank you. Thank-"

I raised a palm.

"Don't think for a second we're on amenable terms. You've got ground you need to gain before I consider you an effective subordinate. You slip up in any way, and we're done. Do you understand me?"

Neel gave me a two-fingered salute.

"Aye aye, sir. Loud and clear."

"Good. So, about learning about my family. What did you have in mind?"

Neel puffed out his chest.

"I think I got a lead on Jacob."

I closed my eyes. My wake crept over my surroundings, and it suffocated the air. I glared at Neel, and the old man paled. I clenched my jaw.

"So, the old man's still kicking? I wonder if I should change that."

Chapter 395: A Shattering Mirror

I raised a palm.

"Don't think for a second we're on amenable terms. You've got ground you need to gain before I consider you an effective subordinate. You slip up in any way, and we're done. Do you understand me?"

Neel gave me a two-fingered salute.

"Aye aye, sir. Loud and clear."

"Good. So, about learning about my family. What did you have in mind?"

Neel puffed out his chest.

"I think I got a lead on Jacob."

I closed my eyes. My wake crept over my surroundings, and it suffocated the air. I glared at Neel, and the old man paled. I clenched my jaw.

"So, the old man's still kicking? I wonder if I should change that."

Neel paled in the moonlight.

"Oh come on now. You'd kill your own father?"

I stayed quiet. A sinking dread passed between us. I sighed.

"Maybe. Probably not. Ah, who knows? It depends on what he's doing if the old man is still alive."

Neel furrowed his brow.

"Does it really matter?"

I frowned.

"It's the only thing that matters. If I acted based on what he has done, then I'd kill him for my own satisfaction and revenge. That's why I'll be ripping him apart if he's a raider, for instance."

Neel gnarled his hands.

"Have you thought about forgiving him?"

I smiled. The expression was a thinly veiled lie.

"Neel. I haven't forgiven you, let alone him."

Neel winced.

"This'll be the last piece of advice you'll hear out of me for a while. Forgiveness isn't really about the one who hurt you. It's about moving on from something. To really let it go. Otherwise, it just haunts you like a ghost, and it'll tear you down if you let it."

I gazed through him, all of my minds peering in tandem. The hair on his skin bristled as I murmured.

"It's easy to say as much when you've spent your entire life abandoning the people that need you most."

Neel's arms slowly fell down. His breath grew less stable, and his eyes watered. A pang of guilt hit me before I pinched the bridge of my nose. I turned a palm to the guy.

"That was...Too far. Sorry. Look, Neel, I appreciate you trying to clear things up. I really do. The thing is, the situation isn't resolved just because you want it to be. So far, you've stuck your foot in some cold water. Well, now you're going to have to get in there and swim."

Neel took a second before giving me a nod.

"You're right about that. To make it up to you, I was thinking we could take some time off and head out to the Rocky Mountains. I know some people there that think we might've seen him."

That was where my mom's family lived. A spike of curiosity exploded in my chest, and I wanted to go. Before I acted on that desire, I raised a palm.

"I can't. I have to finish creating some protection for most of my cities. I actually stopped by here for a break from all that. It's gone on long enough as it is, let alone if I add a few more weeks to the time. That's why I can't afford to linger here any longer."

Neel sighed.

"Then what about Jacob?"

I shrugged.

"If he's survived this long, then he'll be around when we choose to find him. Eventually, I'll get a moment to rest, and I'll meet up with you to find that lead you mentioned. How does that sound?"

Neel smiled, a gold tooth sheening in the moonlight.

"That'd be great, son. I'd love that."

I walked up and offered a hand. He shook it before I turned to leave. As I rose off the ground, Neel reached out.

"Ah, about your last name. There's a reason it isn't Stoltman."

I smiled.

"I already know why. My father took my mother's last name when they got married. Otherwise, I would've abandoned that surname a long time ago."

Neel closed his eyes.

"Good. Good. Er, that you know, that is."

He waved a hand.

"You...You take care now."

I gave a curt nod before pulling myself away. I put several minds onto heaving the dimension around while I dove into thought. I picked up speed, and the crisp wind cooled my skin. My thoughts raced fast enough to counter the cold, leaving me heated.

I never heard of Neel. Never. Not once. You'd think my father would mention him at least in passing, but he always referred to him as his old man. No names. No specifics. It gave me so little to go on along with no idea what my lineage was like. At least Neel's history helped explain why I had so little extended family.

Part of that developed out of a familial disagreement. My mom's family never approved of her marriage to my father. Even after I was born, they still didn't like the guy. They especially didn't like me. Apparently, we visited whenever I was young, and I had a few fuzzy memories of that family branch. I remember they didn't smile much, but that could've been a personal anecdote.

Apparently, they treated me differently than other cousins or friends. To them, I was like a representation of my mom's greatest sin, and my survival helped keep that sin alive. That family branch's resentment poured out onto me whenever I visited, and my mom cut them off after a nasty slap across my face. I remembered that part vividly.

The man backhanded me and knocked me down. I ended up getting a purple welt under my eye since the man wore one of those large graduation rings. He was the kind of man who peaked in high school for sure, and I still couldn't remember why he'd slapped me in the first place. Either way, I always found the situation hysterical.

You see, he broke that ring on my cheek. The fake sapphire broke out of the socket and clattered to the ground in pieces. He always said it was loose, poorly crafted, and ready to snap. I told him that no matter what he told himself, he hadn't hurt me. That wasn't true by any stretch of the imagination, but it got under his skin regardless.

Love this novel? Read it on Royal Road to ensure the author gets credit.

And to me, expressing defiance was a form of victory. Stupid, yes, but I was a kid.

Regardless, my mom didn't visit after that, and my dad bowed up to the guy before backing down after they threatened to call the police. It was a painful memory for my

dad, and he told me it was my fault that mom was cut out of her inheritance. Honestly, I hadn't thought about all of this in decades, but talking to Neel pulled all of it out of the depths.

Speaking of, if what Neel said was true, then he made sure that our extended family wouldn't be on good terms with us either. In that regard, any kind of meaningful bond we could've had was scrubbed clean long ago. I still had so many questions in my head about my Dad's life, my grandmother's passing, and why Neel waited so long to tell me all this.

At the same time, I already juggled a thousand other considerations and concerns. I had to prioritize the Earth for once, and I lacked any time or energy for a deep dive into my past, let alone something this emotionally draining. In fact, two psyches keeled over from pulling my dimension around.

Despite my desire to dismiss the thoughts and dwell on something else, they lingered like roaches in the wall of an old apartment. After a while, I wanted the matter settled to free up my headspace. I resolved to talk to Neel if we met again, but I wouldn't go out of my way to make it happen. What would be, would be.

Until then, I would focus on Earth's safety. Driving that conclusion home, I gasped as another mind went into a comatose from tugging along this tiny portal. Instead of waiting for it to heal, I killed the animus by shredding it apart. My mind regenerated far faster than it healed from the comatose, but it felt excruciating.

Eh, whatever. I would do whatever it took to make progress. If that meant dying in a dozen different ways, then I'd do it. No excuses. Even as I tore pieces of my mind apart, I kept thinking about Neel and my father. No matter how much I tried pulling my mind off the topic, I kept wandering off into that vein of thought.

Even worse, carrying the rift turned a half-hour trip here into a six-hour slog back home. At least it gave me time to sort through my status. As I did, I checked out my skillpoints, finding just over six hundred stacked up.

I put them into Owner of Worlds.

As the root of worlds, you shall be called Yggdrasil. The allfather. The allmaker. Nothing within your domain may dominate without your acknowledgment. Nothing

may rise when you say fall, and within your open palm rests all the havens for billions.
In your closed fist rests the ruin of any that crosses your domain.

For that is the path of he who owns worlds.

ADDITIONAL NOTE:

Always remember your purpose. Those same fists you own must stop ruin from hunting down all that you know, have seen, and will see. An evil will come, and you must be ready. You will need to rise or be smothered by the forces encroaching from all directions.

For they draw near.

+150% to city barrier strength

+150% to city barrier efficiency

+50% to city barrier size

+50% to credit income multiplier from owned territories

+50% to experience multiplier from owned territories

+150% to bounty payout in owned territories

+150% to bounty experience reward in owned territories

-50% to warping costs in owned territories

Rights to Planetary Ruler Classes unlocked! You may now grant classes to your followers! Note - Terms and conditions required. See the guide for more details.

Sovereign Exclusive: +30% to World Perk Efficacy

The ominous message in the second part of the tree stood out in more ways than one. It presented a terrifying reality, one I suited up for at a breakneck speed yet still felt woefully unprepared for. After the ominous feeling passed, I opened my tree menu.

Select a talent tree for distributing points.

Requirements met! Additional trees unlocked!

Anomaly(Be singular in nature)(2,500) | Immortal(Have a possible lifespan of over 100,000 years)(2,500) | Conquerer(Take a city by force)(1,500) | Schema's Champion(Prove yourself worthy of my personal attention)(5,000)

While the other trees still seemed more than worthy, I chose to take Schema's Champion. Without the prerequisite set of points to unlock anything more, I closed my status and contemplated Owner of Worlds. In many regards, it fed into my current goals beautifully, giving my cities a wider scope of protection.

It granted better passive governance to my territories via the bounty bonuses, and the warping cost reductions made my local economies far more manageable. The last bit about classes also piqued my interest, so I checked it out.

Class Upgrade Guide:

Your followers will be given variants of chosen classes based on performance. Whenever a variant class is selected, they will be notified that this tree was the cause for transparency. We hope this guide has been helpful.

It was about as helpful as damn near anything in Schema's guides. With a bit of time to kill, I considered a few avenues for self-strengthening, building up my army, or even working with Schema. It was something I was afraid of - hitting a wall in power. I'm sure my guildmate would roll their eyes at that idea, but I worried about it regardless.

I mean, by now, I cranked all of the most obvious levers at my disposal to their utmost potential. At least the ones obvious to me. Despite turning over all those stones for power, I was lacking in many ways. I shivered, remembering how Eonoth crushed me

utterly. Facing off against someone like him or even Valgus required absolute dominance psionically, physically, and dimensionally.

Hell, in every way imaginable.

It was the problem with having enemies I didn't know and couldn't name. I already worked on my cipheric markings, channeled mana, and worked on powerful skills like Temporal Compression and the new Dimensional Weight ability. Portions of my mind died all the time, and I recuperated because of my stats.

Without them, I'd have been driven mad long ago. It still wasn't enough. As the vista of Mt. Verner expanded in the distance, I settled on my next course of action. Having received no messages on Diesel's progress on the golems, I asked for an update before landing at my golem creation facility.

Until the next morning, I had some time. I'd make the most of it.

A pit of dread filled my stomach as I typed up another message. As I sent a request for Shalahora, I considered what I was asking for. This would be yet another trial by fire. Oh man, it would be one more undertaking I wanted no part of, but based on my limited knowledge, I lacked any other options.

I would progress where I knew I could, and as far as I could tell, all of my avenues to success required me to figuratively die. Well, die many times, really. All of my training would require me to expire enough that I'd rack up an impressive body count by the end of it all. Perhaps I'd name the training for each skill differently.

What about battles? No, this would last too long. Conflicts? Eh, it sounded too light. Ah, yes, wars. I'd call them wars from within. Like, I don't know, the war of time. The war of dimensions. With Shalahora, this would be the war of the mind. I clapped my cheeks, silencing my growing procrastination.

I sent my message to the guild's strongest member. Arguably, at least. A few minutes passed, and a heavy silence oppressed me. I jumped as a shadow welled up from the ground. Shalahora murmured with a silence that echoed.

"Harbinger...I have read the request...Are you certain about this?"

I took a deep breath.

"I don't see another alternative. You're the only person I can train mind magic with."

Shalahora peered at me before reaching out a hand.

"Then be ready, and know I've been commanded to do this."

I braced for impact.

"Do your worst."

Shalahora laughed.

"It will be far from it, but for now, a piece is more than enough."

A connection sprang up between us. As Shalahora's mind grazed mine, I stared into a relative infinity. The size of Shalahora's psyche mirrored Valgus's mana production. The scale of it was like seeing a great monster's eye taking up all I could see.

Feeling like an ant on an elephant, I winced.

"Oh, man. This is going to be pretty bad, huh?"

Shalahora whispered.

"Define bad."

Shalahora's mind drenched out in a flood. It reminded me of Elysium's tactics, his mind akin to a horde. Unlike anyone I'd seen beforehand, Shalahora's psyche shot out without flaws, cracks, or edges. He was a one-man, walking army, and he commanded each soldier to perfection.

It really was incredible. I gazed at an entire species folded into a tiny, miniature point, and it occupied a tremendously expanded mind. The density and vastness rivaled jumping into an ocean of mercury. I could hardly get under the liquid metal, let alone swim through it.

I grimaced.

"This is going to hurt."

Shalahora's gaze softened.

"In a sense, though pain isn't how I would describe it. It's similar to following an ideology, one you don't agree with. The sense of unease, the cognitive dissonance, it builds until the mind breaks. You accept the corruption as the alternative becomes easier. More of you will follow until nothing is left. This is death by psionic dismantling."

I tested the waters, throwing a mind against his. It all but vaporized.

"Well...It sounds like going insane."

Shalahora took a small step towards my mind. I buckled, unable to stand anymore. As I fell down, he tilted his head at me.

"Is that too much?"

I pushed myself back up.

"I don't know. Maybe?"

Shalahora tapped my forehead.

"How many minds do you have free at this moment?"

"About nine."

"And how many may die before you lose your sanity?"

I wanted to lie as I clenched my jaw.

"I can lose eight, and they come back quickly too."

Shalahora lowered his arm.

"My last question is thus - how deep into the dark do you wish to tread?"

I scoffed.

"Further than I am. That's the goal."

Shalahora's voice pierced into our surroundings.

"Then let us tread into dark waters, Harbinger."

Chapter 396: To Embrace the End

Shalahora tapped my forehead.

"How many minds do you have free at this moment?"

"About nine."

"And how many may die before you lose your sanity?"

I wanted to lie as I clenched my jaw.

"I can lose eight, and they come back quickly, too."

Shalahora lowered his arm.

"My last question is thus - how deep into the dark do you wish to tread?"

I scoffed.

"Further than I am. That's the goal."

Shalahora's voice pierced into our surroundings.

"Then let us tread into dark waters, Harbinger."

Like tearing the arms off a doll, Shalahora killed two of my minds. I coughed into my hand, feeling like blood should've gushed out with the air. Before I breathed in, Shalahora killed three more minds. I collapsed onto the ground. While standing, Shalahora disintegrated two more.

The edges of my mind faded. My vision blurred, and my senses lost clarity. Like a horde of zombies, the pieces of psyche still continued shambling forward. Shalahora stabbed the minds to death, his psyche like a concentrated, psionic blade. Its sheer concentration and ferocity left me stunned.

In all aspects, his presence and ability dwarfed mine. I was a lightbulb staring at a star. Shalahora's voice radiated through my being.

"Adjust to the dying."

Something was off about Shalahora. I grunted.

"I'm...Trying."

Shlahora's voice took on a cosmic scale in my head.

"Your mind is a flood. When your enemies aim to drink from the water, you will bury them. Suffocate them. You need to wield the gush. Take it and learn to live as an incomplete, fragmented being."

I lost my sight as I shouted in my head.

"How in the hell is that even possible?"

"It is the same as what you do to your body. You belittle, degrade, and destroy it. You trust that it will return, full and whole and complete. You must learn to do the same to your mind."

My left arm slackened.

"It's not the same. It's so much-"

Silence permeated my head. Fear sprang through me. Shalahora murmured.

"It is the same. Watch."

Before I shouted for him to stop, Shalahora pieced me apart. I lost my limbs. My body. My soul. I lost my memories. I forgot who I was. Where I am. I fell into a pit of nothing, a broken piece of something that had never been. In a quiet place, I fell into oblivion. A primordial fear permeated everything.

I wanted to cry tears from my eyes that I could not feel. The pressure relented. I returned. My memories flashed back into being. My thoughts returned to coherence. I blinked as sensory information funneled back into my head and mind. I fell backward, gasping for air I didn't need but couldn't live without.

While I kept wheezing, Shalahora stared down at me.

"You tasted it with Valgus. That is closer to death, yet you returned in less than a second."

A second that was an eternity. I put my hand over my chest, praying I was still alive.

"It feels like it's been forever."

Shalahora raised his hand and concentrated dark shadows over it. With a quick swipe, he cleaved into my arm. I peered at it as if he tapped my shoulder. As Shalahora jerked the blade out, my arm healed. He shuddered.

"Invincible. A disgustingly powerful physical form."

I pulled myself up.

"Why did you even do that?"

Shalahora waved his hand.

"Years ago, that would've frightened you. Why didn't it now?"

My eyes widened.

"Because...Because I know I'll be fine."

Shalahora nodded.

"Your mind is the same. It is as infinite and invincible. You must learn to throw more of yourself into the furnace. Your duty demands it. Your guild will need it. And you will need every advantage to cull what is to come."

My eyes narrowed.

"What is that, precisely?"

Shalahora closed his eyes.

"I cannot say. If I do so, it shall manifest grander consequences than silence shall. That is the curse of one so deeply connected to an Old One - I lost my agency in this reality for raw power."

I furrowed my brow.

"You know more, and you're stronger now. You're telling them that you lost your agency? I can understand that with Yawm or Valgus since they lost their minds from the contract, but you're different. You still have most of who you were. Well, from what I've gathered."

Shalahora's form rippled.

"You are correct, but there is a level of knowledge and power where one's perspective shifts. If you are able to see the passing of empires and eons, then eventually, they blur together. Patterns emerge that supersede the individuals involved, and the nature of those people takes all import."

Shalahora reached out a palm.

"That is when I realized that changing those patterns matters more than the empires, but I am helpless to do so. I learned enough and am able to kill in mass. That does not change anything in a meaningful way. I am lost in a cycle of entrapment, one where I can destroy what time has built but not influence its making."

I grabbed his hand.

"Is that why you accepted the contract with me? You think I can?"

He pulled me up. Shalahora murmured.

"I know it. My patron has indicated as much, and they believe in your absolute potential. However, I don't wish for you to walk the path they want for you. That is why you must overcome these mental limitations."

I trembled.

"It feels like dying."

"It does not feel. It is dying."

I peered at the shadow.

"That's why I don't like it. Not even a little bit."

"You didn't like pain either, yet you conquered it."

"That was different. I had the system helping me."

Shalahora's form wavered in the wind.

"And it helps you now. When you are ready, let us go back into the dark. It will become a place of comfort for you. A welcoming emptiness that embraces all that isn't. Until then, goodbye, Harbinger."

He disappeared. Alone in the forest, I gulped. A piece of me wanted to run away from this and do something that didn't involve so much pain. Was it pain? No, it was fear. I was afraid of going down this untrodden path. It terrified me to fully realize what I actually was. To use what I had become.

This wasn't the first time, and it wouldn't be the last. As I pulled myself back upright, I sat down in a cross-legged position. Taking a moment to collect myself, I said aloud.

"I'm ready."

Shalahora reintegrated into reality.

"So soon?"

I sighed.

"Of course. What do you take me for?"

Shalahora let out the slightest of laughs.

"The Enduring One."

Our minds connected. I grit my teeth for what was to come.

"I'm ready."

Shalahora obliterated three minds.

"Yet again, to the dark we dive."

Pieces of my mind died each second. If I stood atop my bodies, a mountain of corpses would've mounted in minutes. The pace of destruction mirrored my mana regen, and I could hardly comprehend it. The mental death didn't help with that, but even then, my soul recuperated with the exact same tenacity and speed as my body.

Shalahora had been right all along. It was a piece of my durability I'd never truly explored. Even after regenerating a hundred times, no scars, wounds, or lingering flaws remained in my psyche. Even after having my mind nearly at the brink of a true psionic death, I came back. I blacked out nearly ten times a second, still able to return to my full consciousness after doing so for minutes at a time.

Despite my ability to do so, I wasn't ready for this. It wasn't something I could rationalize. My human mind simply wasn't built to experience something this traumatic. The ordeal was so close and personal, and it operated on an axis I'd never experienced before. It left me shivering and trembling. I drooled and gasped as if drowning.

It was a conversation with the Grim Reaper, and every word carried weight. The reaper kept talking to me, and I couldn't respond. All I could do was listen to the endless droning of a being that incarnated death. Hearing it speak was enough to drive me insane, but I chose to listen.

I chose to learn.

Shalahora's intensity defied reason. He pushed me further than I expected to go. He never relented, maintaining the same immense and imposing pressure. Why he did so, I didn't ask anymore. He felt an immense urgency and need for this training. Considering who he was, I put faith in the guy, and I put my all into matching the pace he set.

As the sun rose, I stumbled away from Shalahora. I gagged on nothing, and I blinked back dry tears. While I reeled from the experience, Shalahora walked over. He placed a palm on my back.

"The road you walk is a difficult one. One of the most formidable roads imaginable."

My hands shook.

"Th-thanks, Shalahora. I'll let you know when I'm ready to train again."

Shalahora pulled his hand back and turned his gaze, unable to look at me. He closed his eyes before squeezing his hands into fists. He shook his head, and his voice carried pain.

"Yes. Of course. Anytime."

As he faded, I collected myself over the next few minutes. I didn't move the portal, manipulate time, or channel my runes. I existed in peace, the sunrise my comfort and the wind my warmth. After some time, I wobbled back up to my feet. To my disbelief, a quick jog one way and the other verified that everything still worked.

Shalahora wasn't lying to me, but this training was worse than he described. That was likely because humanity didn't have words for this kind of experience. I leaped into dark waters, trying to struggle for air. Jumping onto a much easier, simpler path, I hauled the dimension around with me.

Enjoying this book? Seek out the original to ensure the author gets credit.

I accelerated time, and even more of myself faded. I lived in that fragmentary existence, a part of a whole that would never be entire and utter. But...it weighed on me less than before. I accustomed myself to it like a warrior getting used to old wounds or missing limbs. As I got a grip on the situation, a notification popped up.

Diesel, Johnathan Hopkins(Lvl 1,893 | Class: Engineer) - We have the prototype ready. We need to test it out to see if it works. Where do you want to meet?

The Living Multiverse | Level 24,102 (Cap: 39,000) | Class: Sovereign - My golem creation facility works well for that. It'll contain the heat from the production process.

Diesel, Johnathan Hopkins(Lvl 1,893 | Class: Engineer) - Roger. Be there in a bit.

I waited beside the facility's ground level. After a while, Diesel leaped out of a few trees. He landed on the ground with a bit of a quake underneath him. I leaned against my facility's wall.

"You have some heft there, huh? Constitution?"

Diesel gawked at the upturned soil.

"Huh, maybe? It's probably your legacy more than my stats. It makes everyone heavy. While we appreciate the benefit, it makes designing some buildings a hassle. I mean, everyone's at least a couple tons."

I frowned.

"Huh. I never thought about that."

Diesel shrugged.

"I think about it like a huge inheritance. There's money and plenty of opportunity, but you have to learn to manage the resources right. Otherwise, it ends up becoming more of a nuisance than what you get in the first place."

He checked his status.

"Oh yeah, it gives me more stats than my levels have. That's insane."

I scoffed.

"Too much of a good thing is a poison."

"You're telling me. Ahem. You needed the limiters, correct?"

Limiters. That was a great name for it. Diesel pulled out a notebook. I floated it up while opening the pages.

"Cool, cool...Hmm, interesting...Ah, so you went with diagrams instead of runes? They're very organized."

Diesel waved his hands around.

"The thing is, all of it was chaos to me because of the cipher conversion. They make more sense when I write them down like that instead, and I let you handle converting them. It helps with knowing what information goes where whenever I've worked with you before."

I took a mental note of that practice. As I flicked through the pages, I found an entire novel's worth of content before me. Diesel filled in two hundred pages over the last few days; he and a team worked on this project night and day, no doubt.

I snapped the book shut, a grin on my face.

"This will do nicely."

The subtlest of smirks grew on Diesel's face.

"We'll prove that bucket of bugs wrong, eh?"

I floated us into the facility.

"That's the plan. Let's get to work."

We landed amongst the metallic corpses, my production line like a pristine and glossy graveyard. Diesel ogled at the gravitationally floating golems.

"How in the world did you make them so perfect?"

"I pull my soul out of my body, then reconstituted from a different place in my true body."

Diesel shook his head.

"That...That doesn't sound healthy. You should get that checked out."

I bust out laughing.

"I don't know if health is what I should be worrying about anymore."

Turning the pages, I adjusted the patterns into cipheric runes. The labeled diagrams made it far easier than before. Even after a few seconds, the scale and scope of the project impressed me, along with Diesel's classic attention to detail.

I murmured.

"You've been practicing. Nice."

Diesel raised two palms at me.

"Oh, no, there's no I in this project. This is a team effort, 100%. I couldn't have done a tenth of that in the time you gave us, but give my guys a raise and a nice title upgrade to their job? Psh, the sky is the limit."

I frowned.

"Let's hope not. We'll need these guys in space and all kinds of other places."

Diesel leaned back, rubbing the back of his head. I scoffed.

"Oh, come, I get to make jokes too."

He smiled.

"Yeah, true. True. It's hard not to take you seriously all the time. This position I'm in still feels so surreal."

"you and me both, man. You and me both. Anyways, give me a few minutes to read this."

"Minutes? Did you practice speed reading?"

"No, but I have a process."

I kind of learned speed reading after making up a system for it on the spot. With tiny gravity wells, I tore the book apart one page at a time. A dozen of my minds read a dozen pages at once. Within half an hour, I read the book and discussed the material with other Daniels. Having a firm grasp on it, I toiled on my grimoire to forge the runes.

Diesel watched my work, the engineer's eyes piercing as he took notes. I fell into the task at hand. Telekinesis. Gravitation. Heat. Forges and fires. I constructed and dismantled. I tested and delineated. After a few hours, a few test golems gazed back at us. A circular plate hummed on their back, the cluster of runes psionically isolated from the construct.

Diesel put his hands on his hips.

"Yeesh. They send a shiver down my spine just looking at them."

I mirrored Diesel's posture.

"That's how you know they're just right."

After heading outside, we tested their abilities using their new modes of being. Diesel watched from the top of the facility. He pointed at it as the runes of the golem dimmed.

"We call that domestic mode."

I took a step back from the golem. The construct approached a tree, attempting to strike it. It couldn't shatter the bark, let alone destroy it. As I watched on, it pulled leaves off a tree and snapped thin branches. It couldn't rip large ones apart. Its weakness stunned me.

I gawked.

"How did you do that? It's like...Like a puppy golem."

Diesel furrowed his brow.

"We had a copy of the status screen you sent us as a way of measuring how much their abilities had grown. It took some tinkering to get it right with the other golems, but we locked in the right amount after about a day of rigorous trial and error. We adjusted the new models based on the old ones."

I blinked.

"So it was a matter of precision."

A knowing grin grew on Diesel's face.

"Most engineering problems are. That and supply, but the point is, that's what we're here for."

After a few seconds, I set the golem onto the second mode. Diesel pointed at it.

"That's work mode. It's supposed to be able to apply plenty of strength but with some ability for people to intervene. You link to the runes on the back, which links to the actual golem's mind. It works like a transistor does for electricity."

I linked my mind with it, and it carried only a few controlling thoughts. After a few minutes of tinkering, I operated the golem like a forklift. It walked back and forth from trees to dirt, uprooting the plants and clearing the ground. I laughed as I walked backward in slow motion. It did a robot dance, and I enjoyed messing around with it entirely too much. I smiled.

"It's like a tractor or something."

"That's exactly what we were going for. Preferably with less playing involved."

With a mental flick, I set the golem into combat mode. Its runes burned bright, lines of light tracing its hulking form. After checking a nearby area, I had it attack a patch of trees. As if quashed by an enormous, unseen hammer, it smashed the trees in a powerful gravity well. Sap and splinters erupted over the ground, mixing with the earth in a thick ooze.

I rubbed my chin.

"Huh. That's more like what I remember."

Diesel's face paled.

"Yeah. We don't want people using this one too much. We plan to incorporate shows for our guildmates and any cities they go to. They'll be demonstrations of the golem's power. You know, to dissuade anyone trying to take on our guild's authority, but it also reminds the guildmates what they're working with."

I leaned back.

"Authority? I don't know if we want to enforce ourselves that strongly."

Diesel raised a brow.

"What? Have you ever seen what people can do with a legacy and ring?"

My stomach sank a bit.

"No. I haven't."

Diesel's eyes widened.

"What? Really? Is Torix over law enforcement, then?"

Embarrassment burned in my chest.

"He's over everything. I'm like...I don't know, a figurehead."

Diesel peered off, coughing into a hand.

"No, what? No. I didn't mean to step on your toes, sir. I'll shut up now."

I frowned.

"Honestly, I don't know how a lot of the guild is run. It's not something I've had time for. At the very least, that's what I tell myself to make me feel better. So far, it's kind of worked."

Diesel turned an open palm to the golem.

"You're busy making those things, aren't you? And those, those walking artisans. What are they called-"

"Architects."

"Yeah, those are the ones. Those guys are insane. Don't sell yourself short. You're doing plenty."

I nodded.

"I'll try taking that to heart. Anyways, this is looking pretty promising, but how do the modes change if the wielder is incapacitated?"

Diesel rubbed his hands together.

"Trust me, sir. We thought of everything. It starts by assuming a small, aggressive child has gotten their hands on this thing. That's the failsafe parameters we put in place."

Over the next couple of hours, Diesel showed me the ins and outs of the golems. He and his team drilled through this project like an eldritch through flesh. Woah, what kind of analogy was that? I meant, er, more like a dolphin swimming through water. Anyways, by the time we finished testing, the sun set. We stared at the golems in satisfaction.

I reached out a fist.

"We did it."

His fist hit mine like a child fist-bumping a giant.

"We did."

With around a hundred golems ready, I gave Diesel a thumbs up.

"I think I got it from here."

As Diesel got up a few of his tools and diagrams, I pointed at Mt. Verner.

"Do you mind if I meet the team behind this project?"

"Not at all. They should still be on the engineering floor. We've been working into the nights lately."

I picked myself up.

"Need a lift?"

"Please, sir. These rings aren't hard to use, but man, I am terrible at this."

We went in through one of the primary entrances of Mt. Verner. A horde of people walked in through the concrete tunnel like fans filing into a sports stadium. I gave a couple waves to other guildmates, only being a head taller than most people. Diesel looked me over.

"Where's the floating ball?"

"In another dimension."

"Ooh, sounds complicated."

We passed inside before heading to the second floor of Mt. Verner. Diesel took me over to his workshop, diagrams covering the walls and tools lining the workstations. In the center, a set of obelisks glistened under fluorescent lights. A group of engineers stood by, talking about different concepts over a few drinks.

As I walked up, they all straightened up and gave me a salute. In a practiced motion, I waved my arm.

"At ease. Good work with the limiters today. I'll be having you guys work on other projects like this, and they'll pay well. Trust me on that."

Diesel raised his hands.

"We showed the fancy ant bed what we're made of."

A set of cheers radiated through the group. Diesel lowered his hands.

"That guy and anyone else that says we can't. It isn't like Plazia's the only one that doubted us."

They nodded to that. In the back, Amara eyed me with her face wrinkling. As I neared her, she recoiled.

"Blegh. Disgusting."

I leaned against the table. Well, not really. A gravity well held me up, but you know what I mean.

"What's got you riled up?"

She hissed.

"You're dragging a rupture with you and absorbing the corrupting energy it oozes. It's like watching a predator keep its prey alive while sucking out all its blood."

I rolled my eyes.

"You're an eldritch, right? You're all about eating prey."

She snarled.

"Not the kind of prey that sinks its teeth into me while I believe I'm sinking my teeth into it."

"Eh, I'll be fine. Either way, good job with helping them."

She raised her hands, glaring at me with them. Or maybe not. Amara always had an angry look in her eyes. She murmured.

"Yes...They lack all discernment for the cipher. It is how they think. Their minds dart around in odd, disjointed ways. At times, they mirror a herd of sheep, bowing and baying until all they say is noise."

She hissed.

"But at times, genius strikes amidst the mud. Speaking of the grotesque, I may close that rift if you so wish it. It doesn't need to gnaw at you for eternity."

I waved my hand.

"Think of this as training for me."

She sneered.

"Ugh. Of course. Training. You always wish to take yourself further from what you were. If only all of us wished for such an outcome."

I tilted my head.

"Feeling nostalgic or something?"

Amara's face jerked before one of her eyes twitched.

"No. I...I'm just struggling to recall a few events from my past. That is all."

I frowned.

"Need some help?"

Her outstretched hands curled like claws.

"I want no one to corrupt my mind further. Leave me be."

I gestured a hand to her.

"We may be able to do something about-"

She swiped her hand like an angry cat. One of her fingernails broke against my hand before she shouted. The others stared at us before she growled.

"I am fine."

As she walked away, I pinched the bridge of my nose. Diesel walked up.

"Hello, sir. I wouldn't worry about it. She's always testy at the best of times."

Shaking the altercation off, I rolled my shoulders.

"I'll have to have a talk with her about it. At some point, anyways. I don't want her slicing a guildmate apart."

Diesel walked over and picked up her dislodged nail.

"She wouldn't do that."

I raised a brow.

"What makes you say that?"

Diesel flicked the nail to me, and my armor absorbed it in an instant.

"Because that's not who she wants to be, sir."

I frowned.

"Who does she want to be?"

Diesel put his hands on his hips.

"Normal, like us. I think she's annoyed that she isn't able to just walk out into the street without getting jeers or making children cry."

I could relate. I sighed.

"There's not much we can do about it."

Diesel shook his head.

"you're telling me. I tried to get her to look after her hygiene, but she didn't want to. She's so disgusted with herself that she doesn't even realize she's a big part of the problem."

I peered his way.

"You sound frustrated."

Diesel leaned against the table.

"That's because I am. I've worked with her for a while now, and she's a walking set of contradictions. She's always talking about how hideous she is, but she never brushes

her teeth or hair. Or clean her clothes. Or anything. If I didn't take care of myself, you best believe I'd be gross too."

I crossed my arms.

"Is it the hypocrisy that frustrates you? Maybe the smell?"

Diesel stared at some diagrams.

"Maybe a little on that last part, but really, it's because I care. I want her to be happy like anybody else, but she won't get out of her own way."

I frowned.

"I can understand that. Happiness isn't something that's easy to get. Hell, it's even harder to keep."

Diesel nodded.

"I know the feeling. For me, it was getting a family and making friends at work. A few drinks never hurt either, but I'm a simple man, really. You know, easy to please. What about you?"

I peered up.

"What makes me happy? Probably time with the people I love, getting a sense of progress, and ensuring our security."

Diesel pushed himself off the table.

"I got to give it to you. You're dedicated. Just...Keep yourself in mind between all the chaos."

I smiled.

"Eh, I'll give it my best shot. No promises, though."

Diesel smiled back.

"None needed, sir."

After a few goodbyes, I stepped away. I stumbled to the side, and my alternate dimension dragged me off balance. Panic welled in my chest as I almost crushed through a wall. A few minds banded together, jerking me back into a proper position. A few of my guildmates rushed over.

"You ok?"

"What happened?"

"What's going on?"

I raised a hand, getting my footing back.

"I'm fine. I'm just tired."

After getting some distance, I took a breath. Dread pooled in my stomach like the ichor of some cursed god. Maybe their curse had become my own? Jesus, more importantly, I wondered where all this melodrama was coming from. I couldn't tell, and I didn't care. I crushed it down and got out of Mt. Verner. Eventually, I reached a hilltop.

I contemplated spending the night in meditation instead of training with Shalahora. That temptation drifted in my head as I gazed at Springfield. The moon floated over the new city, people having moved into it. A few houses still had lights on, the street lamps offering a moody atmosphere. A couple flowers bloomed out of gardens across a few homes. A trader's sign stuck out, the mana-powered light mirroring neon's aesthetic. It cast a shadow over a new warp center and currency exchange from Schema.

Springfield had risen again like a phoenix crawling out of its ashes.

As I found marks of its progress, I uncovered hints of its previous descent. A few ruined buildings and dilapidating houses crumbled on the outskirts of the town. Empty railway tracks crisscrossed the expanse, the rusted steel covered in encroaching greenery. Above it all, the moon glistened in its eternal glow.

The celestial body's gaze pierced through me like some primordial being that far exceeded myself. That sensation crept up, becoming even grander. A chill ran up my spine as it kept glaring as if reading my thoughts and mind with ease. My worry mounted, becoming a growing panic. For a moment, I doubted my sanity.

My self-doubt washed away as an eclipse formed over the moon. My eyes widened, and my runes flared. The eclipse smothered the ground in sanguine red, blood gushing from the earth. It rose, covering everything my guild ever built in seconds. People screamed from their homes, choking on the rising tide of blood. The hands of the dead pulled them down.

The bloody sea rippled with waves of decay, and screams erupted in a symphony. Springfield lost all its progress within a few seconds. My hands shook as I watched my home crumble once more. Baldowah's voice laughed in the distance. His menace was a palpable, insidious aura, and his words roared rage into my soul.

"We watch and wait, little one."

I blinked, and everything returned to normal in an instant. My hands trembled, my guild's destruction leaving me hollowed out inside. Taking a deep breath, I sent another message to Shalahora. The shadow oozed from the ground, his eyes as clear as cyan glass.

He murmured.

"You wish to tread into the gloom once more?"

My eyes hardened as I nodded.

"Until it's no longer dark."

Chapter 397: Laughing in the Rain

I blinked, and everything returned to normal in an instant. My hands trembled, my guild's destruction leaving me hollowed out inside. Taking a deep breath, I sent another message to Shalahora. The shadow oozed from the ground, his eyes as clear as cyan glass.

He murmured.

"You wish to tread into the gloom once more?"

My eyes hardened as I nodded.

"Until it's no longer dark.

Death. Rebirth. Death again, a cycle that existed in a cycle. I experienced that cycle, and I forged myself into a different creature from it. In many ways, it was a living hell as my mind fell apart like flesh peeling from bone. In other ways, I learned who I was from the effort. It reminded me of what I was willing to do if need be, and that gave me a wounded but steadfast confidence.

Shalahora whispered through my mind.

"How close are you to a psionic death?"

I spit out my words, my mouth drooling.

"I'm...I'm 70% the way there."

Shalahora's silence left me scrambling. I revised.

"60%?"

"No. You're only at half your abilities."

A dozen of my minds died each second, my psyche a pulverized vase trying to hold water. As stress and strain poured through the cracks, Shalahora took those shards and stomped them.

"You need to understand where your limits lie, Harbinger."

I trembled on the ground.

"I'm doing what I can."

"It is in your name. Harbinger. One who omens. The progenitor. The precursor. The pathfinder. Your birth brings forth a cataclysm. You must be ready for what you usher. Tell me, is half your mind enough to face a god?"

I remembered being obliterated by Eonoth.

"No."

Shalahora's form rippled in the wind.

"You whisper your words as I do."

I slammed a fist into the ground, the hill quaking.

"I said no."

"As long as you are aware. Now, again."

Before he culled more of my minds, I gawked at my hand. The fist slam was an instinct rather than a conscious action. Cutting my thoughts short, seven of my psyches died at once. Shalahora simmered.

"You recoil from so little. We will fix that."

The night dragged on, becoming a kind of purgatory. Unable to think of any cohesive thoughts, I scrambled forward off of instinct alone, my body learning to adjust. I gained

a kind of momentum in my actions. I was able to move or stand even if my soul shattered under Shalahora's onslaught.

It was the same instinct that pulled your hand back whenever you touched a hot iron. It didn't require a mind or thought. The body understood, and it acted. I gained something like that but dispersed across many actions. Standing. Mana manipulation. I could do that and more as the hours passed.

It gave me agency in a hopeless situation, something that could save my life if I ever fought someone like Valgus again. Even as I bolstered my determination, time stretched out in front of me. Every second elongated into eternity like each hour was the passing of an epoch in my head. Having so many minds endure such an undertaking made time seem even longer than normal.

My temporal compression added to that fact, but it was desperately needed. It was one of the few tools I used to close the gap between Shalahora and me. And the chasm stretched out like a sempiternal gorge. It reached out to the limits of my comprehension, a conceptual barrier I could not cross.

Still, I found hints of progress.

My deaths no longer occurred without my awareness. I felt the demise coming, letting me hand off that psyche's actions and thoughts before the mind died. Whenever Shalahora approached me, I perceived more of its sheer size. The psionic ocean still stretched out to the horizons, but more of the waves and currents came into my awareness.

That subtle growth gave me some respite from the onslaught. As the morning arrived, Shalahora gazed at my shambling body.

"You can move while dead?"

I took a hobbling step.

"I have my psyches continue what the others were doing. It lets me-"

I fell forward, the ground rumbling below. Pulling myself up with sloppy, desperate motions, I got to my feet.

"It lets me keep doing what I'm doing. It's...Hard."

I hobbled forward again.

"Hah. For now."

Shalahora watched me scramble forward before I fell again. He stopped killing my consciousnesses, turning away from me. I regained my coherency within a second, but my body recoiled at the prospect of more punishment. I forced myself to stop shaking before I cracked my neck.

"Are we finishing early?"

Shalahora's form rippled. His hands subtly squirmed, and his eyes evaded mine.

"Yes...We are finished...For today. You need rest."

I lifted a shaking arm.

"Oh no, I'm fine. We've still got a few hours."

Shalahora took a breath.

"No. You need the rest."

I clasped my hand, trying to get it to stop. I couldn't.

"It looks worse than it is. I'm going to be-"

Shalahora shouted.

"I said no."

I leaned back, his voice a call through my entire being. Ice ran through my veins, and my stomach sank. I murmured.

"Are...Are you ok?"

He reached out a hand, squeezed it, then pulled it back.

"I...Yes. I'm fine. We will only train at night. I-It's whenever my powers are strongest."

I wanted to protest. Something in my chest muted my words.

"Of course. Let's...Let's do that."

With a heavy quiet lingering from his absence, Shalahora faded away. Standing on the hill, I sat in the silence. Shalahora made so little sense to me sometimes, but I understood something about him. He hated hurting people. Things. Anything, really. Peering at my hand, this training was a thing of profound hurt, a misery for anyone.

And I wasn't the only one suffering.

It brought to light other questions, like why Shalahora scrambled the frog ruler's mind on L-7 that one time. Those thoughts tumbled in my mind as I regained my bearings. Furthering that end, I emptied my mind of all distractions after a while, letting the portal on my back grind away. By now, it might as well be a back massage.

My meditation let me recover from the training faster, and considering the difficulty these entailed, mental recuperation was essential. It was a strange fact I learned from this advent: even if the mind was fine, the body remembered. I couldn't stop shaking until twenty minutes passed. After a half hour of doing nothing, my executive golem ran out of the bushes.

He waved his arms in excitement.

"Ah, there you are."

I opened my eyes.

"You've been waiting in the trees for the last forty minutes."

The executive's runes flared.

"Ah, caught red-handed, aye? Well, you looked like you could use a breather after whatever that was."

He was more empathic than I expected. I tilted my head at him.

"What's the chat for?"

He waved finger guns at me.

"So, the announcements are today. I sent some documents from someone else. Are you ready?"

In my inbox, a dozen messages from Torix glimmered, all of them left unopened. A wave of anxiety passed over me.

"Pshh, of course, I've read them."

The executive towered over me once near. These guys were huge. The executive counted on his fingers.

"So you've handled the speech, sorted the gear, and created all the golems?"

My eyes widened.

"Dammit. I forgot to make the gear."

The executive swung his arm.

"Don't even worry about it. I'm flexible. Let's just, oh, I don't know, schedule a show with the other head golems to buy you some time. Yeah, yeah! That'll work. It's as Juvenal said, 'Two things only the people anxiously desire - bread and circuses.' We'll start with both."

He turned around and strode off.

"Ah, I have to get the food ready ASAP. And what do humans find entertaining? I'll have to make something with razzle-dazzle. A few people are going to have to cancel some workdays."

I raised a brow.

"Cancelling workdays?"

The executive waved his arm.

"Oh, what? Yeah, workdays. I'll have a few civilians commissioned into the project. They'll be compensated for the inconvenience."

I frowned.

"Alright, just make sure you don't step on too many people's toes."

He shrugged while jogging away.

"Hah, what can I say? I have big feet. It happens sometimes."

Crows flew out of the treeline as the executive darted across the ground with utter ease. As he disappeared, I took a breath to center myself. I flew over to my golem facility,

and I took a few of the extra metal bodies down from the gravity hangers. I melted them down into their base fabric.

The heat of the building mounted as the air blurred around me. I stood at its center, a forge master crafting one sword after the next. I mean that literally; I stood upright while floating everything around me. I picked up, molded, sharpened, and carved in runes, all via telekinesis and gravitation.

This let me smash down my temporal acceleration. My psyches swirled in the ether, more comfortable than ever in an intangible form. Even after only two nights of Shalahora's special training, I exerted greater control over time and the dimensional shard I carried. As Shalahora reiterated, I got closer to my limits.

Better able to tolerate the psionic displacement, I pulled more of myself into the two tasks. I blended my minds, their unmade form like a soup of thought. They kept my wake dense and palpable, turning the intangible material into something with substance. My pain offered weight to the world.

Mirroring that reality, my torment did the same for my own dimension. At the same time, other minds balanced the delicate dance of forging before me. It gave me enough space for my mind to wander. And wander it did. I contemplated Shalahora, Amara, and Diesel. Each of them expanded into new territories, and their expansion came with growing pains. As one of my knees buckled, I scoffed.

They weren't the only ones adjusting to changes.

Pulling myself upright, I remade my newest artifact, the fresh shield dented from my mistakes. After about two hours of effort, a pile of shiny gear glowed beside me. I waved my arm, and it cooled while spawning a wave of condensation that misted off the tools. As crystallized mana glistened, a bead of guilt spawned in my throat.

A whisper of doubt pierced into my thoughts - was I bribing these people to head off into unknown territory and fight for their lives? That thought tumbled in my head before another crushed it. I remembered how Diesel showed me how much my guild progressed and how little I let them do.

On the one hand, I couldn't think of everything from every angle, even if I owned all the minds in the world. A population's ingenuity dwarfed my own, and that was the good news for me. It meant my guild held enormous potential in the form of many

talented, intelligent members. By taking on every task, I stopped their growth and my own in tandem.

Giving them certain tasks gave them experience and freed me up to take on the burdens I was made for. After all, I wasn't talented in everything. In fact, my list of talents was glaringly short, so instead of trying to take over every little thing, I had to let go. All that would wait until after this ceremony either way.

I lifted the fresh gear with ease, getting a speech ready in my head. Memories of our guild's feats sprang up in my mind. The victories and sacrifices told a story all on their own, and I organized that story while I floated out of my facility. Torix waited for me with Althea outside my golem center. I raised a brow.

This story has been stolen from Royal Road. If you read it on Amazon, please report it

"How did you guys get here without me noticing?"

Althea smirked.

"You get distracted when you're working."

I smiled back.

"It looks like I have something to iron out."

She hopped over to me before leaping. A flip later, she landed on my shoulder. She leaned down.

"Please don't. I like it."

After we kissed, Althea hugged me. Giving us just enough time, Torix gestured to the side of Mt. Verner.

"It would seem to be the time for our recognition ceremony, wouldn't it?"

I nodded, picking us all up with gravitation. We darted across the skyline, each of us chatting away in excitement. Crossing Mt. Verner's peak, we reached a marble venue humming with activity. The executive golem directed a flying ceremony of Eltari and a band of gialgathens, humans, and an eltari. Chrona led the bunch, her eyes brimming with joy.

The gialgathens tapped ornate glassware with their tails while the Eltari flipped around fire and ice. At times, they charged through the flames, and the crowd oohed and ahed as the blaze bloomed into colors and shapes.

The executive swung his arms like a composer the entire time. His movements matched the show, his practice evident. They finished with a flurry of movement and sound, and the Eltari landed on several pillars at the front while the gialgathens roared near the back wall.

We clapped as we arrived on a platform. Covering the fortification, a mural showed our guild's victories over Yawm, Blegara, and the eldritch. Several architects carried out my artifacts as the show ended, and the entire affair carried the energy of a rock concert and award ceremony wrapped in one.

Everyone overflowed in excitement, and as the music finished, the executive walked over.

"Hah, ok, done. That's all I got, creator. Good luck."

I gave him a thumbs up.

"You did great. By the way, I didn't know you could compose."

The executive let out a laugh before shaking his head.

"Me? Compose? Oh no. My research uncovered that people think more of a show if someone is conducting it. It makes everything seem more official."

Althea gawked.

"So you're lying to everyone."

The executive put his hand on his chest.

"What? Lying? Pshhhh, this is showmanship. Besides, that display by them matched any show I've ever seen."

Torix's eyes flared.

"You've never seen an act of entertainment, have you?"

The executive pulled on an imaginary collar.

"Woah, ok then. Tell me, guys, are we playing an assassin build in a video game? Because you guys are being pretty critical."

Althea laughed before Torix crossed his arms.

"Hm. Fair enough."

The executive tapped my shoulder.

"Oh yeah, big guy, can you show them your full size? It leaves more impact."

I expanded my frame, but I left enough fabric to prevent the warp from closing. As I did, Torix leaned closer.

"Have you uncovered some kind of spatial magic?"

I waved my hands a bit.

"What? No. I'm pulling off some shenanigans."

Althea leaned against my head.

"Hey, they say magic and shenanigans are hard to tell apart at a certain point."

Torix interlocked his hands behind himself.

"Certainly so, and wise of you to know. Blegh, that rhyme ruined my point. Regardless, are you ready, disciple?"

I bit my cheek.

"As ready as I'm ever going to be."

Althea hopped off my shoulder as I stepped forward. My form towered over the stage, nearly thirty feet high. The guild gazed up in wonder, most on the ground but a few hoisted up in trees. Gialgathens' heads popped up between the treeline, and the Eltari sat at the top of the trees. I raised my voice, not needing magic to amplify the sound.

Being big had its perks, after all.

"It's good to see everyone. Most of you have known me. For those that don't, I'm Daniel Hillside, the Harbinger of Cataclysm."

A roar erupted, and they cheered until embarrassment rose up my side like a pulse of heat. I waved my hands down.

"I'm glad you're excited. We'll need excitement for what's to come."

A silence crossed over everyone, only the sounds of nature piercing the veil. I raised a hand.

"I remember a time when we stood at the brink of destruction. We were about to face a wave of abominations and Yawm himself. At that time, we saw monsters in them, and I reminded you all that they saw monsters in us. In those battles, we needed to bring out our worst. It was so they would learn fear."

A smiled.

"And they did."

A cheer erupted. I continued.

"But, the era has changed, and we must change with it. We're no longer at the mercy of forces larger than us. We have time for peace and prosperity. To build and create lives worthy of living. Of relishing. Of dreaming for. This new age is one we forged on our own, and we've earned every second of well-being that comes with it."

Another set of cheers erupted. I smiled.

"Guildmates or family. Eltari or gialgathen. Vagni or skeptile."

I squeezed my hands to fists.

"We seized ourselves from the brink, and our victory tastes ever sweeter for it."

The gialgathens roared. The Eltari's cawed. The humans raised hands and let out booming yells. They'd all tasted despair, and this was their victory, one that would last forever.

Well, hopefully. I spread my hands with a confident nod.

"But we do not settle. We do not relent. Our guild is one that moves forward. One that endures, and we must help others endure. Around us and far in the distance, Earth suffers. People starve, and they are eaten. They are trampled. We have the means to help them, and with our position finally secured, we will."

I gazed at the many eyes of the crowd.

"We are a people of industry and ambition, but also generosity. We'll bring others into our fold. To those willing to volunteer, you will be tasked with helping a population

center. You will not be alone; a golem of mine will stand by your side. You will also act as recruiters for capable individuals so that we may offer them entry into our guild."

My runes hummed with energy.

"This is no mandate. You may choose to continue aligning with your duties here. There is no shame in that. However, sometimes in our lives, we are presented with a crossroads. On our current path is Mt. Verner's success. On the other is humanity's revival."

I gestured a hand.

"There is no doubt in what this will accomplish. It is a tangible good, and it's one we were never offered. What I would've given to have someone save us when Yawm loomed over our heads. Now, we may give that grace to others, as we did for the Eltari and gialgathens. We can help those who struggle. We can bring Earth out of the stone age and back to our previous glory."

The palpable invigoration of Event Horizon crossed over all those present.

"But must we stop there? No. We will go further beyond. We will achieve a glory humanity has never before seen. Those who tread this path will be the origin of Earth's new history, one of triumph. One of victory."

I roared.

"One where we rise."

Another series of shouts echoed into the horizon. It continued for a while after, and people began standing. They stood and clapped for far longer than I deserved. As it died down, I gestured my hand to my followers. All of them stood there, aside from Florence. Having read my updates as I spoke, I boomed my words.

"Florence is forging alliances with others across the stars. He'll arrive later. The others here are the strongest of our guild. I'll begin with the first."

Torix floated over, his hands interlocked behind him. I put a hand on his shoulder.

"This is Torix Worm. He is known as our erudition; that is, knowledge obtained from study and research. Don't worry. I had to look that up, too."

The crowd laughed. I smiled.

"Torix has enlightened us since the dawn of our guild. He led the battle against Yawm. He organized the clearing of Springfield. He fought on the front lines at Blegara and Giess alike. He is our guild's most powerful tactician, a necromancer that raises those we kill for us."

I walked over to the pillar holding his relic. With deliberate steps, I paced back, and the staff sheened with primordial energy. Even the core radiated power. I held it high.

"He'll be given a new body for his many contributions along with this staff."

Cheers erupted. Torix gave an elegant bow before taking the artifact. Althea followed him. I turned a palm to her.

"This is our guild's greatest destroyer, Althea Tolstoy. As she may seem slight, within her is the ability to kill gods. She cleared Springfield. She slaughtered Lehesion and others who fought against us. Now, she works for the goodwill and welfare of our guild's children. She is an idol to us all.

I grant her this necklace. It redistributes force, making her unbreakable. May she continue to serve as our guild's sharpest sword."

I did the same walk to a pillar showing the artifacts. In the back, a few soldiers whistled as I put the choker on Althea. She blushed with fury and fire under her skin. I turned a palm to Kessiah as she peered at the ground.

"It is one thing to be a champion who always stands tall. It is another to have been broken, find the mauled pieces, and begin again. That is the tenacity of our guild's greatest healer. Kessiah is the backbone of our guild's medical care, and she teaches students how to help others who are dying."

Another walk. I gave her the belt. She grabbed it, a tear in her eye. I grinned her way.

"This is given so that she may be as undying as the guildmates under her care."

She gave me a hug before walking off, covering her prize. Hod walked over, his expression goofy as could be. I raised the talon covers.

"These are for-"

Hod squawked.

"Why give Hod back scratchers?"

I scoffed.

"Because Hod, you are a being of duality. You carry the will of a people who had lost all hope, and from the brink of starvation, you shepherded them into a different world. You fought and killed Yawm, and you've assisted our sharpest sword in killing those who wish to harm us."

I handed him the talon covers.

"So I felt the need to make you some backscratchers. May they always get to the itch you cannot reach."

Hod put them on before giving me a hug.

"Hod thank Harbinger. Hod know Hod a lot sometimes. Hod thank Harbinger for Harbinger love and care. Hod not know what Hod do without Harbinger."

I hugged him back before he hopped away using the talon covers. Amara walked out under the light. I gestured a hand at her.

"Amara has been a steadfast presence in our guild. When fighting Yawm, she allowed me to continue leveling even after Schema isolated me from the system. She's done the same for other members of our guild unjustly thrown from the system. She's helped with our missions and cipheric needs as well, all while researching the eldritch to find their weaknesses and maybe one day a cure."

I handed her the amulet along with an advanced AI that I had procured earlier.

"These are to assist her in her research and studies. May her contributions be recognized for what they are - incredible and necessary."

As she grabbed the artifacts, she murmured.

"I'm sorry for scratching you."

I scoffed.

"You're the one walking away wounded...But thanks."

Chrona landed beside me, her form radiant and silver. I grabbed the tail cover, holding it up high.

"The gialgathens are a people of redemption. They lived and grew fat on the slavery of the espens. Now, they grow lean and strong from toiling to build a new home. Chrona has been one of the most loyal members the gialgathens have given us. You've all seen her in battle, her magic a fortress for any who would try to pierce it."

She slipped the tail cover on, the gravitational augments locking it in place snugly. I tapped it.

"May she continue granting us her unmatched might and learned wisdom for centuries to come."

She bowed to me.

"Thank you, Harbinger."

She left as Krog walked over. Chrona smirked at him as she murmured.

"Look who was the first to be called between us?"

Krog sneered.

"This species has a saying - save the best for last."

Chrona rolled her eyes as I pulled up another tail cover. I held it over my head.

"Krog is a wise general, a commander of our army, and one who never shied away from the front lines. His power over sound has helped mute our enemies and has given us a voice. May his voice continue its roar for ages to come."

Krog slipped his tail cover on before letting out a roar. The other gialgathens under him growled out into the wind. Krog walked off with rumbling steps before Helios sauntered up, his cape covering him. I raised his new gauntlet.

"Helios and I have had a storied past. When we first met, I wanted to kill him. He's lucky I didn't try. Over time, he's learned the error of his ways, becoming a reliable and steadfast ally. Whenever we need to travel between worlds or regions, he is our shepherd."

I handed him the gauntlet. He raised a brow.

"You're still grating me over our first meeting?"

I raised my brow back.

"Oh, and I will for a long time to come."

He frowned while placing the gauntlet over his uncovered hand. Interest sprang over his face.

"Hm. It speaks...Interesting. Perhaps dealing with your madness will be worth it."

He moved his hand, the gauntlet lifting several trees in the distance. Helios laughed.

"I suppose time will tell, though the situation seems promising."

As Helios left, Plazia-Ruhl oozed out of the ground, walking out of magma. I handed him a shoulder pauldron.

"Plazia is a misunderstood soul. He has fought his nature since he was born millennia ago. I believe he may rise above it, and he's shown the capacity to do so. He drove Elysium from our world without killing anyone. He offers intelligence and will clear Blegara of their infesting eldritch."

As I handed him the pauldron, Plazia's voice rumbled from the ground.

"Thank you, Harbinger."

The hivemind left the way he came. From a slight crack in the marble, Shalahora oozed out of the ground. I turned a hand to him.

"Most of you have no idea who this person is. He is Shalahora, the Sun Swallower. His level exceeds 60,000, and he was pivotal to my continuation during the lottery. Without him, we wouldn't own Leviathan-7, and I wouldn't have survived it."

Whispers of the planet's harshness radiated through the crowd. Wild rumors ran rampant. Despite their lofty claims, those rumors understated the danger.

I handed the earrings to Shalahora.

"May you continue helping us survive well into the future."

He bowed, his arms outstretched for the artifacts. An odd sensation struck through my chest. Shalahora could kill me at a moment's notice, along with everyone here. Despite that, he bowed the deepest of any of my guild members. There was something odd about that.

The last to be given their gift was Diesel. Feeling out of place, he shuffled up with his head down. Before he could leave, I gestured to him.

"This is Diesel. He could have many titles. Former of golems. Maker of weapons. Designer of arms. He helped with Mt. Verner's initial construction, and since then, Diesel has assisted in the background. He was a man who never needed someone to bring his achievements to light."

I gave him his compass.

"Until now. Well done."

Diesel gawked at the palpable energy radiating off the artifact. It left a grin on my face. His rise to power was a sign to all that anyone could make it, even someone who seemed ordinary at first glance. By the time the cheering stopped, Diesel turned a hand to me.

"Can I say something?"

I leaned back.

"Oh, uh, yeah. Of course."

Torix walked over, giving Diesel a platform and sound augment. The engineer gazed at his compass.

"This whole system thing has been a mixed bag. Since it arrived, I've felt like it was the end of the world. It was on a couple of occasions. It was like Schema arrived as a nightmare I couldn't wake up from. I know I'm not the only one who felt like that. Especially when Yawm first arrived. Those were dark days."

People nodded in agreement, a solemn air passing over the guild. Diesel raised the compass.

"But we're pulling it back. Each of us. I never thought I'd stand here. I count every day as a blessing, and it still doesn't feel real to have all of you in my life. It's-"

Diesel's voice cracked.

"It's more than I deserve. Thank you."

I choked up a bit, the unexpected emotion a nice finale to the ceremony. With everything wrapped up on my end, I handed the ceremony off to Torix. With his usual dramatic flair, he handed out his own documents of academic achievement.

Once finished, Torix walked over to the golems. I stood and watched as a queue formed to take on the mission I laid out. They stretched out well into the forest and beyond. A thousand people waited, and it was more than enough to fulfill our projects for sign-ups. Before handing a golem to anyone, I explained how to use them alongside their gears.

As I signed off a golem to each member, I met many guildmates for the first time. They stood out to me. They were warriors; every person carried scars, grayish skin, and fierce smiles. Hardly human, their steps powdered marble under their heels, and they carried quiet confidence with piercing eyes.

Being ten feet tall didn't hurt their presence either.

I was so worried they wouldn't be able to handle the mission. Seeing their obvious ability, I learned that I was a fool. For once, being wrong put me in a good mood. A great one, really. After all, it was good to be wrong sometimes. With the golems' assistance, these fighters would be more than fine.

Adding to that, they each took pieces of gear from the pile I had made earlier today. After finishing distribution, we tallied up the number that signed up. It was over twelve hundred people in total on the first day alone. It floored any of my estimates, and it made me proud. This was one of the best days I'd had since I founded my guild.

And it made all the hard times worth it. The training. The suffering. It had meaning.

Interrupting my serenity, a message popped up in my status, being selected as urgent.

Florence Novas, Of a Golden Tongue and Honied Words(lvl 9,000 | Class: Speaker | Guild: The Harbinger's Legion) - Daniel, I know this may seem sudden, but I do believe that I have utterly botched one of the negotiations with the diplomats. I mean, I really, REALLY messed it up this time.

A few of them are demanding their rulers back this instant, and it's become an unruly mess. If I'm rather honest, they're irate over even the slightest of provocations. It's difficult to avoid hurting their feelings, and they seem...How to put this. Ahem. Unstable.

I'll be dousing some fires as you read this message, but the flames are burning brighter by the second. I'm just letting you know ahead of time. Ah yes, please don't blow up any ships should they appear. Consider it as a favor to me.

My gaze soured as I reread the message. I despised rulers at this point, from their pompous attitude to their inherent entitlement. I saved them from the brink of death, yet I gained no gratitude whatsoever. I dragged my hand down my face as another note popped up in my status. It dinged with a special notification symbol. I couldn't close it, so I sighed and opened the thing.

Arming Schema's Warriors(Lvl 20,000+ | Quest Rank S | Party Size: Any | Guild Affiliation: The Harbinger's Legion) - Forces enact their will onto Schema owned space. One of your personally crafted artifacts has been found useful. Others are in need of its properties.

Request: Grant 10 million personalized artifacts granted to Schema's armory free of charge.

Award: 10,000 levels of experience, fully maxed core points for your current level, +5,000 to level cap, and an Unknown Skill Compendium.

Note - The core points gained include the level-ups from this quest.

Time Constraints: 10 Earth Years.

My jaw slackened at the rewards. Though a welcome addition, levels meant little at this point, as did the bonus stats. However, the unknown compendium gave me any skill I could conceive, all without needing to grind it out on my own. I considered the possibilities before the space above Mt. Verner shifted.

My armor stood on end, flowing like water. None of the others noticed the warping space-time aside from Helios. He sprinted towards me, his voice a roar.

"Daniel. Something's coming."

Above, a series of colossal spacial rends split the sky. Clean and neat, the portals exposed the void of space above them and a barren planet below them. Even a cursory glance exposed the planet's scars, the Hybrid infestations riddling its surface. A fleet of these ships flew out of many, many warps, their orichalcum hulls glistening in the sun's light.

They dwarfed the size of skyscrapers. It was like a large metropolis floated over our heads. As the shadows covered our guild, Hybrids fought on the outer hulls, many having drilled their way inside. Behind the vessels, the void of space howled out, feasting on Earth's air. Helios reached up with his gauntlet, closing the warps. My runes flared with violence, and Event Horizon smothered the entire fleet.

I reached out with a charged hand, ready to disintegrate them with singularities. With a telepathic wave, I thought over.

"What are you doing here?"

A cacophony of voices screamed back via telepathy.

"Help. Please."

Chapter 398: A Hollow Invasion

They dwarfed the size of skyscrapers. It was like a large metropolis floated over our heads. As the shadows covered our guild, Hybrids fought on the outer hulls, many having drilled their way inside. Behind the vessels, the void of space howled out,

feasting on Earth's air. Helios reached up with his gauntlet, closing the warps. My runes flared with violence, and Event Horizon smothered the entire fleet.

I reached out with a charged hand, ready to disintegrate them with singularities. With a telepathic wave, I thought over.

"What are you doing here?"

A cacophony of voices screamed back via telepathy.

"Help. Please."

Chaos disgorged out of the vessels. I sprang into action along with my guild members. I catapulted toward the largest vessel using a gravity well. As I reached the ship, I tore through its surface and pierced into the labyrinth of rooms. A moment later, I scanned the individuals via telepathy. I found Florence in seconds, his thoughts a jumbled mess.

I bolted through steel walls like a bullet through paper. After destroying the last wall between us, I gazed at a strange scene. Within the room, a twisted Sentinel raised its spear over Florence. The albony smiled at me.

"Ah, you big lug of cold steel. Thank Schema, you're here."

I dashed forward like a juggernaut ready to pulp a soft fruit. The twisted Sentinel sliced towards me, opening a rupture in spacetime. I flew into deep space, where no stars shined, and no galaxies swirled. Behind me, the Sentinel closed the rupture. Before it sealed me in the vast emptiness, I smothered my wake into the rupture. As I had done with my own carry-on dimension, I pried the portal open before flying myself back out. In the command room, Florence hid under a command table. He locked eyes with me and beamed.

"I know, I know, my bravery is commendable. You can thank me later."

After getting all the way out of the portal, I gazed at the twisted Sentinel. Hybrid flesh squirmed in between gaps in his armor plates, and glowing sacks pulsed on his arms. The creature murmured.

"The Harbinger. We meet at last."

I grabbed the rip in spacetime before wringing it out like an old, soaked rag. As I did, the twisted Sentinel's spear shattered. It stared back at me in awe.

"A fine strategy. You isolated-"

I dashed forward, grabbing its skull. My arm moved faster than it perceived and held tighter than it could slip out of. It grabbed my hand, trying to escape.

"Your abilities have improv-"

I squeezed its helmet to a pulp. Like an egg dropping on the floor, its graphene helmet crushed, and the mush inside splattered between my fingers. My armor absorbed the mass within its shell before I tossed the corpse aside. Turning back to Florence, I scoffed.

"You have got to be the luckiest albony I know."

He shrugged.

"It's my main stat. Having causality on your side is never a bad thing."

There was the word again. Causality. Huh. I grabbed Florence before barreling out of the shuttle. Floating over the chaos, I assessed the situation. From the looks of it, my guild assaulted the vessels in mass.

Gialgathens tore Hybrids apart with their tails, keeping their distance by flying. No longer the fattened cats they once were, the amphibious dragons used tactics and their flames to destroy the steel abominations. Flowing faster and with grace, their aerial superiority allowed them to assault the enemy uncontested.

Around them, the eltari flocked in swarms. With energized talons, they tore at the vulnerable cords and orange pustules on the Hybrids. The Eltaris' mana kept them sanitized while amplifying their assaults, flocks of them swarming one Hybrid at a time and leaving it a desecrated mound.

The Omega Strain division crawled over the outer hulls of the enemy vessels, tearing Hybrids apart. They operated in teams of three, each member like a death-dealing spider. Anytime they happened upon a Hybrid, the Omega Strain's claws dismantled the enemy's entire body before engorging their strains on the monster's pieces.

Elthara led the charge. She evolved into a crystalline hurricane, her body shifting and molding her Omega Strain to assault with reckless abandon. The strains moved on her, flowing like liquid gemstones. Before contacting enemies, they hardened into glistening blades. The colors blurred into a confusing, dangerous whirlwind.

And death followed her wake.

Torix moved his hand, experimenting with his new staff in a lazy, laid-back manner. Each spell lobbed out was a cataclysmic event, entire legions of the enemies disintegrating in elemental plumes, acidic fireballs, burning ice, or poisoned steel. Torix enveloped the enemy in a deluge of deaths, ensuring they never lacked in variety either.

Others wielded elemental magic. Helios paired his gauntlets together. With one hand, he gutted vessels using gravitation. From his other palm, shards of void ice erupted out, impaling any Hybrids that fumbled in the air. He raised the gravity gauntlet, slamming the enemies together before throwing his ice-gauntleted fist at them.

They erupted in a satisfying plume of void ice.

Chrona flew over our the guildmembers staying in the rear. She maintained a temporally manipulated zone, enhancing our guildmates' defenses. In this space, even raw guild members fought hand and hand with Hybrids. On the outskirts of this zone, guild members suffered wounds. They maintained composure even if limbs hung half-cleaved from their bodies.

These grisly mutilations looked deadly, but our guild stayed true to its roots; they endured. Guild members pulled back, allowing other guildmates to take on the danger while they healed. My legacy allowed them to recuperate from mortifying wounds in minutes, so even if death's doorbell rang, they found no one home.

Furthering death's distance, Kessiah worked on multiple patients at once. Anyone in real danger, she snatched from death's jaws in an instant. Krog stayed nearby and zoned

for her. His precise sound waves shocked Hybrids, but prolonged blasts caused them to vibrate into tiny fragments, their flesh liquified.

A vessel charged a blast to assault this clustered set of healers. Krog breathed in before blasting a roar into the side of the assaulting vessel. The air trembled before slamming into the hull of the destroyer. An entire panel disintegrated into a plume of steel sand, the cannon no more.

Diesel, Amara, and Hod grouped up beneath Chrona. Diesel helped coordinate people coming for healing while Amara stayed still. This wasn't her fight. Other Hod erupted in a plume if anything encroached, his shadows spreading over any it touched like an infection. Once darkened, the darkness over the Hybrids erupted into umbral flames.

They burned to nothing except a lingering shadow that dispersed like ash. It seemed like something from the void, and the powder left lingering shadows wherever it landed. Hod warped between these shadows like a businessman alt-tabbing at work while high on cocaine.

Of course, the enemy retaliated in kind. The largest shuttle of the enemy fleet charged up a rail cannon, ready to fire at Mt. Verner's center. As it lobbed out the projectile, three of the keeper golems lined up in front of it. The sky dimmed as the railgun fired with untold power, the blast's light blinding.

The first keeper slapped the projectile, redirecting it into the sky. The slug tore a hole in the atmosphere, and the clouds parted in an enormous circle above while a shockwave ushered outward. The second keeper contained the collision's blowback, preventing it from hurting anything nearby. The last keeper slammed into the vessel, tearing its weaponry from out of its side.

To the keeper, steel was tin, and flesh was paper.

The executive managed these golems' efforts and more, keeping the vanguards from killing uninfected passengers and assisting the architects with constructing temporary shelters. The executive even killed nearby Hybrids at the same time, offering combat support where possible.

All in all, they left me with nothing to do. In fact, Plazia and Shalahora watched the devastation nearby. Plazia rested on a basalt throne while Shalahora's form leached out

as if waiting to teleport. While ready for action, they didn't need to do much. I landed beside them, setting Florence down.

The albony brushed himself off.

"And here I thought I was why everyone was so angry. Who'd of guessed our secret meeting would be leaked before having an enemy force assault us. That, and half the luminari's procession turned into Hybrids all of a sudden."

Florence shivered.

"An eerie thing. They didn't even know what killed them."

It was like L-7's last battle. Many died from embedded Hybrids there as well. I raised my brow.

"I thought you said your luck stat was high?"

Florence shrugged.

"I like to think it makes a difference where it matters."

I watched a shuttle get taken by Helios.

"I didn't expect us to clean this up so easily."

Plazia nodded.

"Your guild gains experience and sharpens its fangs. This assault will emphasize their need for training, and those that laze about will no longer let their claws grow dull."

Shalahora murmured.

"They fight well, but I am watching and waiting. If something is awry, I shall handle it."

Plazia rumbled.

"I, as well. None shall die here under my watchful eyes."

Knowing these two could disassemble the invasion by themselves, I sat down and watched the show. After a few minutes, Florence passed out on the ground, his adrenaline utterly shot. The guy earned a nap. I made him a tent of marble and a bed of pine straw.

With the two world destroyers surveying the battle, I found a moment of peace amidst war. I meditated for a while. After an hour of fighting, I checked in. My guild's sharpness dulled, but so did the enemies. People still fought against the vessel's occupants, having cleared deep into each of the ships. In the close-quarters, hallway-based combat, Althea and Hod took center stage.

Althea tore open each of the doorways with a circular swipe of her hand. She used a tiny, unseen thorn from her fingertip. These holes were cut in such a way that they didn't make a sound while sliced. This left each room breachable without the enemy being aware. Furthering her reconnaissance, Althea moved room by room, phasing through walls like a ghost.

She reported what fought within the rooms before Other Hod swarmed in, killing hostiles but not neutral targets. Their teamwork and experience shined, each of them moving like clockwork. They cleared each of the tightly packed rooms in seconds, and vessel by vessel, the enemy's number dwindled.

It still required hours of concerted effort because of each spaceship's design. They were tightly intertwined lattices, like dense steel honeycombs. That composition absorbed railgun punctures in space, preventing the vessel from vomiting its guts out when pierced. Since each room could be locked down, this prevented the breathable air from belching out into the void.

This made sieging each vessel incredibly arduous if a force lacked the right skill set. Despite those innovations and difficulties, the enemy force fell by sunfall. As the sun set on the affair, our guild was victorious. Even with the scale and length of the conflict, we lost no one despite the chaos. Plazia, Shalahora, and Kessiah's

interventions caused an absolute lack of casualties, two of them surveying the battlefield with a watchful gaze while the last member made up for any crippling mistakes.

Support the creativity of authors by visiting the original site for this novel and more.

It exposed how powerful they were, two of them a planetary influence and the last a walking ER. It gave me a sense of satisfaction knowing how powerful my allies were, but it also left me uneasy. If either Shalahora or Plazia turned on the guild, we'd be in hell and quickly.

I let my paranoia fade as the situation wrapped up. I also joined in the cleanup. On each infected vessel, I disintegrated all remains of the Hybrids. Their flesh, metal, and wires all melted into mana from Event Horizon, and my armor feasted on the clouds of energy. As I killed the blight, the Hybrids gazed at me with different bodies.

While still disgusting, Elysium improved their designs. Less a shamble of corded flesh, they bore sleeker forms without as much exposed tissue. Some of the orange pustules were covered in a clear glass, those spots longer pulsing like grotesque tumors. Even the faces held dark eyes like giant irises.

They were haunting.

Paired with each Hybrid were four-legged mole rats in jumpsuits. Even under folds of pink skin, their eyes stared at me with intelligence and dignity. They hissed in despair whenever I arrived, most surrendering but many choosing to die. Their dedication was...Humbling. On the other hand, the Elysium agents lacked that same resolve.

Whenever a situation became dire, they sent their Hybrids on a rampage. The destruction let them find avenues of escape in many circumstances, but not against me. They found no haven in their portals or escape in their smokescreens. I pulled them apart via gravitation, blood raining in and spurting like rapids in a flooding river.

It was something I hated about them. They had surgical precision and complete control over their Hybrids if they chose to be disciplined. However, whenever a situation stressed them out, they baled on their responsibilities. Despite years of progress in learning how to use the monsters, I still found civilians half consumed them.

Some of the noncombatants still lived as their blood, body, and bones were converted into steel. They screamed in agony, and I'd never forget the howling. I would make sure Elysium never did, either.

In many portions of each vessel, uninfested groups huddled together, weeping. This was where I learned what species of alien these people actually were. They were glowing, phosphorescent aliens who screamed for mercy while Hybrids dug cords through them. I freed them with Event Horizon by vaporizing the majority of the Hybridized mass that latched onto them.

After I cleared the bulk of the infection, I handed them off to Althea and Kessiah. They worked in tandem. Althea helped Kessiah by operating on the aliens. Althea's slicing was more precise than any surgeon alive. Her hands danced over them, removing even thin wires and isolated, glowing tumors in seconds.

Althea left nothing within before Kessiah restored them. Anything these aliens lacked, Kessiah granted, from missing limbs to organs to blood. I marveled at how Kessiah could be given a limbless, eyeless, and faceless hunk of meat before turning it into a living, breathing alien. It was the closest thing to a miracle I'd ever seen.

Once healed, we could tell what they were supposed to look like. Most of the injured were a species known as the luminari. Their sleek, black frames outlined themselves in a white light. It was like a two-dimensional drawing in real life. Floating in their encapsulated darkness, collections of light skimmed the surface of their skins. This gave them dimension, and those luminescent dots changed color as their emotions shifted.

Green, violet, and turquoise, their emotional range exposed itself like a rainbow. Even if they were able to show different colors, they all changed to green when awakening. It was their shade of fear. Once they learned they were safe, they dimmed to a cool blue.

It was their color of sadness and exhaustion. We set up a medical bay of surgical tables and sanitized supplies. We left them under the moon and stars since it helped them regenerate. They didn't mind the open air or wind. In those cubicles, we let the luminari collect themselves for a few hours, each of them sleeping for a while.

After several hours of parsing through the mess, we found their leader. Well, the closest thing to one. The Hybrids devoured their generals until they looked less like a command chain and more like a food chain. Still, this was a noble luminari, and it sat

upright despite its wounds. The alien communicated with pulses of light and sound. After talking to a field nurse, the luminari's lights danced across its surface as it gazed at me.

"Oh, mighty Harbinger, thank you for granting our kind asylum. Given the size and ferocity of your species, we expected a harsh world that would induce extreme evolutionary demands. Instead, we find this peaceful planet. It seems you're establishing a base here before conquering it. A wise choice from a wise leader."

The number of misunderstandings mounted, but I didn't have time to correct the guy. Having cleared the hulls and cracked some skulls, I gestured to Florence. Our resident diplomat clasped his hands together while facing me.

"Before we discuss the details, I want to thank you again for saving both of us."

I raised a palm.

"I appreciate the thanks, but I did send you on the mission. Honestly, preventing your death was the least I could do."

Florence's brow raised.

"Then what would be the most you could do?"

I frowned.

"Hm. I don't know. Why do you ask?"

Florence turned his hand to the luminari leader.

"Perhaps there's an opportunity to find out what can be done. Echo and his people need to find some way of fending off Elysium's invasion. I believe you're more than capable of doing that."

I closed my eyes. Yet again, a crisis wanted to pull me back from helping Earth and humanity. By now, I had freed the skeptiles, saved the gialgathens, uplifted the Vagni, and pulled the Eltari out of a dungeon. I'd saved five other races before taking even the most basic steps to helping humanity.

Enough was enough. My voice was stone.

"Absolutely not. I'm not fighting someone else's war while people here are torn apart by monsters."

Florence stiffened.

"Well, you don't have to be so certain about it."

"The thing is, if I give you an inch, you'll take a mile."

Florence leaned back.

"Oh, come on. I'm not doing anything but advocating for these people."

I dragged my hand down my face.

"See, that's the problem. You're supposed to be advocating for us, not them."

Florence moved his hands in circles.

"In a sense, I am. Think about it; these people carry so much potential."

I let out a sharp sigh.

"So do the skeptiles, gialgathens, Vagni, and Eltari. How many species will I need to take under my wing before I even solidify Earth? How many other people's problems will I have to solve before I solve my own?"

Florence put a hand on his chest.

"None. I'm not asking you to siege this species' planet. I'm asking you to give them a fighting chance."

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

"Florence...You were supposed to gain us political leverage."

"This is political leverage."

I shook my head.

"And look how saving someone else worked with the albony. We gained a planet with constant rebellions and no official Schemic presence. We also got dragged into more conflict with Elysium. The only benefit I gained from working with Obolis was getting you and Helios working for me, but even that wasn't given. You two chose to join me on your own."

I sighed.

"In the end, we were dragged into a war that we barely scraped our way out of. Now, you're trying to drag us back in before we've even sent out a basic scouting mission on Earth."

A wave of emotion crossed over Florence's face. He settled on a cold, icy anger. His voice was a low boil, but it didn't sound like it was directed my way.

"I understand your sentiment, but fortunately for us, not every species is led by an egomaniacal tyrant. We're lucky that not all rulers value their personal collections over their families, people, and planets. Some rulers are actually grateful and will help wherever they can if given a chance to repay an old debt."

Since we last met, Florence had time to think about what happened in the lottery. With that updated understanding, Florence's opinion of Obolis had changed., so I let the guy

get his anger out. He and I both knew the subject was a touchy one, like an exposed nerve.

I furrowed my brow.

"How are you holding up?"

Florence raised a shaking hand, holding his tongue. He swallowed a few choice words before letting out a sigh. His standing posture relaxed.

"I'm sorry for my tone. This has been...A trying time. I'm holding it together because of Helios and his support, but-"

Florence's voice cracked.

"I remember everyone I've lost. The homes. The friends. My family. It's all gone. Seeing these people suffer the same fate is like reopening old wounds that had hardly closed."

The depth of his loss loomed like an ocean. Unlike me, Florence invested in the people around him. He didn't get lost in his thoughts, operating in some internal world. Florence put himself out there, and he wore his heart on his sleeve. In response, the world ripped his sleeves and heart out. That's why I always found Florence's vulnerability brave.

I wished I'd been born the same, and that was why it hurt me to see Florence wounded by that same openness. Florence breathed in, pulling himself together.

"Daniel. I don't want what happened to the albony to happen to anyone else. I'm not saying we should fight Elysium for them. I'm saying we can at least give them a few weeks of safety so that they may regroup. Perhaps we may grant them a few golems for combat?"

Florence turned a palm to the luminari leader.

"I'm certain your people are more than fine with paying back a hefty loan given the circumstances?"

Echo's shade shifted from blue to amber. It shook its head with vigor.

"Oh yes. We would adhere to whatever requirements you demanded. We will give you anything we can."

I frowned.

"That's the thing. I can tell just by your species' combat abilities that you're not giving me any empowered relics or war machines. You guys lack firepower, and your economy is shot. You don't have anything you can give me that I actually want. This is going to be charity, and I'll be giving it out while the people on my own planet are eaten alive."

As the luminari heard my words, its reality set in. The leader's head lowered in a slow, heavy gaze.

"Oh...I see."

Florence's eyes brightened.

"Now, wait a minute, Daniel. While these people may not have anything you materially want, they can promise to enact whatever will you desire."

I frowned.

"That's the thing - I don't want slaves. That's actually the last thing I want."

Florence snapped his fingers.

"Precisely my point. I'm certain you saw the various, er-" Florence looked something up in his status. "Molerats in the shuttles, correct?"

"I did. They worked with Elysium. Well, most of them."

Florence grinned, his voice elated.

"They're the race that the luminaries enslaved."

"Huh...You seem really happy about that."

Florence waved his hands.

"Of course not. My point is that these people can promise to live their lives differently after we've helped them."

My eyes narrowed.

"How so?"

Florence paced in a direction, his hand raised. As he spoke, the negotiator within him crawled out of its shell.

"As you've said, the last thing you want is slaves. From what I've gathered, that's on a conceptual level, not just our empire, correct?"

My face wrinkled.

"That's true-"

"Then this is an opportunity to free a people without any of the repercussions seen on Giess. We can have the luminaries contractually obligated to free the molerats after we've saved them. We could enact this across the cosmos wherever Elysium has invaded. All that without fighting directly. This will grow your empire while purging a societal ill that should've ended long ago."

I furrowed my brow.

"Ok, I have to ask this before we continue. Are they really called molerats?"

Florence scoffed.

"No, their Xylojakovichianoradonitises. The name is...It's a horror, so I found an earthian equilivant."

My eyes widened.

"Wow. That's...That's a mouthful."

Florence waved his hand.

"But to further the point, I want to remind you of something. Daniel, you're a man of principles. You're someone who wants to improve the world and the universe as a whole. I've seen that in you, and that desire is something you've shown time and time again."

I raised a brow.

"Really? How?"

Florence turned a hand.

"You've saved multiple sapient species from extinction. You've assisted those on Earth without any reason to. You've even extended a helping hand to the Empire on a whim, of which Obolis never returned the favor. Despite that, you've been good to me and Helios."

Florence met my eye.

"You are a good soul."

I grimaced, remembering the bombing of espen cities and the people I killed.

"I don't know about that. In all honesty, I think people who don't know me can give a better answer to that question than I can."

Florence sighed.

"Then give those people something they can't refute. Here and now, you have an opportunity to do something great. If these people overturn Elysium, then the molerats will remain enslaved. If Elysium wins, the luminari will be gutted and strung up to dry. In essence, enslaved as well."

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

"Dammit."

Florence could tell he got me. He swung a hand.

"You are the only person in this situation armed with the agency needed to change this paradigm."

I nodded.

"I could win the luminari's war and dictate the terms of victory to my liking. But that's the issue. I could make things better or worse, and I can't tell which way the chips will fall in the end. Like with Giess, I don't know the situation. I'll also need to divert resources we could use to help settle Earth."

Florence's face wrinkled.

"You've seen the luminaries' planet being invaded. In the same vein, you've seen what occurred to the gialgathens without your intervention. Since then, Elysium's morality has only worsened."

Remembering Elysium carving on rulers' bones, I glared at the ground. I seethed.

"They're just absurdly evil. It's hard to believe at this point."

Florence stared at me.

"The luminaries will suffer the same fate as the gialgathens, and you have the opportunity to help alter the course of this tragedy."

My face softened.

"I tried and failed at that already. I contributed to the gialgathen's fall when I intervened on Giess. I was an icon for Elysium's rise to power. Remember the gray giant? I made a bad situation worse, and I tried to fix it after I learned about my mistake. But, it was far too late."

I took a breath, my eyes closed.

"I can't do that again."

Florence offered a hand.

"It was your first foray to another planet. You lacked perspective, personnel, and resources. You were focused on yourself, as you should've been. Now, the situation has changed. You can stop Elysium from decimating these people. We have the means. Besides for that, you won't need to do everything. Send a few golems and make it a volunteer project."

I raised a hand.

"Ok, let's assume I'm saying yes to what you want, which I'm not, but assuming I am, what would be my course of action?"

Florence grinned.

"Simple. We arm them with tools and combatants. And maybe an extra planet."

I frowned.

"An extra planet? Where do I have one of those?"

Florence gestured up at the vessels above.

"You have a few here in the solar system. We could perhaps even grant them one of the lifeless worlds in the Blegara system."

For a moment, I contemplated. Florence wasn't wrong about the situation. This was the second time an Elysium vessel landed on my planet, even if it was by accident or in chaos. They breached our treaty multiple times and in multiple ways. If anything, allowing this to go without retaliation might invite even more infringements.

Aside from that, I wanted to help these people. While I couldn't give them as many resources as I had to the other races under my wing, I'd offer what protection I could. I spread my hands.

"Alright, you win. We'll help."

Florence swung his fist.

"Yes! I knew you would be the grand, righteous person-"

I raised a finger.

"This isn't me accepting unconditional terms of support. I'll be helping in a way that doesn't involve us in direct conflict. In that sense, I'll be an arms dealer who supplies the side I want to win."

Florence nodded.

"In exchange for a dispersal of your own moral codes?"

I scoffed.

"You think that's all I'm going to ask for?"

Florence frowned.

"It isn't?"

I steepled my hands.

"Oh, I'm taking everything I can."

Chapter 399: Gaming the System

Florence nodded.

"In exchange for a dispersal of your own moral codes?"

I scoffed.

"You think that's all I'm going to ask for?"

Florence frowned.

"It isn't?"

I steepled my hands.

"Oh, I'm taking everything I can."

Florence rolled his eyes.

"Ah yes, as is expected from the shady grifter I know and love. I'm certain you'll extend a hand to those in need with a poisoned dagger behind your back."

I pointed my hands at him.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. I've been known to be a fine negotiator at times."

Florence shrugged.

"Hm, not to step on anyone's toes, but one could argue that point."

I turned to the luminari leader.

"Let's get down to the brass tacks. I know your planet is in dire straights. I have a solution to those problems, but I'm going to need a few guarantees."

Echo's lights altered to chartreuse.

"What kind of guarantees would you require, oh mighty Harbinger?"

I blinked.

"Huh. That feels out of place, so just call me Daniel. Anyways, you'll need to free any enslaved people you control."

Echo let out a light laugh, its color changing to honey.

"Oh, we never enslaved anyone. We merely offered prolonged indentured servitude."

I raised my brow.

"I watched their people choose to die fighting rather than surrendering. You don't do something like that because of fair contracts."

Echo tilted its head.

"One could argue that any contract is unfair to one of the parties depending on the circumstances."

Florence stepped up.

"That's a semantical discussion. Regardless of where your definition lies, the Harbinger's perception will dictate the terms. He will have a deal fashioned with the dimensional cipher, a language he knows well."

Florence leaned over the luminari.

"Should you breach this contract, you'll die. I'm certain you've seen it given Elysium's loose following of our ceasefire."

The luminari trembled, his light shifting to a dark purple. I raised a brow at Florence, partly to ask a question but also in surprise. The guy changed his tune in an instant once he gained the position he wanted to take.

I said, "Is that how it works?"

Florence took a step back and nodded.

"Yes. A normal contract is enacted by Schema via formalized punishments. On a factional basis, contracts are directed to the individual offenders within a guild. This is one of the largest pitfalls of joining a guild, as they may have factional contracts that are tremendously difficult to enact."

Florence turned a palm to me.

"On the other hand, a cipheric contract is inherently imprecise. It reads into intent, creating more leeway in the actions it curbs while enacting far greater punishments should its terms be breached."

Florence's face wrinkled.

"If I were to guess, Elysium's signing contracts then rediverting the consequences of breaking them onto other people. It must be a messy affair, in all honesty."

I envisioned people strapped down, carved to the bone with the cipher, and experiencing the weight of sins they had never seen but fully felt. I massaged my temples.

"Somehow, Elysium gets worse every time I hear about them."

The illuminari's color shifted to red.

"How are you two any different than Elysium? My people are being brought terms without any option of recourse. This is hardly diplomatic."

Florence grabbed his chin.

"Diplomatic? Have you seen the flying Hybrids? Those were once the giant amphibians known as the gialgathens. Elysium turned them into Blighted Ones, centers of telepathy and corruption."

Florence gestured to Echo.

"Elysium will use the amassed population of your species to a similar end, and that isn't a diplomatic reality. It's a life-and-death crisis. I wonder if they'll make you into tumors that can send messages through the void of space? Perhaps you'll devolve into a Hybrid model that can emote with light? I can hardly imagine the potential as Elysium has shown a vicious glint for creativity."

Florence's voice hardened.

"My kind is well aware of their tactics, Echo. Know it is a harsher road than what the Harbinger offers, no matter what he dictates."

The luminari shook its head before sighing.

"We...We can make that concession. It's similar to the terms brought by Elysium, but at least it doesn't carry the reparations they wished for."

I furrowed my brow.

"Actually, the molerats are who you're going to be paying for my assistance."

Florence blinked at me.

"And you said you weren't a selfless soul. Lair."

I shrugged.

"I'm not. These guys can't offer me anything I want anyway, so we might as well have them do something worthwhile. Think of it like organizing a charity or something."

Florence walked over and nudged my side.

"Ah, look at you. It would seem you're not all steel in there."

He gave my chest a tap.

"There's a heart composed of gold in there too. It's probably still metal, but it's a shinier, less cold kind."

I raised a hand.

"Alright, alright, enough of that. Come on, let's wrap this up. I don't have all night for this. I'm already late for an appointment."

Florence turned to the luminari.

"Then let's discuss details."

I stayed with them for a while to help handle the largest logistics of the matter. They needed 2,000 war golems, and I could arrange that in a couple of days. In exchange, I guaranteed their race's continuation and the molerats' freedom, along with less significant reparations than what Elysium requested.

It wasn't a perfect solution, but it definitely improved the outcome of their conflict. Compared to Giess, both species would lose fewer members in the war effort because I'd make my golems kill only Hybrid forces. The golems would even be directed to defend the molerats if they were attacked without provocation, preventing a few of the otherwise appalling war crimes.

This all came about because of all I learned from my previous arrangement with the Empire. From specifics to peculiarities to minutia, it all mattered when speaking on guild-wide terms. That's why Florence ironed out those aspects in a rapid fashion, the albony's charisma and contractual abilities shining as he did.

Unauthorized duplication: this narrative has been taken without consent. Report sightings.

It left me on solid ground as I left the matter in Florence's adept hands to finish. Having handled what I needed to, I met with Shalahora for another torture session. On the hill we trained at, he waited for me. When I landed, the shadow took a breath.

"I hoped you would wish to stop engulfing yourself in this purgatory. It would seem you were merely late."

I rolled my shoulders.

"Yup. It's out of the frying pan and into the fire. Let's do this."

The night stretched out in excruciation as always, and by morning, I hobbled away from our training like some determined zombie. Once I recovered, I set up a plan for my guild's problems since they loomed over our horizon like a comet heading for Earth. With everything organized in my head, I got to work.

Starting with the luminaries, I drafted up the cipheric contract based on what Florence messaged to me. This time, I wrote it out in normal schema runes as well before having both documents sent over to a specialist that Florence knew. After all my experience, I wasn't about to be tied to a guild-based document without experts helping me out.

As they reviewed the forms, I sent out the golem scouting teams we amassed after the award ceremony. It required some reassurance, but after showing them what the golems could do, they left with fewer reservations. Torix helped organize their assistance, and his efficiency kept everything efficiently organized and neatly arranged.

We weren't the only ones busy handling worldly affairs. Plazia returned to Blegara, and he began sieging the world and pulling the eldritch to our side. His invasion reminded me of a religious conversion. Having discussed the terms with him, Plazia used my image of fear to inspire the eldritch to surrender. While I was certain Plazia would use questionable methods, I figured he'd be the most humane conquerer I could assign.

It was an eccentricity of him being an eldritch. If I hired a Fringewalker, they'd just kill the eldritch and cleanse the world. While I wasn't opposed to the idea, I wanted to try a different tactic first. Plazia enabled that approach since he understood and could subjugate the eldritch without killing them all. I would also check in occasionally to make sure Plazia wasn't doing anything too horrible, either.

I mean, he was still a menacing hivemind of unknown means and power, after all.

Returning from one of those meetings, Plazia and I stepped off of Blegara's shores and into his personal chambers in Mt. Verner. Plazia's voice echoed off the cipher-covered walls.

"If you insist, I can avoid the displays of torture."

I let a hand flop against my side.

"Why would you think that's ok?"

Plazia kept one foot on the beaches of Blegara.

"My methods have saved many Vagni and converted the monsters that roam the abyssal seas to my cause."

I sighed.

"That's because they like torture. They don't fear it."

Plazia shook his head.

"I am still confused by this. My method accomplishes the goal without killing them. Why must you be so picky in how we harvest the world?"

Interrupting our discussion, Shalahora materialized beside me. Plazia stepped through the portal and said, "I'll leave you be, and though arduous, annoying, and trite, I shall do as you ask. You must know that any resulting deaths are on your hands."

I rubbed my temples.

"It isn't like I want to entirely homogenize the Vagni into my empire, but holy hell, they can't be a bunch of rabid cultists who're into tearing our enemies apart. It isn't a good ethical fit."

I gestured a hand at Plazia.

"Besides that, shouldn't you have more than enough power to enforce our rule? Those deaths you're talking about, they make it sound like you're struggling. If you need help, I can send a few golems-"

Plazia scoffed.

"Perhaps I exaggerated the consequences of your approach."

I pinched the brow of my nose.

"Just remember, we're normalizing Blegara the right way. Just...Just take your time, and don't use shortcuts."

Plazia's warp shrank as he stepped through.

"As you command, Harbinger."

Shalahora turned a hand to Plazia.

"I may assist you during Earth days. I can kill masses of enemies with ease."

Plazia cackled.

"It's the domestication of wolves into dogs that is being done, not their culling."

The hivemind turned to me, a split in spacetime humming between us.

"But their demises can be arranged. Easily, if need be."

I waved my hands.

"Keep doing what you're doing minus the torture of eldritch."

Plazia leaned forward.

"What of the occasional bout of excruciation-"

I threw my hands up.

"Absolutely not."

Plazia cackled as the spatial split slammed shut. Shalahora and I stood in Plazia's barebones room before the shadowy Sovereign's form rippled. Shalahora turned to me.

"In a different time, you wouldn't have allowed such tactics at all. You must be stretched quite thin, though you have been since we met."

I leaned against a wall.

"You're not wrong. I'm a bit, er, diluted at the moment. The thing is, it's either I let Plazia handle this, or the eldritch will continue rebelling. That means letting hordes of Vagni die. I could head over and handle it myself, but I'm swamped with Earth and guild priorities."

Shalahora whispered.

"In your mind, you've chosen the lesser of two evils, but perhaps that is not so. You could head to Blegara then and come to Earth during the day."

I frowned.

"I'd lose out on training with you then."

Shalahora peered away.

"Must we continue this supposed training?"

I sighed.

"Of course, and you know why. While everyone else is settling down, I know threats are looming on the horizon. I'm readying myself for them so that we aren't vaporized, enslaved, or turned into mana batteries. Besides that, didn't you want to help me train?"

Shalahora's body turned more translucent.

"I did, and I have done so...But, perhaps we have trained enough?"

I furrowed my brow.

"I can't even hold a candle to you. How in the world is that enough to handle threats even stronger than you are?"

Shalahora's hand shook. He grabbed it in his other palm and nestled it back and forth.

"You will not be able to fight me in my given domain of competence. The axioms we fight on are intrinsically different. While you are now able to tolerate more psionic damage, that doesn't mean you'll be able to match me in regards to psionics."

I furrowed my brow.

"We can't know if we don't give it a fair shake, right?"

Shalahora's form rippled for a moment.

"That...That is true. You are given difficult choices, and you must rise to their demands."

"For now, I think terrible choices are part of being a guild leader. At least, I think they are. Anyways, why did you offer to help Plazia? I know you hate killing stuff in general, so it seemed out of place."

Shalahora gazed at a wall. His body became more corporeal.

"I understand you wish to offer mercy to those monsters, but your kindness is wasted on them. The eldritch do not change, and that is an immutable truth."

I nodded.

"I know they won't change as a whole, but a few individuals may. Speaking of changing individuals-"

I put a hand on Shalahora's shoulder.

"I don't need you to kill anything or anyone. Instead, I have another task for you. We're going to have a lot more residents put on Earth. I'm going to need you to safeguard our psionic safety whenever you're free."

I lowered my hand. Shalahora whispered.

"What does that entail?"

"First, you'll need to check everybody that comes over and make sure their minds aren't remade by Elysium. We can't have sleeper agents dismantling our efforts and giving the enemy intel on our guild."

Shalahora tilted his head at me.

"I can do so, but I may do other, darker tasks. I can evaporate minds in mass, turning entire cultures into nothing. It takes little time or effort, and I have done so many times in the past."

Schema mentioned Shalahora having cleared over a hundred planets. However, this wasn't the path he wanted to walk, and I wouldn't force his footsteps down that path. I frowned.

"Shalahora. You have murdered. You have killed. That doesn't mean that's all you can or will be. You're a lot like me in that regard."

"How?"

"There was a time when I thought I was going to be a monster, and I was afraid of who I'd become."

Shalahora murmured.

"And you escaped that fate. I did not. What has been done, is done. It can no longer be expunged from me."

I gazed at the runes covering the walls.

"You know what's wild? I still feel like a monster. Logically speaking, I know I'm not, but it's a hard sensation to shake off. The notion has this way of sneaking up on you when you least expect it. Personally, I think you're in the same boat. The thing is, you don't have to be some planet-wiping scourge for the rest of all time."

I weighed my hands back and forth.

"You could be a planet-saving guardian instead, and I think changing your path a bit will do you some good. You know, making some peace rather than waging some war."

Shalahora whispered with force.

"Lies and death are all I've ever been. They are all I've ever known. This task, I shall do it, but you must know it is new to me. I will no doubt fail."

I narrowed my eyes.

"Why? Are you going to self-sabotage or can it simply not be done?"

Shalahora's voice reverberated into our surroundings.

"It's not ability. It is a matter of my nature. You...You are trying to use a knife to heal."

I tapped his chest with a fist.

"A knife can choose if it's a sword or a scalpel."

I walked off.

"I'm not going to force you to do anything, but please, think about it. In the meantime, we'll be canceling tonight's training session."

"To what end?"

"I've got a few million people to shepherd to Earth. We'll need you soon for that, regardless."

Shalahora tilted his head.

"Who is it that you're bringing back to Earth?"

"The skeptiles. I've been letting them rot for a long time, and I'm going to go pick them up and give them a better home. That's the plan anyway."

As I walked off, Shalahora peered down, lost in thought. I left him to it while I headed to our local warp drive at Springfield. At the center of the town, dungeoneers lined up to use the currency exchange center, holding horns, spikes, bones, eyes, organs, glowing metals, and artifacts.

They sold pieces of eldritch or rare ores they harvested. As I walked by, they saluted or bowed to me before I said at ease. Beside the exchange center, the warp drive hummed without anyone coming or going. We locked down the warp drive from outsiders because of Elysium, and locals would rather travel to other cities for trade since warping costs a pretty penny.

Sparkling from the first bit of activity today, an ionizing mist spritzed out of the cylindrical chamber, and out walked our grizzled albony. Helios brushed himself off, fog lingering on him.

"At your beckoning call, your majesty."

I raised a pinky.

"Excellent. If you may, I'd prefer more beckoning and less call."

Helios raised his brow.

"Whenever you mirror royalty's dignity, then perhaps we can discuss matters of decadence."

I smiled.

"Looks like that's never happening then. Where were you, anyways?"

Helios sighed.

"I'm managing many tasks at the moment. Even if I disagree with Obolis's actions, the Empire was my home. I am saving my people from Elysium when free."

He rolled a hand lazily.

"Though I'm prioritizing your requests above any pressing matters that may appear. Also, I'm assisting while preventing any further antagonizing of Elysium, though it isn't as if I'd be the first one to break our treaty."

His pale eyes narrowed.

"But I will be the first to charge forward after it's fully gone."

A mind of mine took note of that, chewing on the thought. I turned a hand to Helios.

"Good work then. Are you ready to let the skeptiles in?"

Helios cracked his neck before allowing mana to flow through his gauntlets.

"I am."

A rush of emotion coursed through me, but it was primarily fear. Months passed since making the deal with Obolis for the skeptile's freedom. Since then, the skeptiles had waited on me to arrange their transit, and I kept pushing it back for other matters. I did have my guild send consistent aid in the meantime, but aid wasn't a new home.

I wouldn't blame him if Tera was pissed about twiddling his thumbs for so long. Without any reason to postpone the matter aside from dread, I let out a sigh.

"Then let's give them the warmest welcome we can."

Helios grinned.

"I can't wait to see you get screamed at. It's actually one of my favorite pastimes."

Primordial mana hummed in his hands.

"Now then, let's cross the veil."

Chapter 400: Tera's Return

A rush of emotion coursed through me, but it was primarily fear. Months passed since making the deal with Obolis for the skeptile's freedom. Since then, the skeptiles had waited on me to arrange their transit, and I kept pushing it back for other matters. I did have my guild send consistent aid in the meantime, but aid wasn't a new home.

I wouldn't blame him if Tera was pissed about twiddling his thumbs for so long. Without any reason to postpone the matter aside from dread, I let out a sigh.

"Then let's give them the warmest welcome we can."

Helios grinned.

"I can't wait to see you get screamed at. It's actually one of my favorite pastimes."

Primordial mana hummed in his hands.

"Now then, let's cross the viel."

Helios tapped into an unseen barrier before folding it, connecting the points, then splitting apart spacetime. As his warp opened, a desert world blew dry sand and harsh wind onto ours. I stepped onto the top of a dune. Orange rock and teal sand covered the horizon. The simple color shift alienated the dunes, and the place was as bizarre as any planet I'd walked on.

Well, aside from L-7. It was in a different league.

Walking across the dune, I peered up at two suns, one red and the other orange. Several moons floated over the sky, each floating orb midway through waning and waxing. They were like an unfinished cake buffet with different slices left behind. Below them, the constant wind scrubbed this planet's rocky surface into sand.

Helios gasped while stumbling onto the planet, and his portal clapped shut with an eruption of sound. I gazed at him.

"Are you ok?"

Helios nodded.

"Of course...This planet is simply far away from Earth. It's on the other side of Schema-owned space, so it's far more arduous to arrive here."

"Yet Obolis and the Empire found it? That's odd."

Helios pulled himself up, his mane following the wind.

"My uncle invested heavily in the scouting of weakened or vulnerable planets. This one's ecological disasters gave way for profit at first, and in time, the trickling of slaves followed."

I hovered us up.

"Ah, man, what a great guy. Let's get the skeptiles out of here."

Darting across the skyline, we passed dunes before reaching a canyon. It stretched for dozens of miles, a majestic piece of nature rivaling the Grand Canyon in our world. Sea-green sandstone layered between carrot-colored limestone, and a murky river carved itself across the place. That river supported all life in the area, including the resident skeptiles.

It was worse than I expected. The skeptiles huddled into a colossal, overcrowded city shoved onto one side of the canyon. Much of the skeptiles' architecture mirrored Eltari designs, but unlike our flying friends, these guys kept lower to the ground with a greater emphasis on sunbathing spots.

Each home competed against other sun-laden lounges. From piles of shining stones to arranged eldritch teeth to even modeled broken glass, the roofs of every home carried the soul of their family. Aside from the artwork, their dilapidation exposed itself like dirt under fingernails.

Devoid of technological or magical means, the skeptiles lived in overt poverty, rivaling a third-world country. Only a few signs of civilization stuck out, like Schema's facilities at the town's center or a few futuristic cargo hulls carrying the massive village's food supplies. Considering the lack of life or water, these people needed exports from other places to survive.

Helios murmured.

"Ugh. I should've left the Empire for this, not my own betrayal."

I set us down at Schema's warping and currency centers.

"You're telling me. Were you aware of what this was like?"

Helios eyed two skeptile children, their bellies bulging and their limbs like dried kindling.

"I had heard rumors, but to see it is a different matter altogether."

Dread pooled in my stomach like acid as I sent a message to Tera, letting him know we were here. These people could've been starving because I spent so long on other tasks. I swallowed that anxiety.

"Well, we're here to fix this."

A violet portal opened, and Tera, the World Breaker, stepped out. Teeth of eldritch he'd slain clattered as he jogged up to me. He flashed sharp teeth before spreading his claws. I expected this after having waited so long to pick him and his people up, but it was still going to hurt.

He hugged me.

"It's good to see you well, you pushy metal bastard."

I peered back and forth.

"It's...It's good to see you too."

Helios's smile dampened like a fire covered in soil.

"No screaming then? Hm, is that disappointment I taste. Alas, what a familiar flavor."

Tera grabbed my shoulders.

"You've shrunk in size. Did you want to be able to walk amidst the masses?"

I weighed a hand back and forth.

"More or less. How are things going?"

I winced as Tera clapped his hands together.

"I'd like to show you if you have the time to see."

I turned to Helios. The albony frowned.

"I'm not particularly pressed."

I turned a hand.

"Lead the way."

We walked through the slums of the village, many shacks stacked on top of one another. Each hut lacked a door, cloth hanging and separating the spaces. We passed a few desiccated corpses, each of them having dried out long ago. Every time we passed one, Tera placed his middle finger against his thumb in a circle while stretching his other fingers out. He pressed the hand symbol to his chest with reverence.

Finding me staring, Tera frowned.

"Those are the ones who chose to starve in order to save their family or their children. We honor them as we walk by."

I glared at Helios. The albony winced.

"Yes, yes, I'm awful. Let's concentrate less on what's hurting them and more on helping, shall we?"

I frowned.

"You have to know where wounds are before you can heal them."

Helios hopped onto a roof.

"Despite my being blind, even I can see what they need here." He gave me a tight smile.

"But I appreciate the reminder."

Tera shrugged.

"Life was this way before the albony. To place the blame of our barren planet onto them is to deny our clan's legacy and history. This is a place of starvation and hardship, and because of that, one cannot escape it while they're here. It will cling to you like a curse from an old enemy."

I scratched the back of my head.

"Why'd you seem so happy when we arrived if the situation is this dire?"

Tera's grin showed his many sharp teeth, like a smiling scarecrow with hay for teeth.

"There are far fewer corpses than before. These are not new, as you saw, and even in passing, you've done much. Come. I'll show you."

After a few minutes of running around, we reached the edge of the canyon. The largest of the huts was embedded into the wall, mirroring a Peublan cliff dwelling home. They weaved the teal lines of stone into the walls before polishing the stone to bring out its colors. It glistened inside their home.

Once nearby, Tera landed on his home cliff with a heart-stopping thud. Helios and I touched the ground with finesse before a dozen skeptiles ran out of their home. The children lacked the starving features of the street urchins, their frames normal and their eyes clear.

I gestured to them.

"Your family?"

Tera nodded.

"My kin. My center. My bedrock. Without these hatchlings, I'd be nothing, like some mother hawk without a nest."

Tera pointed at me, his voice stern.

"He is the one I spoke of. Say hello."

They walked over, their eyes wide. Standing two feet tall, their species lacked humanity's size, but their sharp claws, horns, and teeth gave them a natural weaponry we lacked. Their thick, multicolored scales gave them the same vibrance as gyalgathens, though they lacked the same glossy sheen on their skin.

Their dull scales mirrored their backgrounds - tough and humble with depth under the grime.

Having prepared for the event, I handed them rings on necklaces. They each took the gift with looks of awe and fear on their faces. Whenever one put their amulet on, they grew. The first writhed on the ground for a minute, his body molting seven times in the process. Standing several feet taller, the child rivaled their adults after manifesting the attribute gains. Tera marveled.

"By Schema...You're like a god."

Helios stared at his nails.

You could be reading stolen content. Head to Royal Road for the genuine story.

"Oh, if you only knew the extent of that hyperbole."

Tera watched another child molt through its growth. Tera smiled.

"That depends on what kind of god we're discussing. Is the Harbinger a god of greater principles such as light or mass? Perhaps not. What of lesser principles, such as ice or fire? I think Daniel rivals them and their myths."

Helios raised a brow.

"Your kind believes in many gods, not the one?"

Tera covered his mouth as he laughed.

"We do. I noticed you said the god. I always found that amusing. Our gods are lesser, but they are not meant to be almighty. They serve as lessons to those of us who are still learning the ways of our ancestors."

Helios lowered his hand.

"Our god created the cosmos and knows all. As for your religion, I am left wondering how your kind is able to come to terms with the modern world. How are you able to see magicians like Daniel and I, yet you still believe in lesser gods?"

Tera's eyes rippled with violet energy.

"I may ask the same of you. This god you speak of, it must pale in comparison to the Old Ones. If your god created the cosmos, then the Old Ones must dwarf it. Despite that, you speak as if you're a man of faith."

Helios raised his brow.

"More so a man raised in a family of faith, though I see your point."

A skeptile child grabbed some of Helios's fur, tugging on it.

"You are fluffy."

Helios peered down at the reptile.

"And you are filthy. Are showers against your culture?"

The child's eyes widened.

"What's a shower?"

Helios's eyes narrowed.

"Ah, there's my answer."

Tera smiled at the child. He lunged down.

"A shower is where you use water to remove dirt, germs, and filth from your body."

The child laughed at Helios.

"Hah! Silly cat. We cannot waste something like water on a thing like that."

Tera walked over, scooping the child onto his shoulder.

"Excuse this one. She's always curious. Aren't you Tyga?"

She giggled as he tickled her underbelly. Interrupting the heartwarming scene, an adult skeptile walked out of the home.

"How dare you all tug on our company. Come, come. Please sit inside. The sun must be brutal out there."

It wasn't, but we appreciated the offer. Stepping inside, light pierced the loosely boarded roofs in several places, and sand molded into whatever specific item they needed, from chairs to tables to dishes. Several skeptiles sat together, chatting around

an open balcony while spitting into piles of sand. They molded the material into various needed goods for the home.

A child shattered a plate before a skeptile rolled their eyes. They grabbed the shards, shattered them further, and put them in a pile for reuse. Another skeptile worked their current object into another plate, replacing it from scratch.

Tera spread his hands.

"These are my wives. They are my light and joy."

They stood and bowed to us, their scales glinting in the light. They shined more than the males, having taken the time to polish their scales to a sheening perfection. The smaller eyes and shorter horns along their brow also gave them a gentler appearance, and seeing these guys let me determine which gender the kids were.

Tera pointed at them.

"They live because you took us in before we were forced to fight Elysium. We would have been led to the slaughter against them. Your deal on Blegara saved my family and the lives of this community."

He met my eye.

"Thank you."

Helios frowned.

"Why would Obolis send you all against Elysium? You're unable to dish out even a modicum of resistance, and you'd all become fuel for the Hybrids."

Tera walked down the stairs.

"There is a simple answer. If one cannot buy victory, what else can they attain through battle?"

I sighed.

"They can buy time."

Terra grinned, his expression sharp.

"And to your kin, our lives are cheap. Aren't they?"

Helios closed his eyes before frowning.

"To most, yes. Not all."

Terra tilted his head.

"Ah, but to you, we must be cheap. Otherwise, you would've taken us out of our squalor, correct?"

Terra glared and Helios couldn't find an answer. The Speaker scoffed.

"Own what you've done and what you haven't. Otherwise, you live in a world of denial."

Terra kept walking, but Helios stayed in place. Helios's hands loosened as he gazed at the ground. I waved a hand at the guy.

"Anyone there"

Helios's voice was like a dead, dried stump.

"Yes. I'm...I need a moment."

I left him, knowing he never experienced the full brunt of the Empire's underbelly. Digesting these facts might take a bit. Leaving him to his devices, I walked downstairs. Here, we found Tera's wealth. A thousand parts from a thousand eldritch hung from every inch of the place. Preserved eyes, ears, noses, teeth, skin, hearts, organs, talons, claws, horns, and diagrams covered every square inch.

A few dozen bottles of eldritch energy sat on the countertop. Tera grabbed them.

"Do you mind discarding these? They can be difficult to get rid of, and you found them useful before."

I raised a hand, and Tera tossed them to me. Uncorking the bottles in tandem, I released the dark plague. Tera's eyes widened, and he raised his palms.

"Wait. I've been saving those for years. We're in danger-"

Within seconds, the mist soaked into my armor. The echoes of screams faded from the room as I squeezed a hand.

"Thanks for the snack."

Tera gawked.

"No...No problem."

I observed magical runes and diagrams on every part of many eldritch sub-types, along with potion formulas for many of them. I grabbed one of the potent mixtures.

"So you're an experienced alchemist?"

Tera scratched a scaled cheek.

"It's a necessary evil. I don't wish to use the bodies of those I kill in such morbid ways, but I lack the potential for victory without them. Aside from that, I have never been able to afford potions or healing from experts. This is how I've diversified my skillset.

Otherwise, I would've been completely subservient to Phillip Novas and, by extension, the albony. You've seen where that gets you."

I winced at the prospect. Tera opened a cupboard before pulling out several dimensional storage rings. He tossed them to me.

"These have food and other necessities you may need. I know it isn't much, but it should be able to handle the costs of moving us."

I checked their contents, finding enough food to feed an army. I smiled.

"I appreciate the offer, but I'll be taking a different form of payment."

I tossed them back, and Tera's eyes narrowed.

"Does that mean you're expecting a subspecies contract? We will not sign another of those cursed things."

I furrowed my brow.

"I'm going to be hiring you and your elite. They'll be able to join my guild and work for me. Everyone else is free to do whatever, given they follow a few rules. You know, don't kill, steal, all the basic ethical necessities required for a functioning society."

Tera's irises slimmed like the eyes of a viper.

"What percentage of our earnings will you be taking?"

I scratched the side of my head.

"What does that even mean?"

Tera rolled his eyes.

"You play coy, but I shall play along. You shall give us a quota of missions. We finish them for your members. We keep some of what we pillage, and you take the rest."

I inspected a row of bottles holding miniaturized natural elements.

"That's not gonna happen. Well, maybe the quota, in a way."

Tera stepped up.

"Stop playing games. This is our livelihood you're talking about. I appreciate what you've done, but I understand that no meal is given. It is earned, and we are more than willing to earn our keep. I want to know how much of our hunts you want to take."

I met his eye.

"Hm. About 0% of them, actually."

Tera's horned brow furrowed.

"That doesn't make sense."

I moved my hands.

"So think about it like this. I'm not here to get you to work jobs for me. It's more like...Hm, I'm directing you guys to accomplish certain tasks I want done. You do them, you keep the rewards. In return for choosing to follow my directives, I'll pay you guys for finishing those quests instead of handling other quests."

Tera's face scrunched up in disgust.

"You...You're paying us to finish quests for ourselves? How...How does that even make sense?"

I shrugged.

"No one on my planet wants to live in a desert. They're considered wastelands. You guys are going to be in those remote regions, killing and destroying eldritch. Do that, and I'll provide resources, support, whatever you guys need in the meantime."

I spread my arms.

"Think about it like this. I'm having you guys mow a lawn for me or something. After you finish, the lawn is yours."

Tera stared at his clawed hands.

"That's not right. You're paying us for landscaping our own yard. A-And you're giving us a yard. We don't own a yard."

I made the walls of a box with my hands.

"Oh, but see, that's where you're very, very wrong. You do, in fact, own a yard. Now, the thing is, your yard has to be in a certain spot. That's why I'm paying you guys. That makes sense, eh?"

Tera's eyes hardened.

"We're not a charity."

I lowered my hands.

"And I'm not a philanthropist. Those eldritch will run wild and scour the land for food if we don't have them handled at some point. Having you guys there eliminates them as a threat, and we may even be able to terraform the area over time if we play our cards right."

Tera turned a clawed hand to me.

"I'll believe this deal when I see it. That said, you plan on terraforming your own planet?"

I weighed my hands to and fro.

"You know, I haven't given it a ton of thought. The way I see it, there's a complex relationship with nature that I don't actually understand. Despite my appearance, I never graduated from high school, let alone college. What I do know is that land needs water. In that case, I could make plenty of water to land on the place as rain, but-"

Tera waved a hand.

"The oceans would rise. You'd become like Blegara in a few myriad years."

I pointed at him.

"Uh, sure. Tell me, do you know something about terraforming?"

Tera smiled.

"I do. It's a pastime of mine. I love the interplay of forces that generate the geology of a planet. You know, the lay of the land. It's a harmony not unlike music. Each twist and turn leads to a singular rhythm. Once you've found that rhythm, you can adjust it however you please. It's a thing of beauty."

My eyes widened.

"When did you learn all that?"

"On Absolon-22. It's part of how I managed to get the planet under albony rule. I found several species of eldritch that produced a few natural forces. After getting them coordinated and breeding, I worked with a few albony scientists to release them in certain areas. That collapsed several of their planet's farming structures.

I then leveraged their poverty into financing accounts for the empire. It also required working with a few Schemic lawyers to arrange the contracts beforehand so that the albony could get their due."

I nodded in awe.

"Wow. You really took them for all their worth, huh?"

A sad smile spread over Terra's face.

"No. I showed them the desperation of poverty and the evil of greed...But I did it for my family, and I'd do it again in a heartbeat for the hatchlings. For my people. Tearing their planet down kept us breathing. It's why this city has grown to such a majestic sight."

From his workshop, we got a great view of the expansive city. It was a series of poor, rundown slums. I kept my own judgments to myself as I nodded.

"Yeah. It's great you gave your all this for a planet."

"Speaking of, whenever we get to your planet, I'll have my team and me act as your skeptile squadron."

I waved a hand.

"Eh, that won't be necessary."

A smirk grew on Tera's face.

"Oh, but it will be."

I leaned against one of his workstations.

"What makes you say that?"

Tera stepped up.

"I've been thinking of how to help your guild since you offered us so much support. I have a few ideas."

"Such as?"

"First, you need an economist with global experience. I have that, and I can arrange for the needs of a population to be met."

"That's...Highly useful. What else?"

"Second, I know how to use different eldritch for potion ingredients or other useful products without having them come back to life later. I can share my knowledge with your guild."

"Hell yeah, that's also pretty useful."

"Third, we can help terraform regions. We skeptiles stay close to the ground, and we can speak to the spirits that rule over lands. We can harmonize those forces so that a place can become fruitful."

"Spirits, huh? I didn't know they existed, but it wouldn't be the craziest thing I've seen since joining Schema's system."

"It is as true as the sands of time. From this barren rock, we've reaped impossible harvests, and that is how we can work with the land to bring the most out of it. I'm sure you're able to handle food from what you've said, but we're able to do that without interfering with the soil over the long term. Our methods help hold the careful balance of nature."

I leaned forward.

"Is that how you feed the people here?"

"It is. We manipulate the climate with ritual magic. Once cast, we'll need a continuous flow of mana, but we have plenty of people willing to man the shift for such a job."

I scoffed.

"Mana will never be a limiting factor again. Instead, your problems will start to revolve around not blowing everyone up."

Tera smiled.

"Too much power, hah. It is a good problem to have. We can start now if you'd like. All we will need are the initial funds to warp to your planet. I am ashamed to say that we lack the ability to warp so many, considering we have so little accrued wealth in our clan."

A glimmer shined in my eye.

"Oh, don't worry about that. I've got a chauffeur."

Tera gazed at the ground.

"You're sure that's fine?"

"Of course. I don't want to leave you all high and dry."

"To the contrary, we skeptiles prefer that kind of position."

I laughed.

"It's a phrase. I'm not leaving you all on a new planet without support."

"But we can handle it."

"That's the thing, you won't have to. Besides, getting you guys going would help me accomplish my goals faster anyway."

"Help. Like us managing our own lands for your profit?"

"Profit? Probably not."

Tera pinched the horns of his brow.

"I cannot fathom why you're doing this for us. It...It makes no sense. You have nothing to gain."

I waved my hands in circles.

"Think of my goals and aims as being the mysterious desires of the Harbinger."

Helios walked downstairs, having heard us. The albony held a witticism waiting under his breath, but he chose to stay silent. I let him be before turning a palm to Tera.

"You have your elites gathered, right?"

Tera nodded.

"As much as I'm able."

"Then let's go."

We stepped out before each of us flew over to the center of the city. After passing a variety of slums in different states of disrepair, we stood beside the warping station and currency market. Schema's hirees peered at us, worried as a hundred skeptiles mingled about. The veterans under Tera, these individuals wore the scars and wounds of war, and they sharpened weapons made of bone and teeth as we arrived.

We landed amongst them. In silence, they grouped up behind Tera, who stood a head taller than the rest. What Yawm was for the porytians, Tera was to the skeptiles, but Tera led his race from abject poverty to prospective wealth. Unlike Yawm, Tera wouldn't be corrupted during his rise to the top.

I'd make sure of that. I raised my brow.

"Are you all ready?"

Tera gulped.

"Of course."

Helios took a deep breath, his mood like sour milk. He stretched out his hands, and our dimension bent. Springfield stood on the other end, and one of my architect golems waited for their arrival. Helios and I walked through before we turned to the skeptiles on the other side of the warp.

I gestured to the city.

"Alrighty then. Welcome to your new home planet - Earth."