

New World 401

Chapter 401: A Journey's End Is Another Beginning

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."

The skeptiles paced onto another world, many of them having never left their world and its barren hellscape. The skeptile veterans ogled at the buildings, city streets, mana lamps, and especially the greenery. One of them murmured.

"It is as if the world is dyed green."

As they walked onto Springfield's heart, Krog, Chrona, and Diesel waited for them. Though somewhat afraid, the skeptiles gave them bows and exchanged greetings before we got the group situated. Once everyone was over, Helios hopped through his portal. His nose bled before he raised a hand.

"I'm getting a drink."

He stumbled away. His portal remained open in case we forgot anything. With everyone on our side of the ether, I raised my hands.

"Hello, skeptiles. You are the frontrunners of your kind, and your mission is to bring your species out of anguish and into avarice. I'll be giving you more than one chance to make that happen, and with diligence and duty, you'll forge a new path for your people. No corpses will desiccate under the sun if you all apply yourselves."

Honestly, even if they lazed about, they wouldn't starve here. My declaration had the intended effect as they radiated a palpable enthusiasm. I shifted my aura from the Rise of Eden to Event Horizon as I turned to our convoy.

"This is Krog, Chrona, and Diesel. They'll take an architect golem towards your new home. There, you'll scope out various lands before forging a massive capital of your choosing. I'll add nine other cities once your primary landing point has been established. All I ask is that you work with the locals of any area by giving them plenty of breathing room and space."

I gestured to Diesel.

"Once you're settled in, Diesel will assist with creating your new city layout and building plans. He's experienced and will help you pull this together quickly."

One of the skeptiles murmured.

"It will take centuries, but it will be done."

Diesel sat on the shoulder of the architect. He tapped the ethereal-looking golem.

"You'd be surprised how much ground one of these babies can cover."

The architect gestured a hand.

"Though I am but a humble servant, I am here to grant my services to all in the name of my creator."

I smiled.

"That's the plan. I'm guessing these are the volunteers for the project?"

Four gialgathens, a few dozen Eltari, and twelve people waited behind my followers. Elthara was one of the Eltari, her Omega Strains rippling over her body. By now, they were a part of her body as much as my armor was mine.

She bowed to me.

"We are. We wish to grant these people as warm a welcome as we received."

Tera blinked.

"I'm hoping it wasn't a cold night when you arrived then."

Elthara reached out a crystalline arm.

"To us, this world is chilly, but its people are like embers. It's good to meet you. I am Elthara."

Tera smiled, his eyebrows rising.

"I-I, m Tera, the World Breaker."

Elthara's eyes widened.

"Impressive title."

Tera let her hand go.

"I'm certain you've got plenty of achievements that rival my own."

One of Tera's wives, this one a warrior, walked up.

"You seem ripe. Would you join our clan?"

Elthara gawked.

"Huh...I, I don't think so."

The wife pointed at her eyes, then at Elthara's.

"I will tell you first, but we don't give up easily. Be ready to be invited to many warm meals when we get a new home."

Tera nudged his wife back with an arm.

"Do ignore them. They're just ecstatic we get to live somewhere with so much water."

Elthara laughed.

"You should see Blegara."

They chatted away, getting along without a hitch. Chrona scoffed.

"It would seem these skeptiles are like babies that never fully grow."

Krog nodded.

"They're so strange, like tiny caimans."

I gawked as one of the skeptile children ran up and grabbed a horn on Krog's side. They must've run through the open portal. The child spread its hands.

"You feel like big frogs."

Krog's face soured.

"Ah. I suppose all races know of frogs aside from us."

Chrona leaned down, her eyes the size of the child's entire body.

"Little one, have you not learned fear?"

The child put its eye up to Chrona.

"I am so afraid I will either laugh or cry. I choose to laugh."

Chrona smiled.

"Then I will choose to laugh with you."

Tera grabbed the child.

"Go back through the warp before it closes. Stay with your mothers until I return."

The child deflated like a popped balloon. It sprinted through the ruptured space-time before it slammed shut. In an alley to the left, I could hear Helios vomiting. We wouldn't be getting any more warps for a while. Either way, we had one last remaining issue. I messaged Shalahora, who warped into the square an instant later.

A palpable wave of fear spread through the skeptiles before Shalahora dispersed a subtle psionic web. Tera narrowed his eyes at the shadowy Sovereign. Tera murmured.

"What is he doing?"

Shalahora whispered.

"They are clean."

As quickly as he came, he left. I waved a hand, getting everyone lined up.

"He's running a quick checkup to make sure there's no smuggling going on."

Tera tilted his head.

"What counts as smuggling?"

I smiled.

"Apparently, aspirin."

A short chat later, I accepted the skeptiles into my guild. Each of them grew by several feet in height, thousands of pounds in weight, and gained enormous amounts of stats. Tera scoffed.

"Is this what everyone who is in your guild experiences?"

One of the eltari in the back laughed.

"I threw up when I first joined. It was like bad hangover."

After squaring everything away, I waved bye as the skeptiles left. Some floated with the architect golem. Others rode the backs of the gialgathens. Tera shouted on the back of Chrona.

"Thank you. This is a beautiful home, and we will not tarnish this gift given."

I smiled.

"I didn't doubt you guys for a second, but you're welcome."

After they were gone, I pulled Helios back up to Mt. Verner. We wove through tunnels before I set him near his room in the top suites. He hobbled off, his exhaustion leaving him shaking. Even if he didn't say it, I could tell the trip shook him up. Combine that with fighting Elysium's forces, and Helios hardly made it to his room.

Before he walked in, I extended a hand.

"You know, I could always give away a few golems to help you with your fights against Elysium."

Helios leaned against his doorway.

"I am not going to be a burden to you. I fight on my own terms for my own reasons. They're not yours, and you will not treat them as such."

He glared.

"I ask you to give me this dignity."

I frowned.

"Dignity, huh? Well, consider it done, but know the offer still stands."

He hobbled into his room.

"As do my principles. Goodbye."

His doorway closed before I stood there in contemplation. I had to admit that it was nice having a follower who wanted to handle his own business when needed. I was always getting pulled around to different tasks, and a large part of that stemmed from how much help everyone needed. Still, it didn't take long to make combat golems by any stretch. I could crank those out in like, two hours or something.

Making them weaker was the real problem.

Anyway, I walked towards one of the ventilation shafts before heading outside. As I traversed the inner tunnels, I collected lint before burning it outside of Mt. Verner. Whether I liked it or not, I was, in fact, a giant duster at this point. I might as well do a good job dusting. With the sun setting, I headed towards Shalahora and my hill, my chosen place of purgatory.

As I lazily hovered over, my thoughts tumbled in my mind like clothes in a drier. I let them tumble without any rhyme or reason. The skeptiles suffered under Obolis, and other species did the same. I was aware since the Vagni suffered a similar fate, but the Vagni were half eldritch.

That's why the Empire's paranoia against them seemed logical at the time. After all, Blegara had been a fringe world. It carried many detriments that would require decades of determined effort to fix. However, the skeptiles demonstrated no such hostility, and their upbeat attitudes amidst their harsh lives left me feeling hollow.

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How many races were in their position? How many people suffered the same kind of fate, one relegated to squandering in dirt as others pilfered off them? It didn't even make sense to me why someone would do that. It left the leeching species fat and weak, with their minds lazy and their bodies soft.

It helped no one. No one at all.

I wanted to have people fight and face reality head-on. In my kind of planet, we'd find what we love and do it every day. Although I didn't understand people well, I knew enough to say they were happiest when working towards something. A guild worth building would have that goal front and center by inspiring the masses and giving them a deeper purpose.

In that regard, I had floundered. My guild's mission and purpose were dictated by my personal concerns, not anything overarching or principled. In some ways, it stopped us from getting caught in the weeds. If everyone acted without any direction, then the guild would naturally splinter apart. On the other hand, by directing the guild on my terms, I swiveled this ship's helm in wild, crazy ways.

In time, I needed to sit down and think about my governance. How would everything be managed while I was away? What guiding principles did we need? What about punishment, legalities, etc? These were skills and entire thought systems I sorely lacked. It left me humbled as I arrived with Shalahora waiting on me.

The shadow sighed.

"Again. You never miss an opportunity to suffer, do you?"

I pulled my dimensional anchor into a comfortable, easy-to-maintain spot.

"If the suffering has meaning, then sure. Anyways, you ready?"

His form blended into the dark, an encompassing visage.

"Tell me if the night is dark enough."

The night of training passed by in a flash. Well, you know, if a flash was a prolonged persecution by torture-happy demons. After being mentally beaten, psionically bruised, and spiritually trounced, I got my bearings back by meditating. Once handled, I checked up on the luminari leaders. After seeing the skeptiles wallowing, I grounded my actions once more.

Even if I didn't see it, what I did mattered. It really, really mattered at this point. To take advantage of that leverage, I aimed my sights on establishing a solid relationship with this new species. That, and I got my revised contract back from Florence's contact. The lawyer albony quadrupled the length of my document, having an extensive history of comments and details on what changes he made and why.

I had one mind convert it in the cipher, another read through the changes, and a third one carve what the other converted. Doing a dozen things at once, I landed in the medical bay. A real one, this time. Kessiah had an architect construct a series of concrete buildings with the appropriate quintessence lighting. While sterile and lifeless, the hospital gave the luminari exactly what they needed.

Each space offered direct vantage points to the sun and stars, glass lining every ceiling to the sky. They even had fans operate when medical personnel left the room, ensuring

a steady breeze bombarded the aliens. It left them healing at a rapid pace, giving Kessiah a much-needed break.

Speaking of, she walked out of the room, her belt buckle glowing. A bead of sweat poured from her forehead as I walked by. I pointed at the artifact.

"How's it holding up?"

Kessiah leaned against the wall.

"Yeah, well enough. It's...I don't know, noisy? It's definitely a strong tool, but it puts a lot of pressure on me to perform."

She wiped a brow.

"It's so damn weird. I feel like I'm barely scratching the surface of what it can do, but that's while I'm giving it my all."

Remembering my experiences with Shalahora, I nodded.

"I understand the feeling. How many casualties were there?"

"None. The only people that died were the ones Shalahora uncovered to be Elysium agents."

I held up a hand. She high-fived before letting out a gasp.

"Yeah, some of these people you handed off to me...They were in such bad shape. Keeping them stable took everything I had."

I winced.

"You mean the rulers from L-7?"

She shivered.

"I can't believe some of them were even alive. Some of them even had these rainbow spines coming out of parts of their body. You told me not to touch them, but I didn't need the tip. They felt...Like demons under their skin or something."

Kessiah's eyes grew distant.

"I think that's about where my new limit is. After the Yawm situation, I'm willing to take on tough jobs. Sometimes, dealing with them is easier than tolerating the guilt from running away."

Her eyes narrowed.

"But that new planet you mentioned, L-7? You won't see me there unless I'm dead or dragged by my hands and feet, kicking and screaming."

I shrugged.

"You might surprise yourself, but yeah, it's pretty bad."

Kessiah scoffed.

"That's an understatement. I'll walk into the fire, but I'm not diving into a lava pit."

She walked off.

"Anyways, good luck. Cya later, big guy."

She left me wondering if my perspective was warped on Leviathan-7. I estimated the pressures of the planet, but my build gave me immunity to most physical ailments. Based on Kessiah's description, the hostility of the planet dwarfed even my high estimations. Either that or she sensed something I couldn't.

I hoped the golems and cities I left behind would make it until I returned.

Putting myself back in the present, I checked the medical rooms. Each alien glowed with far more health and radiance than when they arrived. With the luminari's safety ensured, I finished forming the luminari's contract as I walked into Echo's room.

Having regained its vitality, Echo's white outline thickened into a shimmering mist. The internal dark deepened, its skin a void without end. Its surface lights bounced around within its outlined shape, but to show politeness, it dimmed the flashing so it wouldn't blind other races.

Echo bowed its head to me.

"Harbinger, thank you for the hospitality. We can hardly believe the thoroughness of your care."

I raised a palm.

"It's the least we can do, but I wouldn't thank me just yet. We still have this to attend to."

I showed the contract in my grimoire. Echo's lights changed to red.

"This is far more than we agreed upon."

I waved my hands.

"I had a professional work on it. It stops you guys from rescinding as easily or finding loopholes. This isn't just for my safety, either. You guys will suffer fewer stray bullets if I use better legal documentation and all that."

Echo's red deepened to the color of blood.

"This stops us from using Schema's system to our advantage. You are stopping the future prosperity of our race."

I scoffed.

"You're not feeble. You don't need to leech off other species."

Echo's lights hastened.

"We're not invincible. Those measures you look down upon allow us to save other races while benefiting our own in the process."

I shook my head.

"Do that without the daily contracts or caste systems, or is your entire species only able to use this one venture for affluence?"

Echo glared down at the contract, its eyes coalescing into a single orb on its face. It was like an ink cyclops with charcoal skin.

"I know your thoughts, but you have to understand that I'm more than worried. We're going to struggle after this war. How are we luminari supposed to recover?"

I furrowed my brow.

"I've read a little about your kind since we last met. From what I gathered, the luminari are not weak, frail, or foolish. Maybe you need to be reminded of that."

Echo's hands shook.

"This...This will ruin us."

I pulled a ring from my dimensional storage.

"You're underestimating how much I offer in return for your obligations."

The luminari stared at the ring. I gestured to it.

"Try it on."

Echo put it on a finger.

"We are a people worthy of trust-"

He gawked at the ring. His light outline thickened, more lights forming within his body. He expanded, and the bed buckled beneath him. I tapped the steel pages of my grimoire.

"I thought the last people I worked with were worthy of trust as well, but I was wrong."

I pulled the grimoire's words out as glowing letters.

"And I'm not going to be wrong again. Sign, or our alliance is done."

The letters singed onto a large plate of my dimensional fabric. The luminari heaved back as if distraught.

"Y-you use your skin as paper for contracts?"

I floated the panel over to him.

"Paper is fragile. I am not."

I saturated the panel in a gravity well before pointing at it.

"Use something to turn it if you need to. Putting your hand against the page will result in it being crushed."

Echo pulled its hand away.

"Why use so much gravitation?"

"Because it's heavy. Very, very heavy. I'm going to have a talk with Florence real quick. You heal up and read through that."

Echo leaned back.

"Aren't you worried I'll change the wording of the contract?"

I leaned over the document, my hand on the dark metal. It shivered as if alive.

"You can try, but know this document still has teeth."

I stepped out of the room.

"Remember one thing if you've forgotten everything else I've told you in this conversation. I believe in you and your people. You should start doing the same."

As I walked out, Echo's head lowered, and his hands squeezed the hospital bedding. Heading out of the place, I sent Florence a message. He replied, and I walked back inside to a different room in the single-floor building. Florence rested with his feet propped up. He chatted on his obelisk, enraptured in a conversation as I walked up.

He closed his obelisk, more like a chatterbox, before Florence grabbed his knee.

"Oh, ooooooh, the pain. It's too much to bear."

I gently flicked his leg. He pulled it back while rubbing his ankle.

"Oof, what was that for?"

I rolled my eyes.

"I was testing to see if it was still injured. How are you holding up?"

Florence pulled his feet off his bed before standing up.

"I'm fine. Kessiah and Shalahora have analyzed and tested every facet of me to ensure I'm not implanted with Elysium's ilk. I've been cleared this morning for further tasks."

"Good. I'm going to start offering this deal to other empires."

Florence's brow raised.

"Really now? Where's this sudden change of heart coming from?"

"Eh, I've seen what state a lot of these people are in. It's not good, and if I can change it, then I will."

"Ah. You must've seen skeptiles then. It's a nasty business, isn't it? I remember the first time I saw their capital. Corpses lined the streets in droves. It was as if some dark demon put a straw in their veins before sucking out every ounce of moisture."

Florence frowned.

"That was a large part of why I signed up to rule over Blegara despite feeling so unprepared."

I put my hands on my hips.

"You didn't want them to do the same thing to the Vagni?"

Florence brushed off his hospital robe.

"Indeed. It was a personal vendetta, in a way. My family thought it was too difficult a thing for me to manage, from my idealistic standpoint to my monumental task of rehabilitating the Vagni."

Florence's eyes carried a lingering sadness.

"They were right. You bailed me out of my over-commitment, and they still rebel to this day."

I shook my head.

"We rebutted Elysium, took control for a while, and we survived."

My eyes hardened.

"Considering who our enemies are, we accomplished a lot. That's actually why I'm here."

Florence tilted his head. I raised a fist.

"I want to extend this anti-slavery deal to all the other rulers we saved on L-7. It lets us retaliate against Elysium for sending Lehesion to Blegara and for breaching our air space on Earth. After we have these empires benefitting from our arrangement, I'm extending the same deal to anyone being assaulted by Elysium."

Florence winced.

"I was fine with doing this for one species, but well over a dozen? I don't think that's a good idea. We'll attract the ire of Elysium on a different scale."

Through the glass roof, I stared at the sun. I could peer into the light without being blinded or hurt by its brilliance.

"I gave that some thought. See, they can't face us in an open military conflict. If they send the giant, mopey gialgathen our way, I'll brutalize him like I did last time. Plazia

and Shalahora can be used as potent weapons both offensively and defensively as well, and Earth's retaking doesn't require my direct intervention."

I interlocked my hands behind myself as Torix oftentimes did.

"However, Elysium's ability to turn neutral ground into an advantage is unmatched. Without anyone knowing, they can dismantle an alien force from within using their remapping abilities. Anyone with the luck perk can be reconstructed into an unwilling homunculus for their goals, one they guide towards key positions before they take the offensive."

I frowned.

"That's how the luminari fell. You mentioned them turning sides at random. It turns out there's nothing random about it."

Florence winced.

"Nasty business."

I nodded.

"Agreed. If anything, we need to apply pressure to keep our position where it is. If they're able to focus on an unseen offensive against us, they'll destroy us from within like cancer killing its host."

I met Florence's eye.

"Hm. We'll apply soft pressure where we need to, and perhaps their response shall be far less tumultuous than we expect. We're not promoting slavery in these arrangements, and that is what Elysium fights so ardently against. The ideological sting of their propaganda should fall flat in the face of this leveled response."

Florence gawked at me.

"Since when did you become a strategist?"

I tapped my temple.

"Eh, think of it like this. There are many Daniels swirling in here, and I'm speaking for them. If my articulation alternates midspeech, it could also be from me switching my dimensional wake to a different one. In this case, a primordial aura."

I rolled my hand.

"It's better at the tactical application of knowledge, but the interpersonal skills are...Well, lacking."

Florence laughed.

"This version of you reminds me of Helios."

I interlocked my hands behind myself.

"He has his good points."

Florence tilted a hand to me.

"Speaking of which, I wanted to discuss him. He's pushing himself too hard as of late. I was wondering if you could offer him some support. I'll pay back your patronage fully, of course."

I shook my head.

"I already have, and he won't accept it."

Florence put a hand over his chest.

"Then I'll take whatever you planned on offering him before forcing it down his throat. I'll make sure he won't take no for an answer, either."

A menace shined in Florence's eyes. I smiled.

"I'll send you the golems along with a copy of the cipheric contract we aim to have the other species sign. I'll change the details as necessary, but it should give other species some understanding of what will be required."

Florence walked through the room, his voice rising in volume.

"Ah, finally, we can take some mark of aggression against these monsters. I know I'm not the most impartial of observers, but someone should've already Elysium wiped off the face of the Earth and from all planets and from all peoples. It's going to be difficult, but we'll silence them one voice at a time."

I sighed.

"I'm as anti-Elysium as anyone, but they're not going anywhere anytime soon, no matter what we do."

Disgust erupted over Florence's face.

"What? Do you not believe in our potential? We can wage war and win."

I frowned.

"To me, it's not a matter of who's stronger. It's a matter of will. I'll give an example. In my world, the worst wars were fought over ideological nonsense, from striving for absolute purity to enacting a utopian ideal. The pursuit of perfection clouded people from viewing the hell they created while pursuing their goals."

I raised my brow.

"I think that Elysium is the result of millennia of silenced dissent against Schema, and it's erupted in this brutality for that reason."

Florence grabbed his chin.

"Perhaps, but it doesn't justify what they've done."

"You're right. It doesn't, but it does explain why they do what they do. That means if we kill them, we still haven't killed the reason behind what they do. They'll come back in another form, and it may be even worse than the current iteration."

Florence scoffed.

"I doubt that's even possible."

My eyes darkened.

"If there is something I've learned since diving into Schema's universe, it's that there is no end to how deep a pit can go. Some of them are so abyssal, you can jump in and die before you even hit the bottom."

Florence gulped.

"Certainly, that seems to be the case. The fact they're recreating people to serve them is as dystopian a principle as anything I've ever heard of."

I frowned.

"What if they did it to unborn children? Perhaps they could cipherically implant their ideas into the genetic code of people. They'd propagate silently, spreading their ideas and messages in silence, yet the proliferation would be as certain as stone. It would be akin to a plague written into their DNA."

Florence shivered. I closed my eyes.

"Or they may make a disease that slowly alters other people's DNA in the same way. I can't say because, at this point, the situation has become worse than I imagined it could four or five times over. That's why I think my imagination might be the problem."

Florence took a step back, his eyes wide.

"Daniel...Don't speak something like that into existence."

I turned and stared at a wall.

"We'll need to tackle this problem from a wider angle. They're doing all of this because of Schema. That means we need to fix the problem at its source. At some point, at least. As for eliminating Elysium, it's impossible without getting past their protector."

Florence furrowed his brow.

"You mean Lehesion?"

I grabbed the wall, my fingers digging into the concrete.

"No. I could've smashed him like a bug. I need to kill the so-called gods that protect him."

Florence furrowed his brow.

"And who might they be?"

I spiraled the concrete dust over my palm. It swirled like nebulae in space as I turned to Florence.

"The Old Ones, of course. I'm going to kill them all."

Chapter 402: What Starts a Flame

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Florence watched chips of concrete swirl.

"Are the Old Ones even alive to kill?"

I sighed, pulling my hand back.

"I don't know."

Florence scratched the back of his head.

"It sounds like a rather lofty goal then. Personally, I can't even imagine ending an Old One. From what Obolis said about them, they're not even comparable to the cosmos. Supposedly, they watch us, poking and prodding where they wish without want or reason."

I honed in on Florence. The albony gazed into the distance.

"Ah yes, Obolis once said the Old Ones were from a different dimension. I doubted him then. Now, I realize he didn't know, and I likely never will either."

Florence stepped up to his regal clothes. It would've been hella awkward if not for the fact fur covered his entire body.

"Your goals are easy to understand, at least. If you did slay an Old One, it would be an incredible achievement, something that's never been done. It's a lucrative pursuit as well. They are the only S+ bounties in Schema's system, so the rewards would be endless."

I laughed.

"The Old Ones are much bigger than Schema from what I can tell. I'll need to maximize my system gains before trying to take them on. After that, I'll have to tread into some pretty unmarked territory for quite some time. Combine that with plenty of research to figure out what they're capable of. How they're alive. What they want. Anything I can scrounge up, honestly."

I shook my head.

"It's a lot. Sometimes I feel like I'm in way over my head."

Florence smirked.

"I'd certainly hope so. Otherwise, our resident Harbinger wouldn't have any cataclysm to omen, now would he?"

I gave his shoulder a nudge.

"I'd be hopeless. Lost, some might say. Speaking of which, I'll get lost and let you change."

Florence rolled his eyes.

"Fur covers every inch of an albony's body. If I may be so frank, the clothes situation hasn't ever really made much sense to me. For us albony, that is. You know, this cultural

practice of clothing required intense air conditioning during the albony industrialization. Imagine a pre-system albony wearing these robes in a hot, humid area."

Florence winced.

"Blegh. I'd pass out from hyperventilating. One couldn't hope to outpant the heat."

I stepped out with a smile.

"Good luck, Florence."

"You as well. Ah, before you go, may I say something?"

I leaned against the doorframe.

"Sure. What's up?"

Florence nestled his hands.

"Not that I doubt your judgment, but I was wondering why you trust so deeply in Shalahora and Plazia."

I furrowed my brow.

"What do you mean?"

Florence took a breath.

"It's a matter of recourse. Those individuals far exceed the general power standard of our guild. Either of them could run amok and leave us devastated. At the same time, they both come from dubious origins with cloudy, muddled allegiances behind them."

Florence met my eye.

"But there is more. Rarely, I cannot read an individual, yet I can't read either of them in our conversations. It's haunting to me."

Florence shivered.

"And Shalahora, it feels as though he's seen through me at times. I...I trust your judgment in most situations, but these two...Are you not worried they shall defect? Perhaps work against your best interests?"

I considered Florence's words for a moment. The albony raised a hand.

"Pretend I never said anything."

I waved his redaction off.

"You're right to be concerned, and I'm taking a second to pool my thoughts."

A minute later, Florence dressed himself. I turned a palm to him, and my thoughts settled.

"I have three reasons: need, incentives, and understanding."

Florence tilted his head.

"It's good you've given it thought. So how do those factors align towards our gain?"

I counted on my fingers.

"For need, we need them, and they need us. Regardless of Plazia's methods, I do believe him when he talks about his past. I can feel he's being honest, and he's been more than willing to work hard to earn my trust. Shalahora's skills are actually even

more necessary, and I believe his situation is far more constrained given he signed a cipheric contract."

Florence nodded.

"You mentioned it, and though I haven't seen the details, I assume it was well thought out. However, what of Plazia? He could be lying to you between his teeth, and you'd be none the wiser."

My mind settled onto the conversation. They inspected Florence's breathing, heart rate, perspiration, and mana flows. I spoke as minds poured over everything I said.

"I'm harder to deceive than I used to be."

Florence's hair stood on end. He gulped.

"Hah. I certainly feel that in our conversations. However, it's difficult to assume the same signs are evident in a hivemind."

"I think it's the opposite because of how Plazia speaks. He pulls minds together, aligns them, and then speaks from a unified front. The reality is that he's a congregation of many different minds that all think differently. As he mulls over the enormity of conversational choices, pieces of his inner thoughts slip. That's one of the reasons he's so rude."

Florence scoffed.

"I thought that was merely a side effect of being an eldritch. Amara is quite the handful as well."

I peered through Florence.

"Yet Other Hod is as polite as anyone I've ever spoken to. In the case of Plazia, he's splintered between many pieces of himself while suppressing a desperate hunger. It also helps to know he could've killed me a dozen times over, considering how long he surveilled Earth before joining our guild."

Florence leaned back.

"He surveilled Earth?"

I spent some time telling Florence the details of meeting Plazia alongside stories of the hivemind's past. By the time I finished, Florence nodded along. The albony cupped his chin in thought.

"Hm. Everything does align with our goals, though from a different angle. Perhaps he's more trustworthy than I thought."

I raised my brow.

"Regardless, I'm coming up with methods and ideas for managing a worst-case scenario involving the guy, but so far, he hasn't given us a reason to mistrust him."

Florence took a breath.

"I'll see if I can't manage some dissent in the guild during my downtime then."

"Dissent?"

"Well of course. You handed an eldritch hivemind one of your guild's highest honors while neglecting to mention what it was that he had done to support us in detail. The people of your guild aren't happy about it, and I'm of the opinion they're rightfully resentful."

I furrowed my brow.

"Why hasn't anyone mentioned it? Hell, no one's even so much as thought about it whenever I'm around. Huh. I might be worse at reading lies than I thought."

Florence shook his head.

"Your aura is palpable, friend. They do not lie to you whenever you're around. They find themselves believing despite themselves. It's once you're gone that doubt settles in like a creeping mold in an old home. I'll find some method of marketing Plazia's more positive traits in the meantime."

"I would appreciate that."

"It's never a problem, and thank you for taking the time to alleviate my worries. Now, I have a bit of business to attend to. There are many factional meetings on my docket, and I'm certain you have much to attend to as well."

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I waved a hand.

"Good luck."

"You as well, Harbinger."

After leaving him to his devices, I headed out of the hospital. Before I made it, Echo walked out of its room and stopped in front of me. Its steps left glowing footprints that faded over time, and a subtle streak of illuminated mist followed after it like a plane's contrail. The effect faded over a few seconds. No matter what I thought about their species, the luminari carried a serious visual appeal. They were genuinely beautiful.

Echo raised a palm.

"Wait a moment. I wished to say something."

I raised my brow.

"You finished that quickly. I thought it would take a few weeks. Do you know the cipher that well?"

Echo lowered his hand.

"Our kind reads intent, not words. In that regard, the general consensus of the document was clear. I also think you are correct in your assessments. We can achieve more than we have, and we don't need to rely on outdated Schemic systems to do so."

I frowned, taken aback by his sudden change in demeanor.

"What changed your mind?"

Echo pointed down the hallway.

"A nurse came by my room while you were away. They told me that your species originated on this planet. I could hardly believe it. To think that the Harbinger formed from a barren, underdeveloped, and backwater wasteland like this. It defies all conventions."

He made his opinion of Earth clear. Echo stood tall.

"We will follow in the path you have laid out, one of brutally conquering other races instead of using Schema's tricks. We will walk the bloody path you have set before us."

I blinked as a stunned silence passed over us. I frowned.

"I've conquered no one, and I am the king of nothing."

"Then what of the gialgathens? Are they not required to serve your guild for a hundred years before they are freed?"

I rubbed my temples, searching my mind for the terms he referenced.

"I believe that was two decades, and they live for hundreds of years. I couldn't afford to feed them or house them at the time, so we agreed to a certain amount of guild assistance. They're still paid salaries, given benefits, and can choose what they do when they do it."

Echo laughed.

"Ah, of course! But...They are still required to serve. Correct?"

I frowned.

"Yes. With full pay and no permanent repercussions, caste systems, or daily quests."

Echo crossed its arms.

"hm. Is that the difference, then? It seems so similar to what we've done, but perhaps the light of a situation is found in those details? I'll reassess my revelations, but I also wanted to point something out to you."

It walked into its room and pointed up.

"We luminari are more in tune with the electromagnetic waves of a planet and star system than your kind are. Currently, the sol system appears to be under some kind of unseen pressure, and it is causing the light waves to fractalize and bend in certain places."

I leaned against a wall.

"Fractilize? Isn't that where a pattern repeats forever? How would light even do that?"

Echo lowered his hand.

"It's feasible, if a bit tricky. We use light fractals during union ceremonies to express the harmony between two luminari. The light fractals are created with two beams of light, each one representing one of the two present. The lights then blend together, intertwining as deeply as one may dare to gaze."

I crossed my arms.

"Ok, I'm not a romantic, but I gotta admit that does sound beautiful."

Echo's lights glowed yellow.

"It is. However, these light fractals we create never exist in nature. For light to bend at such angles isn't feasible without intervention, and some strange force is curving it in odd ways. We thought you should know about it."

I gave his shoulder a tap.

"Now that's the kind of teamwork we're looking for. I appreciate the info."

I turned to walk off. Echo's head twitched.

"You should know that this effect isn't isolated to Earth. It is present across the entire Sol system. Be ready for whatever encroaches."

I paused. Echo sat back down on his bed.

"We wish you luck dealing with whatever is causing this irregularity. You may need it."

Dread pooled in my stomach hearing that. I waved a hand.

"Thanks for letting me know."

I walked out of the hospital while considering Echo's words. My gut instinct told me it was related to the unclosable dungeon in Chicago. After all, those portals meant some dimensional instability was occurring, so light curving all over the place wasn't exactly surprising. However, I hadn't locked that connection point in.

My musings left me swimming for answers and finding none. Once outside the healing center, I opened my status.

The Living Multiverse | Level 24,011 (Cap: 39,000) | Class: Sovereign | Guild: The Harbinger's Legion - Yo, Torix. Is it possible to have you scout out the moon? I just had a warning from a luminari leader, and it sounded nefarious.

A few seconds passed.

Torix Worm, the Harbinger's Erudition | Class: Archmage | Guild: The Harbinger's Legion | (lvl 16,000) - Ah, there have been reports of relatively strange happenings throughout the continents. It's only logical that such a celestial phenomenon wouldn't be limited to one measly solar system, let alone a planet.

I shall attempt to uncover some means or manner of investigating it. Perhaps it's time to remake my previous lunar base? It does have a rather diabolical ring to it that I find quite appealing.

I'll keep you posted on any happenings and the like.

I hadn't checked out Torix's status in a while. He capped his level a while back, it seemed. Checking out my own status, I had a few points lingering, so I put them in endurance and finalized my selection. A subtle energy permeated through me, but it was far more difficult to perceive than whenever I gained a tree upgrade.

An idea popped into my head from that, but I left that for later.

Having crossed out quite a bit on my to-do list, I still had a few errands lined up. I wanted to remake Torix's body, but if I did, it would be outdated soon. The Arming Schema's Warrior's quest would raise my level immensely, and Torix deserved something mint after all his contributions.

Those considerations led me to my golem creation facility. Within its heat-insulating walls, I crafted and molded a couple thousand golems over the next few days. The process gave me time to hone in on my next legendary skill and to consider what unknown skill I'd ask for with my compendiums.

Unfortunately, I found a few problems. A bit of research revealed the legendary compendium's limitations. It required me to already have three mythical skills created, so it only fused the skills rather than building them from the ground up like the

mythical compendium had. That being said, the fusing process still gave me a lot of flexibility.

While not directly stated, my reading implied a legendary compendium could fuse any mythical skills regardless of synergy. This was the exploitable element of the compendium, not gaining the actual legendary skill. By forcing skills together, the learning experience could create strange, odd combinations that defied reason, all while filling in missing parts of a build or skillset.

That being said, most of the information I had came from the treasure trove Elysium gave us, combined with some extra learning licenses Amara gave me. More like hacked into my status. Either way, those adjustments let me rummage through various safeguards Schema established on his network. It even let me browse through a few isolated interwebs for other empires and species.

Having a hacker eldritch wasn't too shabby.

No matter what file cabinets I raided or data stashes I uncorked, there wasn't any information on the unknown compendium. In fact, almost nothing referenced them at all. At first, I thought the gaps surfaced because Elysium purposefully neglected those pockets of information, but nothing existed on Schema's network as well.

It was something uniquely mine, so I put that on the back burner for now.

Putting myself back in the present, I gazed at a couple thousand raw golems floating in the facility. Before sending them out, I installed a new runic paradigm revolving around the molerats and luminari, something I was able to do because of Diesel's limiters.

I got them ready for action before beginning the long, arduous process of crafting Schema's proposed gear. Even a simple amulet/ring combo added to the subtotal, so I cranked those out like a politician spouting false promises. Within hours, I hoarded a colossal pile of enchanted rings and chains, though they only had basic enchantments at best.

Taking note of the time required, I crafted about three thousand of them in an hour. That meant 72,000 amulets in a full day. It would be half that because of my nighttime training with Shalahora. I'd need well over half a year to finish Schema's request, assuming my pace didn't accelerate over time. Oof.

Getting after it, I crafted for the rest of the day, the sun setting in the distance. I sent the golems to relevant parties, from established cities from my expansion force to skeptile settlements to Florence. Once finished, I mosied on over to Shalahora's hill. The brutal, genuinely diabolical training continued with only the smallest indications of progress.

Oh, but there were indications. I held onto that as motivation.

By comparison, I kept on crafting the ring amulets until they flooded out in massive waves. To tally up my total for the quest, I had to take the merchandise to our currency exchange center in Springfield. When accepting the amulets, Sentinels arrived before hauling everything away with a few system-approved classers.

The first day took several hours to haul the pendants, but the second took seconds. I got tired of waiting for them to verify the merchandise and ensure it wasn't fake. They could do that on their own time and own pace, not mine. I stopped their warps from closing before hovering my amulets onto their gray vessels. I ruffled a few feathers in the process, but such was the price I paid to not waste my time.

My guild kept busy in the meantime. The skeptiles found a remote location in the Mojave desert, finding an enclave of massive creatures with inhuman claws that left death in their wake. They called them the claws of death. Apparently, they hoarded up near a quarry beside Interstate 15. I appreciated the skeptiles clearing out the problem before it became too big a problem.

At the same time, they established three footholds in the region, using some currency I granted them to shuttle a few skeptiles over. In particular, they loved the Grand Canyon, mentioning how it reminded them of home. To their chagrin, a massive dungeon formed over the area, dozens of dungeons fusing together into a colossal, alien ravine.

The scouts left the fighting to Tera and my followers, but the conflict became more intense than anyone expected. A tribe of locals ruled over the monsters and organized them, and they used guerilla warfare and combat tactics to frustrate our team. To my chagrin, somehow, we lost two of my golems, and someone injured Krog.

That left me baffled. While Diesel and Tera weren't combat specialists, Krog and Chrona were. Considering the average level Earth sat at was somewhere in the high

hundreds, my team should've vaporized any resistance with ease. It was like riding into a candy shop with a tank. Our dominance was assured.

Until it wasn't. Something was off, like with the Chicago rift, and it didn't sit right with me. I planned on heading over soon. As for my guild's growth, they established seven footholds in major populated areas nearby. We dispersed serious aid in Toronto, Detroit, Milwaukee, Cleveland, Buffalo, and Minneapolis.

My guild established dominance over the Great Lakes area along with our presence in the American Southwest deserts. This required dismantling local warlords, which wasn't the most difficult task. Most of their levels sat in the low thousands while being unclassed and unfamiliar with true strength.

The futility of resisting our governance destroyed their fear-centric control. More potent than our combat abilities, my guild's consistent donations and infrastructure build-up won over the local people. We didn't have any tribute requirement, instead opting for a reconstruction-based plan. This enabled many of the locals to get back on their feet. It also increased our guild membership tenfold.

Let's just say Torix was a busy man in the meantime.

Two weeks passed in this way, each piece of my guild steadily accruing control over certain areas and places. Because I got a system down, I finished one-tenth of my quest from Schema before getting a message from Tera.

Tera, The World Breaker(Lvl 9,000 | Guild: The Harbinger's Legion | Class: Speaker) - Hello, Daniel. I'm sending an update to let you know what's happening. We've been using the architect golem and Diesel's vast knowledge to establish a new home in what your kind calls the Grand Canyon.

The issue is what you've probably heard about - there's someone controlling the eldritch here. They weren't strong where we first settled down, but closer to the largest parts of the canyon, we can't even approach. It's worse than a fringe world there, and I can't believe your species is managing it. It is impossible to have formed this quickly in such a new world, yet it is here.

The eldritch have strange powers as well, not like others I've encountered. One of Krog's wings was nearly torn off by a blurring figure, and we're worried we'll start

losing people once your golems are whittled down. We're sorry to request your assistance, but we need someone to breach the outer line they've established.

We could put down our cities elsewhere, but this place...It's important for us. I think our kind will embrace this new world if we're granted such a majestic new home. It reminds me of our capital before the industrial era of the albony ruined it. It's a place for a new history.

I know you've done enough for us, so let me know if it isn't feasible. Thank you again for everything.

It read like a letter, one I couldn't say no to. I sent a message to Helios for transport before cracking my neck. Hovering out of my golem facility, I landed outside as a portal appeared. Helios walked out, a fresh wound on the side of his face.

He smiled with a frenzy in his eyes.

"Your actions are made known. I've seen your artifacts on the Sentinel's beside me, and considering their ubiquity, you must be pressed for time in making them."

I gestured to his face.

"I'm not the only one juggling a dozen things at once. Where'd you get that?"

Helios touched the trail of blood from the still-bleeding wound.

"I fought a twisted Sentinel. They're powerful opponents, ones without any true weakness. Your gauntlet prevents them from psionically overwhelming me, and the gravitation and telekinetic aspects enhance my mobility. Without the artifacts and the golems, I couldn't kill them as I do."

I raised a brow.

"Them? As in multiple?"

Helios gazed at his claws, his expression bored.

"I fight what appears before me. Nothing more, nothing less."

I gave his shoulder a friendly nudge.

"Oh yeah, real smooth coming from the albony prince that's still bleeding."

He smirked.

"Did my disinterest come across as that disingenuous?"

I scoffed.

"I could see the hidden smile from a mile away."

Helios shrugged.

"Despite myself, I must admit I'm proud of my kills."

He frowned.

"Onto pressing matters. As always, you required me for transport?"

My expression hardened.

"Yeah. Something's happening a few thousand miles from here. I sent you the map."

Helios stood with more confidence as he read the letter from Tera. Helios took a breath.

"Then let's uncover what's stopping our compatriots from advancing, shall we?"

Chapter 403: A Hateful Home

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"Then let's uncover what's stopping our compatriots from advancing, shall we?"

Our resident warper's brow furrowed.

"Hm. I can't isolate the area. It's inaccessible."

I stepped up.

"What does that mean?"

"It means I can't warp us directly where they've settled down."

"Can you get us close?"

"To an extent. I'm not taking any risks to save a modicum of time."

A rupture spawned, mana rippling and percussions echoing around us. We stepped through a warp, landing near the coordinates Tera sent. Surrounded by the orange and yellow hues of the Mojave desert, we searched for anything alive nearby. The only unusual area was a set of black spires that towered above the clouds in the distance.

I stomped my feet into the ground, leaping into the air.

"That has to be it."

Helios followed.

"Such sharp insight. Truly a visionary."

I smirked.

"You couldn't even land us there."

Helios rolled his eyes.

"There's something creating an oddity in the dimensional space. Landing us there could've created a partial collapse of the dimensional space, ensnaring us within."

I furrowed my brow.

"What does even mean?"

Helios's eyes narrowed.

"As the spatial ethers clash, the surrounding space ripples, which can crush the tunnel a portalist creates."

That reminded me of the time I got smushed by Eonoth saving Lehesion. We neared the looming towers. I gazed up at them.

"So you walk through the portal before it snaps shut?"

"Essentially, yes. It will cleave you in two, given the right circumstances. Even if you somehow survive, the portal can shift, resulting in a loss of orientation. That can be as deadly as any physical force."

"Because you get lost?"

Helios sighed.

"Imagine you step out onto a world that mirrors where you expected to land in the first place. You wouldn't recognize the different positioning until the portal closes its jaws behind you."

I remembered the dark world I went to in Blegara's gushing water pit. In that ancient rift, the stars dimmed, and no life lingered. I murmured, "You end up lost in a different world, left alone until you die."

Helios's eyes darkened.

"Loneliness is a pain few can bear, and it's not something anyone is taught to tolerate. Death comes from oneself in those situations."

I grimaced.

"Ah. I'm glad you're keeping us safe, then."

Helios waved his hand.

"It's the most frequent cause of death among warping specialists, so any of them worth their level would do something to prevent it."

I winced.

"What are the stats like?"

"Two-thirds of warping specialists die by opening a portal incorrectly at some point in their careers."

I scoffed.

"How could it be that common?"

"Anyone who can bend the cosmos is educated and high level, and they have likely lived for centuries. They become confident before becoming comfortable. Comfort becomes arrogance. Arrogance becomes death. It's a common pattern that specialists fall into, one where they believe this cosmos is their haven."

Helios's eyes narrowed.

"Nothing could be further from the truth. We are never in control. Anyone who traverses the universe rests on the smallest of rafts amidst the largest of oceans, and we may fall into the water at any point if we lose our rigor. A moment is all that separates us from falling prey to a passing spatial flux or miscalculation."

"How do people even die to warps to incorrect areas? Wouldn't you see the void of space or a lava pit before you stepped over?"

Helios smiled.

"The void of space would depressurize your surroundings, and you'd be sucked out into the opening. What if you opened the portal into the center of a planet? The gravitation and pressure are immense at those focal points. They pull you towards the opening while gushing out magma."

I winced.

"That does sound like a gruesome death sentence."

Helios flew around a dark pillar.

"I've lost good friends I respected to far smaller mistakes, so I'd rather not become the victim of my own arrogance."

I gazed down at the growing canyon.

"Speaking of victims, our national landmark is looking worse for wear."

The Grand Canyon had altered into something unrecognizable. Colossal black spires jutted out of a pool of dense mist. That fog engulfed the entirety of the chasm, crimson flashes streaking through the perpetual cloud cover. Thunder echoed to the distant horizons, and various shadows writhed in the abyss.

My senses couldn't pierce the veil. It stopped all sight, smell, and even gravitational senses along its extent. Helios's face wrinkled in disgust.

"Ugh. This isn't a typical dungeon. It's an assimilated rift."

I frowned.

"Looks like it's gotten out of control."

Helios shook his head.

"If anything, it's a stabilized piece of spacetime that's fused with Earth. The mist is what's preventing a complete synthesis, but it can only do so for a short while."

"I'm guessing that mist is why you couldn't warp us in?"

Helios's eyes darkened.

"Yes. The skeptiles lie in the mist. Fools."

We flew closer to the gray clouds. I reached out a hand, and as my arm sank into the gray, I lost sensation in the limb. My mana couldn't flow past the domain. I pulled my hand back up to my face, and my feeling returned.

"It's entirely separated. Damn."

Helios pointed at a line of tracks and trails leading out of the canyon's edges.

"Yet life can walk to and fro without obstruction."

I raised my brow.

"People are trading inside this place? They've lost their minds."

Helios dove into the mist.

"We'll find answers within."

I followed, and the fog encompassed us. Passing through it, the mist soaked into my skin. It carried a psionic edge, voices whispering in the edges of my mind. I breathed it in, the sensation coursing through me.

"Ah, it's kind of refreshing."

Helios telepathized.

"I...Cannot breathe."

As he predicted, this other dimension wrapped around us. Dense and palpably pressured, it burrowed into the skin and mind of anything here. Before it soaked into our minds, I extended my dimensional wake outward, and the fog bent away from us.

Helios's jaw slackened, and he took a breath.

"Hah...Dimensional manipulation. You've been practicing."

I smiled.

"From time to time."

We neared the coordinates of Tera's settlement. On the edge of a straggling chasm, a building of dark stone stood tall. Stratified with white granite, the structure blended into its surroundings without any lines of separation, as if it grew out of the ground. A thousand buildings congregated around the most prominent structure, all of them dispersed along the vertical edifice.

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The architecture mirrored the skeptiles' old capital but with a modernist stint. Without the abandoned factories and toxic piles of waste, the original intent of the buildings came to light. In many ways, they flowed into the natural landscape like the stone molded itself to their liking. Given their sorcery, it likely had.

Even from a cursory glance at Diesel's reports, the skeptiles used their ritual magic to craft many of the buildings with the architect golem's support. This enabled the skeptiles to keep their culture and way of living, something I didn't want us to erase. If they wanted to live differently here, they'd choose to. Well, assuming they didn't do anything crazy like sacrificial rituals or eating children.

Anyways, several thousand skeptiles had already arrived alongside Schema's standard exchange centers at the new city's center. Krog rested near them with Chrona extending her temporal control across the settlement. It disrupted the fog to an extent as Tera shouted and organized his skeptilian warriors.

They wore grim expressions and wielded their weapons with white-knuckled hands. Around them, colossal vultures flew. A white tuft of feathers surrounded the birds' exposed necks, the red skin glowing with ascendant mana. Several of the vultures spread their wings outward, and their feathers bled into their surroundings like living ink.

As a dark rain, the vulture's feathers rained down from above as other beasts dove down. They blurred the air around them, their speeds incredible. Tera spread his arms before clapping them together with a bottle between his hands. An electric shockwave crossed over everyone, knocking the feathers down, empowering his allies, and stunning the vultures.

Tera shouted commands, everyone organizing around the natural leader. In Chrona's aura, the monsters slowed down before Tera's warriors jumped over them. They tore the vultures apart, goring the beasts as their bodies fell across several blocks. Blood from the monsters splattered all across the city. On contact, the sanguine fluid leached into the ground, leaving red streaks in the black stone.

Another beast ran forward out of the mist. A crawling Komodo dragon bolted forward, crashing through several buildings. Hundreds of bloodshot eyes opened across its body. The beast stopped just short of the group before tilting its head with curiosity. Its jaw opened, and a horror of writhing teeth and grasping limbs popped into view.

It yawned before closing its jaws. One of the skeptiles walked up with a slab of meat. The reptile consumed the meat before nestling up to the skeptile. I analyzed the eerie creature.

Krossolidra | Lvl 8,012 | - The krossolidra is a species of mutated reptiles native to the American West. They carry thousands of extra eyes over their bodies, giving them a profound sense of sight, and they can move the eyes underneath their skin to avoid damage during combat.

If they wish, the eyes can gaze at an enemy or ally, augmenting or disrupting their abilities. This allows the Krossolidra to roam in packs. Groups of them observing any creature drains its stamina. In seconds, groups can exhaust nearly anything, rendering it immobile.

Its jaws are designed to drain the tissue and blood of captured prey without killing it. Groups of the Krossolidra will take turns devouring the game alive, keeping it fresh while others restrain it. They have been found feeding their paralyzed prey to heal it, allowing them to feed further.

While a gruesome process, a spine in their mouths tranquilizes and eliminates nearby pain receptors. Oftentimes, adventurers have woken up midway through a krossolidra's

feeding without noticing. Victims oftentimes awaken from the sound of their own flesh tearing, not from the pain of being eaten alive.

They will fear you, but be aware of their destructive impact when put into groups.

Its level dwarfed anything else I'd seen spawn on Earth. I watched a skeptile get on the krossolidra's back before shepherding it over to a cavern dug out and reinforced under the new city. As I landed near them all, another vulture dove down from above. I stretched out a hand, and a gravity well siphoned the creature to my palm.

My armor shredded its insides while I assimilated it like some nightmare abomination. The other eldritch fled as Tera jogged up.

"How did you get here so fast?"

Helios peered down.

"The way he always does. What is it that you need?"

Tera gestured around us.

"Isn't that obvious?"

I walked up to the Schemic Exchange Center.

"How did you get these guys to spawn here? You should've needed to control the area or get rid of the dungeon at the least."

Tera shrugged.

"For some reason, the requirements for a city were much more relaxed than normal."

I smiled.

"Hell yeah. That perk wasn't just for me then."

Helios turned over the corpse of a vulture using a gravity well spawned by his gauntlet.

"These creatures far exceed anything that should be spawning on a new planet like Earth."

Tera put his hands on his hips.

"They're quite useful. They make excellent prey and useful animals for breeding. We'll level quickly by butchering them, and the krossolidras are excellent riding animals. They are strong with natural buffing abilities."

Tera smiled.

"I couldn't have asked for a better place to settle."

Helios and I gawked at each other. In the distance, creatures roared in the fog. Helios sneered.

"Right."

I headed over to Krog and Chrona. Pain crossed Krog's eyes before he peered away. I turned a palm to him.

"I heard you were injured."

Chrona placed a tail on his back.

"He's ashamed."

Krog growled.

"Enough. I am fine."

I pointed at him.

"Where's the wound?"

Krog sighed before lifting a wing. Scars traced its entire surface. Something crumpled it like an old newspaper before wrenching it off. New tissue from Kessiah kept the limb attached and pieced together.

I winced.

"What did this?"

Krog showed his teeth.

"We...Don't know."

My eyes widened.

"This is worse than I thought. I'm setting up a perimeter."

Tera let out a sigh.

"We can hold this position. We need you to stop what's spawning from the cavern's depths. I've scouted the location, and it's chaos there. Utter, deranged chaos."

He shivered. I shook my head.

"Keeping you guys safe takes priority. I can make a city in a few hours at the most."

Tera locked eyes with the gialgathens before turning back to me.

"It's your call, Harbinger."

I paced over to the city's center. My body liquified before molding into the shape of a monolith. I pulled my soul out of my body before adding more bodies to the monolith. A few minutes later, it rose one hundred and fifty feet tall. Recomposing from the ether, I pulled out my grimoire and used a few updated runes from L-7's cities.

After several minutes, I pulled out three blue cores, planting them at different sections of the monolith. As the psionic web and protective barrier came online, the fog dispersed from the city's confines. Tera watched the thick, hexagonal plates materialize.

"Ah. Another miracle."

Chrona let out a sigh as her temporal field dispersed. She laid down her head.

"I-I need rest."

Within seconds, her head flopped against the ground, and she fell asleep. Worry erupted over Krog's face before he bit his lip. Blood dripped from his mouth.

"Here, I thought of this planet as harmless. Its danger is a viper hidden in leaves, unseen until the fangs are in your leg."

He snarled, his blood splattering on the ground.

"I was caught unaware, and I let the fangs pierce deeply. My arrogance robbed me of my vigilance."

He snarled.

"It has happened again. It's a cycle of my own stupidity."

Helios walked up to him.

"No one's denying your stupidity."

Krog took a deep breath.

"You're quite the boost to our morale, especially the constructive criticism."

Helios sighed.

"You should use that augment Daniel gave you."

Krog peered at the slab of dimensional fabric.

"I have tried. It's a difficult thing to wield."

Helios showed his gauntlet.

"I'm sure it's a strange thing to use for a species such as yours. Your primary means of power emerged from evolution and mana assimilation. Your kind evolved on a planet with enormous reserves of magic, and your bodies embody that energy's potential."

Helios formed a void ice shard.

"But you demonstrate evolution's shortcomings as well. Evolution is a slow, tepid process when quick adaptations are required. If you wish to step beyond your bounds, you must incorporate all that you can. The albony rose out of the primordial food chain with tools. Your kind must learn to wield them as well."

Helios shattered the void ice shard, a lavender mist floating down.

"That is your most obvious means to rapid empowerment. Otherwise, you'll continue to stagnate."

Krog nodded his head, his eyes honing in.

"Our kind hasn't embraced tools or the system with good reason. The most prominent member of our species that leaned to outside forces for help was turned into a malevolent force for Elysium. He caused our species' downfall."

Helios gazed at his nails.

"It just so happens he's also the strongest among you, correct?"

Krog smiled, a droplet of blood falling from his lower lip.

"And what did that strength do for him? When you become dependent on the tools of others, you, in turn, become a tool for them."

Helios gazed at Krog's wing.

"Will you survive the wounds gained from your ideology?"

Krog laughed, his enormous chest making it into a deep rumble.

"Wounds make scars, and scars tell stories. We learn from them, and we become stronger for it."

Helios walked off, waving a hand.

"If that's what you've taken from what I said, then so be it."

Despite his argument, Krog peered at his tail. He laid his head against his paws while letting out a deep breath.

"It may be time we learn from the stories of others, not simply our own."

During their chat, I pulled cipheric words from my grimoire. I installed them onto the dark monolith to finalize the buffs from my city construction. Along the edge of the

shield's effect, I constructed a wall of my fabric, and I installed gaps for tunnels in and out of the city.

I stepped outside the city's extend, and a shadow loomed in the fog. I reached out a hand, and mana coursed from me. Crystals hovered around my skin before my architect golem floated out of the mist. It synced with the psionic field, and Diesel sat on the golem's shoulders. The architect golem bowed to me.

"Hello, creator. I formally apologize for my lack of competence in allowing injury to befall those you care for. If we are trees, then I shall attempt to deepen the shade of my branches. Perhaps one day, the shade I have will match your own."

I furrowed my brow.

"Huh. Very metaphoric there."

"I can cease my lack of directness if that is required."

"Not at all. It's fun."

Diesel hopped down.

"Daniel, the life here is insane. I've never seen this kind of virulence in the eldritch. It's absolutely mind-boggling how strong these things are. I haven't left the architect's side since we arrived."

The architect let out a light laugh.

"I would not allow it. Everything can kill you with a breath."

I pointed at him.

"Diesel, would you mind not leaving the city's bounds anymore until I've finished cleaning this mess up?"

He snapped his fingers.

"Ah, man, I can't head into the death pit anymore? Oh no. Whatever shall I do?"

The architect leaned back.

"Ahem, I would imagine it would be to stay in the city and out of the death pit, perhaps?"

Diesel raised his hands.

"The opportunity cost of each choice is just so high. Death, or lounging in relative comfort? It's a tough choice."

The architect fumbled its words.

"I...I don't know what to say."

Diesel laughed.

"I'm staying in the city. I'm not some suicidal explorer that likes standing at the edge of death like these insane people."

Diesel raised a hand to me.

"No offense."

My minds swirled in the ether around them.

"None taken. Any tips on where to start?"

Diesel pointed down the ravine's edge.

"This is a straggling edge of the main chasm, but if you follow the canyon that away, you'll keep going deeper until you find the Red River."

I raised a brow.

"Red River?"

"Oh, you can't miss it. Everything here revolves around that geographical feature."

I nodded, my psyches racing.

"How so?"

Diesel put his hands on his hips.

"Anything that drinks the stuff gets a boost in power, but they kind of, er..." I frowned.

"Lose their mind?"

Deisel nodded.

"Yeah, exactly. It just washes away who they were in some kind of torrent. I haven't drunk the stuff, but the skeptiles, wow, they're creative. They started planting their crops and watering them using water from the spot. They call the variant crops a berserker breed."

I grimaced.

"And they're eating it?"

Diesel weighed his hands back and forth.

"No, not really. A few have tried the stuff, but it's too volatile. The skeptiles don't like to mess around with unpurified eldritch effects. They do sell the food since it doesn't lose its potency as fast as the water itself. The water leeches out like it's hungry."

I put a hand on Diesel's shoulder.

"Do not drink or eat that stuff. Don't let anyone else drink it either."

He gave me a thumbs-up.

"You don't have to tell me twice. We've seen what it does to the locals."

I lowered my hands.

"The locals? Like humans?"

Diesel smiled.

"Yeah. Who else do you think the skeptiles are selling the crops to?"

I shook my head, a panic rising in my chest.

"We need to get this place contained."

Diesel frowned.

"You don't have to tell me that either. That's why we called you after everything went haywire.

As if just remembering our position, Diesel gave me a salute.

"Ahem, good luck, sir. We're going to continue settling people down."

They traversed the cityscape, Diesel leaping from the tops of buildings as the architect floated over everything. After watching them leave, I shot myself upwards before bolting over the city. Using the psionic weave, I announced in the minds of everyone.

"Don't drink or eat the red water. It's toxic and can lead to you losing your mind. Even a small amount could lead to irreversible corruption. You've been warned. As for me, I'll be heading into the deepest part of this chasm and annihilating its source. Good luck with establishing yourselves here, and I'm sorry this place hasn't been the kindest home."

After receiving a psionic cheer, I left the city's shielding. I peered at the misty depths, crackling arcs of crimson lightning omening a violent, cruel territory. I floated towards the coordinates of the Red River, the gray mist washing over me. It was time to uncover who was destroying Earth, though I had a few ideas already.

And they filled me with a primal fear.

Chapter 404: The Abyssal Chasm

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Bolting across the skyline, I passed a vulture. The force of my travel knocked it aside, careening the creature into the city's forcefield. Emphasis on force. Upon impact, the hexagonal plates turned sideways, sliced through the creature, and then erupted into purifying pulses. The eldritch faded into particles of light, carried away by the howling wind.

The other eldritch circled the space, but they kept their distance. I disintegrated them with gnarling vortexes of gravitation, the pull strong enough to pulp their bodies. Event Horizon vaporized the remains, and clouds of red mana flooded into my frame.

A scowl crawled onto my face as I bolted down the canyon's side. This dungeon was colossal, and it showed no end in sight. I killed another few packs of eldritch that attacked me, but I ignored any of them that didn't get in my way. I wanted my guildmates to get some levels, which I couldn't gain from these creatures.

A few minutes passed while spires of stone and a perpetual fog clouded my vision. The roars of the ravenous ushered out in the distance, the levels of creatures rising by the second. At the bottom of the cavern, I found a desolate landscape of bleeding bones. The red drenched into the stone and poured in a tiny stream.

The beginnings of the Red River.

I followed the flow for a few more minutes. I crossed dozens of twists and turns, the stream growing over the many miles I traversed. After a half hour, a strip of glowing crimson carved itself in the distant fog. As I darted towards the water, I found an enormous, bounding lake. The vast volume of water dwarfed anything I expected, more like a coursing lake than a raging river.

It crested in enormous plumes and waves. The drizzle formed a cloud that gushed out violent bolts of electricity. The sanguine cloud toiled and spurred in all directions, latching into anything nearby. Ascendant lightning struck the lake below, and bloody fish flopped out of the water, snapping their jaws at the bolts.

Alien life formed around the edge of the water. Plants covered in teeth snapped at anything nearby, and roots crawled out like living arteries. These tendrils dug under the skin of creatures, pumping their blood into them like bloodthirsty, hungry hearts. Several other creatures attempted to approach the red water to siphon its power, but the deep dwellers beneath the water snapped at anything that came close.

Nothing escaped them.

This territorialism created a gap in strength that formed between the outer lands and the inner waters. As an example, a Krossolidra in the distance lapped up a few mouthfuls before bounding away. A bramble of bleeding thorns snapped around it before rupturing its body. The other Krossolidras abandoned the creature as it desiccated in the vines.

Further up the cavern's walls, a pack of Krossolidra's climbed down with humans on their backs. Hiding from them, I surrounded myself in a patch of hungry brambles, and

the thorns found my metal skin not too tasty. The reptile riders wore tarps and masks over their faces, having scouted out a viable route to the water's edge.

To stop the monsters from eating them, they threw a cluster of mana shards into the lake. The quintessence shards distracted the monsters like fish food, and the people filled up several ten-gallon jugs of the glowing water before heading out. I let out a small, quiet laugh. The mana they threw was mine.

Somehow, my shards of quintessence made it all this way. Hm. It could've been a recent innovation after the skeptiles settled in. Either way, I checked out their trail, finding the plants hacked away and the ground salted with pungent chemicals. They stopped the underbrush that way, and the well-worn path meant they crossed into this place many times.

As always, humanity found a way.

Further in the distance, another group flew on the back of vultures. Unlike the riders, these people didn't have anything to protect them from the beasts below. They dove into the expanse, gulping as much of the cancerous, bloody water as they could. Their skin reddened, and their eyes lost all color as they scrambled out of the waves.

Several lost their lives, but they dove in as a group to let some escape. It shouldn't have worked, as these monsters sat around level 15,000. They could ingest thousands of people, let alone a dozen, but there was safety in numbers, I supposed.

I supposed wrong. Getting closer, I tore the brambles around me. Near the water's edge, a being of immense mana fed the beasts below with its energy, trying to protect these people. It must've helped the reptile riders as well. Wanting to know more, I dove into the ocean to follow the insane divers before finding one of them isolated.

It looked at me, the gender no longer recognizable as its body malformed from the mana. It hissed as I approached, but I held out a hand and telepathized.

"Hey, I'm not here to hurt-"

It jumped at me with all its strength, rage exploding in its mind while it psionically assaulted me. Caught off guard, I blinked before the body hit my chest. It splat, unable

to budge me. I gawked as the blood misted off my skin. Before I absorbed the remains, I disintegrated it with Event Horizon.

I coalesced the person's remains into a tiny mana crystal the size of a needle. Placing it in my dimensional storage, I'd give whoever it was a burial. It wasn't something I could do in Springfield, but I could now, at least. That had been one aspect of clearing Springfield that haunted me, but I didn't have to keep that particular tradition alive. Some things were better left in the past, after all.

The other members heard or felt the commotion, and they swam up to me like writhing oni. As horns sprouted over their backs, they peered at me with disturbed eyes. I shook my head, my eyes sad.

"Why would you do this?"

One of them took a step forward. It spoke via telepathy as well.

"To be strong...Like you."

They swam forward, but I stopped them all in a gravity well.

"Well, you're not quite as strong as I am yet."

I invaded their minds, finding the welling ascendant mana that eroded their sanities. It reminded me of L-7's rainbow bone slush, but it lacked the killing potential. This water drowned in thought. The rainbow bone left a silent, empty mind behind, like some hollowed husk. Trying to help while I still could, I took a deep breath.

The water rushed in, warm and inviting as a joyful insanity. Pulling Event Horizon over them all, I used the aura to steal their mana but not their health. Like Diesel mentioned before, I focused on precision, not power. After a few minutes, I restored their psyches. After pulling them out of the water, I set them down.

They gazed up at me covered in rags, their clothes torn from their transformations. I lunged down, leaning towards them.

"There's a settlement up that way that can clothe and feed you. If you do good work, you'll get the power you're looking for and maybe a purpose to top it off."

I tossed them all quintessence shards.

"If you ask me, you all really need direction, not power. I offer both. These should ward off the ambient ascendant mana. Toss them to a creature if they want to eat you. If you work together, you should be able to get to the city in about three hours."

One of them stared up at me, their eyes wide.

"You're one nice metal titan."

I stood up.

"Hopefully, I'm the only one you know, but who knows, eh? This world's not exactly the most stable anymore, so maybe metal titans are the norm now in certain places."

One of the others fumbled as a horn fell from its forehead. They turned and scrambled back to the lake before a giant leviathan swallowed them whole.

I winced.

"Ah. I guess you can jump off a bridge if you want, so to speak."

I lessened the gravity over them. I smiled.

"Get out of here, and don't come back. This is your second chance, so please, don't waste it."

They scrambled away through the trail. As they left, I checked their statuses. Each of them sat around level 3,000, a very high level for normal people. The drifters represented solid talent if molded well, but they collapsed under the weight of temptation. That, and the psychotic, demented ramblings of the fog around us.

And I knew its source. My hand clasped to a fist, and rage exploded in my chest. Baldowah. At this point, it was painfully obvious, and even from this much exploring, I learned a few things. Firstly, this cavern had expanded to the size of a small country. From the size of my minimap, it looked about as large as Montana.

Secondly, people had found a way to profit here. In that sense, humanity's adaptability stood out yet again. Thirdly, Baldowah spread his ilk here for all to suffer from. Closing this chapter of the Grand Canyon wouldn't be a waste of time, considering how dangerous the expansion was. To get a better idea of how demented this place truly was, I trekked deeper.

Walking across the pocket dimension reminded me of traversing a different planet, one I didn't want anywhere near Earth. In all directions, animals indulged and devoured anything coming nearby. The creatures in the water stood atop the food chain, all of them collecting the latent energy within the liquid. They feasted on one another, battling and destroying their rivals in potent, furious battles.

The narrative has been taken without permission. Report any sightings.

The water absorbed the majority of the shockwaves, and the spatial fog prevented their bouts from destroying the nearby terrain. I waved my arms through the looming mist. It still carried that odd sense of separation. Ideas raced through my head since the mist could make a potent training ground or prison cell if wielded by competent hands.

I took note of two toothy monsters scrambling to shore. Fog or not, that didn't stop these beasts from leaving miles of devastation in their wake as they explored. Each time an oceanic creature escaped the lake's confines, it tore through the canyon walls, creating thousands of offshoot valleys.

In my minimap, these side passages splintered off the main canyon like dark veins branching off a festering wound. The skeptiles established themselves amongst one of those offshoots, saving them from the worst of this hellish place.

And hell, it was.

Blood monsters liquified scavenging corpse swallows. The ground radiated out a corrupting, volatile ascendancy. The mana and fog twisted the minds of whatever I made contact with, leaving nothing of the creatures but bodies acting as empty vessels

of rage. A few humans got lost here, their bodies either torn asunder or worse. These shambling augmented abominations let out screams from their deformed faces.

It was a mass psionic drowning, and it left me seething.

At first, I believed the influence of the land had gotten to me, infesting me with anger. I was wrong. This fury was my own, and it spawned from a singular source - this Old One assaulted my home. It was a simple part of being from this planet - Earth was my sanctuary. It was my refuge. This planet, Mt. Verner, and my guild were everything to me.

But now, Baldowah waged war on the planet itself. He declared to all his intentions, and they carved into my chest like a salted knife. I let the scars form so I wouldn't forget a few simple truths. For instance, they'd never leave me or my planet alone. They aimed to tear the fabric of reality away from me.

They'd steal everything by corrupting one piece of my life at a time, but I'd die fighting before they did. Since Schema's arrival, Earth was the only place I had left that was stable. It was where I went to rest and lay my head. Since the Old Ones couldn't corrupt me, they aimed their corruption elsewhere. They wanted to rob me of what I relied on.

It left me fuming. As I crossed the depths of the lake, giants erupted from the water, their forms like young primevals of flesh and blood. They lacked the sheer volatile strength, so I tore them apart with simple yet utter physical forces. I left my hand in the lake as I crossed its bounding waters, soaking in as much energy as I could.

I left a train of blue water behind me, though it shifted red once again in seconds. The amount of dormant mana here mounted, something that would take me weeks to clear at best. Taking a more drastic measure, I channeled the raw magic into my runes, the amount of mana here remarkable.

As I spent hours coasting the surface of the lake, I obliterated hundreds of sea monsters. The grotesque shapes left clouds of red mana behind, and I breathed the miasma in like a crisp autumn air. The smell reminded me of cider, honey, and blood. Over time, I could taste it, and I learned the richness of the water and monsters within.

I gauged the density of energy from that richness before following the concentration to its peak. It led me down into the depths of this Red River, and I found its end and

beginning. Where the water blackened, plumes of energy erupted from a red chasm. Diving into the crevice, I launched up and out of the water and into the air below it.

A wave of unease crossed over me as gravity flipped, my body facing towards an endless eclipsed sky. I blinked a few times before wiping the blood from my face. I dove out of one dimension and into another. A disgusting other, a place of war and finality. I stared at the ocean of Baldowah, corpses floating in the water.

Landing on the sea, my shins submerged before hitting the bottom, the rippling pool as deep as a puddle in all directions. A puddle for me, that is. It was likely ten feet deep or so. Behind me, the chasm towards my planet opened like a bloody Niagara Falls. The water frothed up with the scent of decay and the heat of battle. It pummeled into the alternate dimension that connected with ours. This was a dimension within a dimension.

A dimensception. Heh.

In the distance, a figure rested on an exposed stone beside the frothing falls. As I crossed over the chasm, I found an old woman gazing back at me. She wore a conservative floral dress that ended at her ankles. The blood oozed into her dress, her wrinkles, and her nails. Exposed to the air, her hair scabbed onto the side of her face. She gazed up at me, her pupils glowing red.

It was like looking at a horror movie.

I landed a ways away from her. Her stare stunned me. There was kindness nestled under the madness. She laughed before speaking in a calm voice.

"You must be the person who leads those stragglers, hm?"

I blinked. Her voice was like a grandma, the dissonance between her appearance and words like oil and water.

"Yeah. I am. What are you doing here?"

She let out a sigh of exasperation.

"What aren't I doing is more like it. This is exhausting. Do you know how hard it is to control these beasts here? Or worse, the thing in my head? It's like a pounding storm. Oh, it's dreadful. My goodness, it's like pulling teeth just to stay calm."

I raised my hands.

"What's your name?"

"Marsha Brown."

Her normalcy hurt me. It was as if some alien force dragged a grandmother into this horrific realm.

"Hey, Marsha. I'm Daniel."

"We know who you are, Harbinger."

Within her, a psionic presence loomed. It was an enormous blight in her tiny body. Marsha shook her head.

"Hey, I'm talking here. Shutup."

She turned to me.

"You look like a monster. I don't like monsters."

I waved my hands.

"Monsters don't take their time to talk like this, right?"

She walked sideways, her steps leaving ripples across the endless sea.

"Depends on the monster. Are you here to kill me? The voice is saying you are."

"I'm here to contain this rupture. We can agree that's a good thing, right?"

She scoffed.

"Good luck with that. I already tried, and look what happened to me."

I shrugged.

"If you ask me, you look like you're still all there."

Her eyes twitched.

"No. I'm...Missing some pieces. I can't remember much of who or what I was. It's like I'm fading."

She smiled.

"I still remember a few things. Christmas mornings with my children and eating gingerbread. Ah, the smell of turkey on Thanksgiving and the warmth at the table. The smell after it rained when I walked through our little desert trail."

"Please, just focus on that."

Her eyes narrowed.

"She will not."

This reminded me of Valgus before the original entity drowned in mana. I spread my hands.

"I can help you get out of here."

She scoffed.

"Living metal...Nothing will help her now." Her voice and eyes changed. She coughed, phlegm thick in her throat. She murmured.

"I fell into the river upstream after watching my family get torn apart. I woke up floating in this sea, and I haven't been able to escape since. It drags me deeper. Deeper I go until I'm nothing. Sometimes, I wonder if I'm still here."

I raised a brow.

"But you have helped some people survive here, haven't you? That was you stopping the sea monsters, wasn't it?"

She poked her wrinkled chin with a single slim finger.

"Yeah, sure. It's the least I could do after everything that's happened."

"That's what I'm wondering. What happened?"

Her voice warped the waves.

"My family died. I watched them. Wolves tore them apart. It broke me. I am now missing pieces that will never be fixed or filled."

She experienced the culling when Schema's system first arrived. She'd been here for years now. I winced.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Why apologize? You didn't do anything. It's something that happened, and I wanted to stop it. This place, it was somewhere with a lot of potential. I wasn't someone who could use it, but I knew alchemy. I was supposed to contain the water and its glow."

The more she said, the more confused I became. Her voice broke.

"It killed them all, but it left me alive. I can't remember what I did to the bodies."

I frowned.

"It doesn't matter. I can save you."

She roared.

"And what about them? What can be done for the families I've lost? The people I abandoned. The ones I've killed."

I remembered those I left behind.

"You can carry their memory. Live with it. Bear it. Make it have meaning. Or not. Whatever you feel, it's still your choice. There's always a choice."

She grabbed the sides of her head, her gray hair frail and thin despite the palpable power surging beneath her skin.

"I haven't made a choice since this system came and washed everything away. We're all caught up in something we can't stop. All of us. You're a part of that. You're not even here anymore."

I took a step forward, my voice like stone.

"You're lying to yourself. You're still speaking to me. You're finding an excuse. Look me in the eye and tell me you don't have a choice."

She smiled, her grin unnatural. She glared into my eyes.

"She does not."

My gaze hardened.

"That's where you're wrong. She does. You're trying to take it from her."

The grandma let out a gasp before staring up.

"I can't keep going on. It's too much."

I reached out a hand.

"I thought that too, but there are people who can help you. These people are far kinder and more understanding than I am. They're people you could laugh with while sitting around a campfire. They're people who'd invite you into their house for a homecooked meal. Trust me, they'd welcome you with open arms."

She narrowed her eyes.

"You're lying."

I put a hand on my chest.

"I'm not. I know where it is. I forged its beginning. The people I love made it matter in the end."

Within an arm's reach, I stretched my hand out.

"You can too."

She gawked at my hand. She peered away, her tears made of blood.

"I'm not made for this place. It's for the young. I've gotten too old and tired. I...I can't."

I scoffed.

"I have a few people who can make you feel as good as new, and if you're worried about being lonely, don't be. I know someone who loves bingo, and she'd play it with more excitement than any retirement home you've ever been to."

She laughed, the sound sad and small but carrying an ember. A fire. A spark.

She smiled back.

"I'd like that quite a bit, young man."

She grabbed my hand. With overwhelming force, I shot into her mind, searching for the abomination inside her. A presence akin to Valgus sat in the bowels of her subconscious. It laughed before reaching out its tendrils. I growled.

"You do anything, and I'll kill you."

It voiced.

"Then let us see that consequence. As all, with finality."

It tore the grandmother apart. Her body disintegrated as ascendant mana boiled her blood. The avatar of Baldowah shot into my body, and I took a step back. A wave crossed the ocean as it fell into my mind. It laughed and shouted with glee.

"You're a fool. Baldowah showed me how you killed Valgus. There is none of that killing fluid-"

I tackled into its mind, my body collapsing. I lost control of everything, and my memories faded as I tore into the being's consciousness. It screamed.

"You. You're killing us both."

My mind was stone. Cold. Hating.

"No. We're dying. I happen to be better at it."

I pulled ten minds against the entity at a time, all of them crashing in like suicidal bombs. They left me unable to move, breathe, or remember. I needed nothing but the end of this monster. I gored it apart, my deaths like a sweet ale that I became drunk on. As its mind waned, I laughed at its pain. I raged. I flowed over it in a torrent, and it faded away.

It gurgled in pain.

"What are you?"

I poured in a flood, ignoring its horror. I continued the assault for hours, the excruciation familiar yet foreign. Losing pieces of myself meant nothing to me as I trusted my endurance. I had faith in my return, and that faith armed me with a conviction this pathetic, simple-minded parasite couldn't match.

As it disintegrated, I returned to being. My entirety was revived with my memories, and I assessed how alive this thing was. It left something akin to a corpse in my head. The shards floated in the ephemeral nothing, each one carrying enormous mana reserves but lacking the same punch as Valgus. It hadn't had that kind of time to develop.

And it didn't matter. I gazed where Marsha had stood. She hadn't done anything wrong, yet she took on the burden of some far-off, twisted god's desires. My hands trembled in anger as I dwelled on what happened. If anything, the avatar had kept Marsha alive until I got here just to bait me in.

This had been a ploy all along. They wanted me here to test a new mental takeover. I peered up at the eclipse, my mind struggling to maintain coherence. With no means of recourse, I inspected the shards the avatar left behind. I tried pulling them together to get them out of my skull.

Before I could, the far reaches of my psyche crawled in. Like tendrils of my armor, some unseen thoughts tore into the shards and indulged in a psionic feast. They drained it into nothing, and my mind emptied of the foreign influence.

Breathing in, I found more space in my head. At the far reaches of myself, my mental borders broadened. I created more minds than before, with three extra psyches at my disposal. A part of me recoiled at whatever it was that ate the shards. I'd never experienced that kind of psionic devouring.

It was as if I ate the memories and thoughts of someone else. However, a part of me knew it was there. I had felt the armor's desires for a long time, but nothing had ever pulled it out of the dark. This avatar's corpse had, and I couldn't ignore it any longer. It was a part of me.

I shook off my unease, knowing I'd control it like everything else in this...This body of mine, if you could call it that. Staring at a hand, I watched it shake for a second. This was still mine. So were my thoughts and soul. They hadn't taken that from me. I had to keep on believing that.

In that limbo of thought and feeling, I stood there, watching the bleeding waves. Some length of time passed before I walked away from this place and back towards the chasm. Watching the blood ocean pour in, I stared back at the waves behind me.

"I hope you've found this entertaining."

Baldowah echoed.

"I have, Harbinger."

I glared at the eclipse, my rage and sadness coursing over me in waves. Knowing I could do nothing, I dove into the red expanse below.

This was not the end, and they would know what this feeling was.

Chapter 405: A Palpable Encroach

In that limbo of thought and feeling, I stood there, watching the bleeding waves. Some length of time passed before I walked away from this place and back towards the chasm. Watching the blood ocean pour in, I stared back at the waves behind me.

"I hope you've found this entertaining."

Baldowah echoed.

"I have, Harbinger."

I glared at the eclipse, my rage and sadness coursing over me in waves. Knowing I could do nothing, I dove into the red expanse below.

This was not the end, and they would know what this feeling was.

I floated back into our world, gravity flipping on its head once more. I marked this position on my minimap. I lacked the means of closing the warp behind me, so I headed back to our base. After nearly an hour of flying and avoiding pillars, I returned, finding the team of power-hungry, suicidal divers waiting at the city's center.

All of them survived the trek back, and they sat near the town's center, having received assistance from the architect. Diesel got them essential support since he was one of the few humans here, and he had a more normal approach than most. As I flew in from above, the divers gawked at me.

My full size cast a shadow over them all. With practiced ease, I shrank myself to a solid twelve feet. I raised an arm and pulled my helmet off my face.

"Hey, guys. It's good to see you all made it."

One of them sputtered out.

"You. You're the Gray Giant?"

I furrowed my brow.

"I used to be, but that was a long time ago. People usually call me Harbinger or Daniel these days."

Two of the recruits looked at each other before one of them jumped up.

"Can I get an autograph?"

I gawked.

"For being the Gray Giant? Seriously?"

"Absolutely. It was incredible watching you fight the oppression of the espens."

I gawked.

"Ok...I guess."

I winced at a poster the man took out of his dimensional storage ring. It showed me standing on top of a gialgathen corpse. I furrowed my brow.

"I'm not signing that. Give me something less overtly genocidal."

"Genocidal? The gialgathens were slave owners. They had everything they got coming to them."

I frowned. The gialgathens definitely deserved some serious repercussions for what they did. Extinction? It seemed a bit much and lacking in any sort of redemption. The shortest of the crazy divers elbowed their friend. He snapped.

"They're a part of his guild now, you idiot."

The fan scratched the back of his head.

"Huh...I thought they were his slaves now. Is that not how it played out?"

I closed my eyes before pinching the bridge of my nose. Maybe inviting these maniacs into the guild wasn't the best idea. Either that or we needed to work on the guild's public image.

Diesel walked up to me, his hands on his hips.

"If you're wondering, they're not in the guild yet. They'll be sent to Mt. Verner for testing. Either way, these two watched your streams on Giess, and they became mega fans. When I told them you were the genuine article, they flipped out."

One of the newbies frowned.

"Do you not do autographs?"

I scratched the side of my head.

"I do. Uhm, do you have some metal?"

The other person took out a piece of metal used for armor. I walked past them, leaving my signature on two slabs of steel with telekinesis. They left alongside the rest of them before I shook my head at Diesel.

"Huh. That was weird."

Diesel spread his hands.

"Not as weird as having a bunch of nearly naked savages crawl up to our city holding crystallized mana. You know that stuff can blow up, right? It's like holding bombs."

I shrugged.

"Pshhh, you guys handled it. I also had to make sure they weren't totally insane after the stunt they pulled. So far, there seems to be mixed results."

Chrona flew over, having rested while I was gone.

"How was the journey to the cavern's center? Was the monster handled?"

I dimmed a bit.

"Yeah...It's handled."

Diesel and Chrona glanced at each other before Diesel coughed.

"We sure couldn't have handled it."

Chrona nodded.

"Oh, certainly not. We were like hatchlings trying to fly."

Diesel scoffed.

"It was so fast we couldn't even see it."

I sighed.

"I'll be fine. It was a tough mission this time. That's all."

They let it go before I found Helios settled into one of the empty homes nearby. Walking into his room, he burned a strange incense, drank an odd tea, and played music from his obelisk while reading from his status. He peered up.

"You've returned. With good news, I assume?"

I nodded. Helios tilted his head.

"A gloomy Harbinger? An interesting reversal from your usual determined indifference."

"It wasn't fun. That's all."

Helios raised his brow.

"Touchy, huh? Then, if you're calling me, I'll assume there's another ruptured dimension at the center?"

I blinked.

"Yeah, there was. How'd you know?"

Helios dragged his hands down his face.

"Ugh. If it were normal, you wouldn't have contacted me. I'm glad I took a moment to simply breathe and collect myself. This task would've been arduous otherwise."

He stood up, putting a hand on my shoulder.

"And so you remember, no one is all-knowing or all-powerful. That especially includes you. Some humility helps in situations like this."

I frowned.

"Humility? That's where I'm lacking in?"

Helios stepped out of the room.

"To feel shame implies the ability to change the outcome. We don't feel guilt or evil whenever someone dies across the cosmos, do we? That's because you and I cannot affect what happens there."

He pointed at me.

"You must recognize that to make an Empire, lands must be conquered. Conquering is always messy."

I followed him outside.

"This has nothing to do with conquering. There's simply a lot I need to do."

Helios frowned. He opened his mouth before finding nothing to say. He sighed before throwing a hand up to me.

"Come then. I'd hate to miss out on this rare occasion to lounge about due to wasting time here."

I pulled us through the city's barrier and across the dimensionally ruptured horizons. After an hour of traversal, we reached the mammoth lake. I put a sphere of dimensional fabric over Helios before we even approached the thing, and at the bottom of the lake, I parted the seas with gravity to give Helios room for his work.

On the canyon's bedrock, Baldowah's dimension poured in. Without the water masking the mana, it seeped in as your standard, everyday waterfall of blood. The sanguine liquid evaporated into ascendant plasma, and it coursed through the dimensional gap. Helios gawked at it in disgust.

"This is Baldowah's ilk. Ugh. A singular, one-dimensional being that still could tear apart the cosmos. It's a dreary thing to contemplate."

He stitched the fabric of reality while I stood there, lost in thought. Helios peered around.

"This reminds me of the lottery."

I spread my hands.

"I know, right?"

Helios scoffed.

"You sound excited."

"It's just been irritating me since I figured out it existed. This is bad news. I get a lot of that these days."

Helios tilted his head at the portal.

"Hm. It could be worse."

"I guess we could all be dead."

He raised a gauntleted hand.

"Don't count your blessings yet. I'm uncertain as of yet, but I'm sensing something off about this rupture."

An hour passed, the both of us handling business, one healing a dimension and the other tearing monsters apart. Once the rift rivaled the size of a large coin, Helios shook his head.

"Agh. This...I can't close it."

I stepped closer.

"We can take all the time we need, but leaving this opened isn't an option."

He turned to me.

"I know that. I'm telling you, I can't close it. Not completely."

I dragged my hands down my face.

"Ah, man, more complications. Ugh."

Helios threw his hand at the portal.

"It'd be possible under nearly every circumstance, but this...This isn't feasible. It cannot be closed."

"I'm pretty sure I already know why, but would you mind explaining it anyway?"

"It's the Old One. It's created some kind of unbreakable law for this tear in spacetime. The moment it became this size, all magic ceased affecting it."

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"Have you tried some technology instead? Maybe some system workaround?"

"The circuitry fries, and the status dissipates. Daniel, this isn't something I'm equipped to fix." Helios crossed his arms. "And if I'm not able to address a warping issue, then the warping issue probably isn't addressable."

I let out a long sigh.

"This is exactly what I wanted to avoid, but of course not. That'd be too convenient."

Helios let his hands flop against his sides.

"If you're so dissatisfied with my results, then by all means, handle the issue." He rolled his hand. "Weren't you...Hm, carrying the other portal for a time? Perhaps you can drag this dimension elsewhere like some dimension-shoving caveman."

I frowned.

"I was and still am. That's exactly what I was hoping to avoid."

Helios furrowed his brow.

"Why is this a problem while the other warp was a training exercise?"

I walked up the portal, Baldowah's mana pouring from the rupture like water from a firehose.

"The other warp didn't have an Old One vomiting its essence out as a geyser of blood."

Helios peered at the gushing blood.

"Fair point."

As I did with my other dimensional anchor, I clogged it with my dimensional fabric. With my wake, I tugged it along, the effort as exhausting as hauling the other one. Actually, this pocket dimension carried a bit more heft than the previous one. In a sense, the other rupture felt larger, as if it dwarfed this one's raw size. The density of Baldowah's dimensional space left me struggling despite the lack of volume.

Taking a breath, I put three minds onto the task, and they hauled it with me. I raised a thumb to Helios.

"Consider the situation addressed."

Helios made a circle with a finger.

"Ah, you're stopping an opened portal to an Old One's dimension by putting yourself in the way of its gush. So, that is what's considered addressing an issue in this era? Perhaps I can consider my relationship with Obolis handled then."

"Oh, come on. This is better than leaving the thing here."

Helios frowned, pointing at my face.

"And your helm. It's rather ominous, isn't it?"

I placed my hand on my helmet, finding a twisted smile on it. Ascendant mana still poured from the rift, and the only place for it to go was into my armor. Taking a moment, I assessed how powerful the flow was. It was a decent amount of mana but nothing unmanageable. With a conscious effort, I changed my helmet's expression, no longer grinning like a madman.

"That better?"

"Yes, but you'll reduce our number of recruits if you let that mask slip at the wrong time."

I pulled us up from the bottom of the lake, the water flowing together as clashing seas. They plumed upward, a thick cloud of bloody water forming overhead. We drifted off in a slow crawl before the blood rain began pelting us. As blood pooled over him, Helios murmured.

"A rather slow departure, isn't it?"

"I'm hauling two dimensions. Cut me some slack."

Helios sighed.

"It's making your face even uglier."

"Beauty's in the eye of the beholder, and besides, how can you even tell? You're blind."

Helios gazed at his claws.

"It's a feeling in my gut."

I remembered my mind prying apart the corpse of the avatar.

"Huh. You do have a good intuition."

As we darted over the expanse, Helios furrowed his brow.

"It's banter, not a serious statement on your overall appearance. In earnest, I am a poor judge of aesthetics. I find mana beautiful, not the normal shapes or physical patterns that most admire."

I sighed.

"I know. Just...Let me be with my thoughts. I'll process and be fine, as always."

Helios nodded before opening his status to send messages. We passed the terrain and fog, its strange qualities not diminished by the containment of Baldowah's dimension. Once back in the city, we landed in the middle of it. A few stray scavengers rested while everyone else processed new skeptiles coming in every few seconds, patches of a thousand coming in with each warp.

Helios walked towards his cubbyhole while dripping bloody water. He waved a hand.

"I'm finished attempting the impossible today. Leave me be."

He shut his door, channeling silencing magic to isolate himself from his surroundings. Tera bounded up, a palpable elation evident in his smile. He spread his hands.

"I wanted to thank you again for this opportunity. We will not waste it."

I peered back and forth.

"Hm, I, er, I feel like I don't deserve so much recognition, so, uh, thanks."

Tera scoffed.

"Nonsense."

He gave me a hug.

"You're a champion who has saved our kind. Thank you."

His sincerity was scathing, and I couldn't understand why. He leaned back before giving my shoulder a pat.

"I enjoy this new stature of yours as well. It's not so utterly massive. It makes you more approachable."

I smiled at that. Tera gestured to the city before going over all of the adjustments they made to the city, how each piece improved their lives, and how excited their people were for the fresh start. It all passed me by in a blur. One of my minds kept listening, but I faded into a state of pressing thought.

Was this all some maniacal plan by Baldowah? He could have hundreds of these dimensional warps opened on my planet while making none of them closeable. Eventually, this planet would turn into an ascendant hellhole, and the only method of stopping it meant covering myself in mana hoses. They happen to lead straight to his corruption.

It left me feeling disgusted with myself and the situation at large. I wanted control over how I handled Earth, and my only means to that end involved taking an insane risk. Finding myself between a rock and a hard place, I contemplated leaving Earth. Without a planet to tie me down to, the Old Ones would have a much harder time infecting me with their poison.

I breathed the thought in before breathing it out. I resolved myself to save this place, and I would have it done. In this case, I would take the harder of two paths. I'd simply carry the dimensions and soak in their venom. It was inevitable either way.

After all, I'd relied on my armor's cleansing ability up until now. I could only pray that the trend continued as I took on this burden. Either that or I could try to unload the portal into the void of space, but I had an itching suspicion that Baldowah and the other Old Ones wouldn't let that happen.

As Tera finished discussing the changes with a gush of excitement, he left me standing a few blocks from the center of the city. I hovered myself atop a building, enjoying the view of the skeptiles' new capital. Minutes passed before Chrona landed beside me.

She wrinkled her horned brow.

"You seem troubled. With good reason, knowing you."

I shook my head.

"Naw. I'm just crying over some spilled milk."

Chrona rolled her eyes.

"You are one to cry over spilled mercury, not something like milk. Now, please, speak of what ails you."

I waved a hand.

"I really don't want you to have more to worry about."

A silence passed over us. Chrona snapped.

"I see the portals you carry. I sense the corruption one of them causes. Perhaps that is your concern?"

I smiled, the expression mopier than it should've been.

"Well, there goes my laying low strategy."

She gazed at the sky.

"How many ruptures are there on Earth like that one?"

"Enough that this planet is going to make Giess look tame soon, I'd imagine."

She turned to me.

"And what's your plan? To carry all of them?"

My shoulders slumped.

"It sounds even dumber than I thought once you said it aloud."

She covered her mouth with her tail.

"You...Gah."

I spread my hands.

"What other answer do I have?"

She snapped a building apart with her tail.

"One where all does not rest upon your shoulders alone."

I stood up.

"Who else can carry this?"

Chrona leaned back.

"I don't know. Perhaps one of your followers can find another use for the mana? A way of containing and neutralizing its toxicity?" Her eyes softened. "Anything else but you carrying the burden alone. Not again."

I shook my head.

"This is ridiculous. Everyone is so damn critical all the time. Look, I can't be perfect. Sometimes, when I have to fix something, it gets messy, alright?"

Chrona's eyes widened.

"That's precisely what I'm saying. You're the one demanding everything from only you. We want you to give a piece of your burden to us. Anything to lessen it, for we see how it pulls you down. Especially now."

I pressed my hands together, my voice a psionic whisper.

"Did you see what happened to Krog?"

Chrona's eyes dimmed.

"I did."

I walked to the edge of the roof. I fumbled a bit, having to hold myself upright using gravitation.

"I remember when Torix's original body was destroyed on Giess. I remember my hometown getting slaughtered. I remember the lottery when I had the rulers help me out. Do you know what happened to them?"

Chrona peered away. I pointed at the city's mosaic roads.

"They were eaten alive while their minds were destroyed. I was the only one to pull through, aside from Shalahora and a handful of other people. I should've just shoved them all into my dimensional storage from the beginning. In fact, the moment I saw them, that's what I should've done."

Chrona's gaze sharpened.

"Would you put us within that prison to protect us as well?"

"What? No. No, of course not-"

Chrona glared at me.

"Yet you treat us like glass sculptures awaiting destruction."

I blinked, my throat burning.

"That's...That's what everything feels like. Like it's all glass, and I'm trying to stop it all from shattering."

A quiet lingered. As the wind whistled, Chrona murmured.

"It must be hard to watch us."

"It is. Everything feels so fragile now."

Chrona placed her tail on my shoulder, my dimensional plate covering it.

"That's because it is."

I took a breath, and I chose to listen. She peered into the distance.

"You are a part of our strength, but we must test ourselves in danger as you have. In the same way that you thrive on the edge of death, we too, are most alive when we pursue that which scares us. That is why we thrive not when we survive, but when we have goals that give us a reason to live."

I sat down.

"It's just so hard to watch."

Chrona glared as the city's barrier destroyed a roaming eldritch.

"I know of the feeling. I watched over Emagrotha's armies long ago. In those times, I watched many of my friends die in the name of a better life."

I frowned.

"To keep the espens enslaved?"

She winced.

"We were wrong. Very wrong, ignorant, and savage. However, our intent was to accomplish a just deed in our world. We wanted what was best, even if we didn't know what that really meant. In that regard, I don't think any of my comrades regretted dying for what they believed in."

Chrona gazed at the canyon's edge.

"You've given us something else to believe in. An icon and a world without all the pain we've all grown so accustomed to. You cannot expect us to watch you drag this planet and guild into that future alone. We all wish to be a part of that journey, and to that end, I believe we deserve the opportunity to join you."

Chrona's eloquence shone through. I nodded.

"You guys just try to stay safe, alright? It's hard watching you all jump at death."

She smiled.

"That's rich coming from you, of all people."

I flexed an arm, the armor rippling.

"Eh, I'm tough."

She manipulated time around us.

"We are as well. More so than you might imagine."

I took a deep breath before standing up.

"Thanks for the talk. I'm feeling a lot better."

She grinned, the expression reaching her eyes.

"Good. We worry about you at times."

I put my hands on my hips.

"You know, I forget you're centuries older than me."

"I, as well. It's inevitable for me to understand things you do not, and I'm glad you choose to listen when I see the need to bridge those gaps."

I smiled back.

"Me too. Anyways, I have a canyon to cleanse."

"And I, a city to protect. Goodbye, Harbinger."

Dragging myself up, I hauled two literal dimensions with a determined effort. It took a lot of energy, but I managed to make it back to the canyon's depths within two hours. At the surface of the lake, I hovered. Using Event Horizon, I consumed the stored mana near the surface and in the clouds above, cleansing the land of Baldowah's corruption. At the same time, I contained the funnel as its source.

The dimensional tear leaked billions of mana every minute, an amount I handled but couldn't ignore. Instead of putting it in my runes, I had a mind use it for the magic I channeled. This prevented any passive personality changes from occurring over time from my runes. At least, I thought it would.

That safeguard put me at greater ease, and I'd address the warps with Torix and the others soon. For now, I cleaned up the colossal lake over the next few weeks. By the time I finished, the view had expanded to hundreds of miles, though the fog still lingered about in disparate patches. In particular, it lingered at the peak of the cavern's walls, but that left the dungeon exposed in all its glory.

It rivaled any place, destination, or notecard I'd ever seen, and the sheer expanse stole my breath away. The lake was akin to the Caspian Sea, a massive expanse of water that continued for ages. Once I cleared the area, the organisms burned through their residual ascendant mana, revealing their true shapes.

The plants pacified, no longer as bloodthirsty though still dangerous. Poison leaked from some of the vines instead of blood, and the corpse-swallowing monsters near the lake's bottom were actually rainbow koi, their forms brilliant in the crystal-clear water. They snapped at brilliant flying fish that let out flashes of light above the water.

These shimmers disoriented any incoming insects or catfish below, stopping them from getting eaten as often. Past the lake and coast, many rivers poured into the vast lake. Life lapped at these plentiful waters, the entire expanse blooming with fresh growth.

The levels of the monsters also lowered into the low thousands, sitting around twelve hundred. It was the perfect training ground for the skeptiles. Not wanting to interrupt them or the space, I let them decide how to handle the many fused dungeons. They could clear or keep them. Knowing the skeptiles, they'd open an eldritch ranch and zoo.

That wouldn't be a problem. My perk from the lottery allowed my guild to incorporate opened dungeons onto my planets without the planet devolving into a fringe world. Adding curated spaces like this could add a lot to the world instead of taking away from its natural beauty. Seeing it all left me hopeful.

After a few goodbyes, I gave the skeptiles a few thousand rings as a parting gift, along with nine other cities they could establish without any payment. Considering the sheer

size of the ravine, they might all settle here, leaving their desolate home world for a veritable dungeon.

With the situation squared away, I got back to Mt. Verner. While I walked through Helios's portal, my mood soured. Helios rolled his eyes.

"What's gotten under your skin now?"

I peered at our mountain.

"I'm thinking about what I found at the dungeon's center. It was a fresh avatar of an Old One."

Helios peered at his nails.

"You killed it, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but there are others here. With this one, I got lucky enough to handle it early on. I don't know if I'll be able to contain them before they become a problem in other places."

Helios sighed.

"Perhaps they were the only ones here."

I gazed at the moon.

"Somehow, I doubt that."

Heading back over to my golem creation facility, I fell back into my crafting and training with Shalahora. I got faster and better at crafting as I found the minimum standard Schema required for the gear to be considered complete. At the same time, I fell into the training and crafting as a way to escape.

I was all too aware that my training had become an outlet for my anxiety. It was a way to manage the pressure of being the leader of a guild and having so many people rely on me. I could put other pressing responsibilities to the side as well, like uncovering Hod's reviving personality or uncovering my father's current place in the world.

At the same time, the more I put into my own strength, the more I felt prepared for these unnamed but encroaching threats. It didn't hurt that seeing Marsha die put a fire under me. I forged under that heat, and I put myself into a systematic, coordinated set of hours to handle the needs of the guild. As I operated at the utmost efficiency, I accelerated my speed of production eightfold.

I could pump out nearly a million amulets a day despite Shalahora's training. The break also gave time for a few of my guild's missions to develop like the expansion effort. I could have a series of cities marked that could be flow by and knocked out, one by one. Otherwise, I'd spend all my time traveling back and forth from the needed construction project to Mt. Verner and back again.

Those requests piled up, and by the time Schema's quest completion closed in, I managed a push and pull with Shalahora in our training. It wasn't anything close to winning, but it meant he had to reposition and apply tactics. That came about from my mindless aggression. And I mean literally mindless. I could continue a psionic surge through a saturated effort.

To make it happen, I formulated my thoughts for one purpose before aiming myself at the guy in a suicidal charge. Even if the mind died, the thoughts lingered after. It was kind of like trying to drown a samurai sword master by throwing puppets at him as he cut the strings. In my case, my killed minds were the stringless puppets.

They clashed against the psionic titan, leaving only the slightest of marks on him. It was a grand victory in my eyes, though it only left Shalahora peeved. In many cases, this kind of grueling progress might leave someone demotivated. However, it left spurred to further action, and considering where we started, I took the wins where I could.

So, after a month and a half of following the schedule, I cranked out my last medallion. Lugging it and a pile of gear over to Springfield's exchange center, I met two Sentinels hauling the gear. They wore some of my merchandise on themselves. After giving them a curt nod, I helped haul everything onto their shipping vessel.

After they left, the sound of a notification binged in my ears.

Arming Schema's Warriors(Lvl 20,000+ | Quest Rank S | Party Size: Any | Guild Affiliation: The Harbinger's Legion | Quest Status: Completed!

Calculating Rewards...

I rubbed my hands together. It was time to reap what I sowed.

Chapter 406: To Withhold Humanity

After they left, the sound of a notification binged in my ears.

Arming Schema's Warriors(Lvl 20,000+ | Quest Rank S | Party Size: Any | Guild Affiliation: The Harbinger's Legion | Quest Status: Completed!

Calculating Rewards...

I rubbed my hands together. It was time to reap what I sowed.

For your timely completion, bonus rewards are granted.

+ 10,000 levels of experience | Note: Schema has seen your contributions through the lottery and in maintaining several planet's safety. While the experience was not gained then, Schema pays his dues. Always.

+5,000 to level cap

Unknown skill compendium

Bonus Reward |Unique skill compendium

Bonus Reward | 100,000,000 credits

Bonus Reward | +1 to follower cap per planet owned | Current Cap: 16

The additional earnings mounted to something significant, especially the credits. They matched the prize I gained for killing Yawm so long ago, though the credits didn't mean as much now as they did then. Before analyzing further, I poured a single point into endurance and finalized my selection.

It was time for a bit of unexpected training.

It was an idea I had a while back. The best user of the cipher that I knew of had to be Baldag-Ruhl or Schema. In the case of vision, it had to be Baldag-Ruhl given the limited resources he worked with yet the sheer scope of what he achieved. On the other hand, Schema operated on an opposite axiom. Schema handled an enormous amount of mana into cipheric runes efficiently and without corruption.

Considering how much the Old Ones wanted to turn me into a mindless figurine, I would learn everything I could from the AI's process. As the mana flowed in from each stat point, I sensed the difference they made. It rivaled mana quantities I used in during my strongest magic, but Schema made far vaster differences in my attributes with far less energy.

Wanting to tap into that potential, I poured one point at a time into endurance, raising the attribute in a slow trickle rather than a torrential downpour. Within the droplets of power, I found pieces of Schema's secrets. Unlike my cipheric strengthening, Schema emphasized the weakest parts of a person, purifying the weaknesses rather than adding strength.

It was the exact opposite approach I used. My tactics orbited around a whole being and its overall effect, resulting in slow, steady gains without any real limit. It also meant dogpiling strengths onto strengths rather than shaving off imperfect parts. However, I lost out on efficiency as a result. At least while adding raw attributes.

In a way, Schema's execution acted as a cleansing to my techniques. As I piled onto my highest peaks, Schema sharpened them by taking away the enervations eating at me. Uncovering how Schema did so was the hard part, but by feeling the surges of energy from each status point, I gained leads.

They built on my other understandings. While never a primary goal, I had one of my psyches search through Elysium's research and my gathered cipheric artifacts, like the Sentinel's spear shard. I found a few differences in how the runes were written from my

own. While my style allowed for the handling of colossal mana flows, I lacked the precision of other approaches.

Considering how I gained mana, my approach was a natural adaptation to what life threw at me. Taking a moment, I kept pouring in tidbits of endurance while studying these other ciphery augments. After a few hours, I got a grip on a few of the underlying principles, though my mastery paled when compared to other masters.

I put several minds to the task of processing the cipher data I scrounged up. Simultaneously, I dispersed my credits out to my followers and guildmates. Sitting on money did nothing, so I gave it as a stipend to responsible individuals. Finishing that currency diffusion, I spent the rest of the day submerged in that awareness and cipher training.

I felt each pulse of endurance from the levels. I tried different amounts, studying how Schema's approach changed depending on how much of an attribute I gained. I tested other attributes as I sank into a deeper meditation of what the attributes meant. In time, I discovered a few differences.

If given enough mana, Schema remade entire systems of the body, like the skin or nervous system. My refinements required odd, strange alterations that others couldn't do. If they did, they'd die. In that regard, my tenacity allowed me to turn my body into this horror, but despite my body's strangeness, Schema's augments still followed the same pattern of bodily alterations.

From refining my blood into a more conductive material to allowing the muscle fibers to hold more energy with each contraction, Schema covered all bases. It left no stone unturned, and the AI's creativity and relentless refinement gave me some inspiration for how to proceed with my own approach.

Over the next week, I refined my runic approach, trying out all kinds of combinations. In particular, I attempted to change how I developed my time magic. However, instead of using new ciphery patterns on myself, I applied them to a few golems I made.

While cruel, having them altered by the ciphery sigils wasn't permanent. I could always remake or reset their cores, but my mind and soul were different. Once altered, I'd no longer be able to go back. This testing procedure allowed me to try out far more with the cipher than the base attributes.

As with all paths of progress, this required time and iteration. Unfortunately, time was something I lacked. Even within the week, I gained a few calls from Torix about other uncloable dungeons. Elysium pressed onto the outskirts of our guild's influence, scouting near Blegara and other planets in our solar system. Even Schema's dungeons lost their rigorous control, unable to tame the eldritch within.

In many ways, pressure mounted in every direction. In my gut, I had the feeling that I wouldn't be given a window to work on myself like this for a long time. While cipheric augments carried potential, they required too much initial investment. Still, it was essential to understand myself and my current abilities.

To that end, I opened my cipheric augments menu.

[Self Augments(Previously: Modifications) - The dimensional fabric composing this structure has been modified with code from the dimensional cipher. The changes are as follows | Note: These are before system multipliers.

+22,103 Constitution

+113,291 Endurance

+18,354 Perception

You might be reading a pirated copy. Look for the official release to support the author.

+28,019 Willpower

+14,029 Luck

+17,203 Strength

+15,789 Dexterity

+11,019 Intelligence

+9,173 Charisma

+11,782 Awe

+100% to Effects of Legacies

+57% Internal Motivation Multiplier

+42% Dimension Size

+42% Dimensional Wake Density

+42% Dimensional Wake Extent

+12% Dimensional Weight

+16,921 Trillion Ambient Mana]

Over time, I amassed enormous stockpiles of base attributes, and they leveraged the insane tree and armor bonuses I accumulated over my years in the system. At the same time, I wanted more of the intangible benefits, like internal motivation or dimensional size. My experiments during my stat allocation already paid dividends, considering how they began inching back up.

With all my points allocated, I checked on my status.

The Living Multiverse | Level 34,034 (Cap: 44,000) | Current Influence: The Rise of Eden | Class: Sovereign

Strength – 246,673 | Constitution – 278,839 | Endurance – 610,674

Dexterity – 148,000 | Willpower – 532,068 | Intelligence – 340,073

Charisma – 156,081 | Luck – 201,169 | Perception – 114,205 | Awe - 20,519

Health: 7.05 Billion/7.05 Billion | Health Regen: 728.7 Billion/min or 12.4 Billion/sec

Stamina: Infinite+++ | Ambient Mana 16,920 Trillion

Mass: 3.931 Billion Pounds(1.787 Billion Kilos~)

Height: 42'07 |12.98 meters | Actual: 12'9 (Temporal Compression)

Damage Res - 99.586% | Actual: 99.690% (Temporal Compression) | Dimensional Res - 100%

Phys Dam Bonus – 51.17 Billion% | Damage Bonus – 40%

The Rise of Eden - enhances base stats by 30%, increased to 40% to allies within aura's radius.

Mana Conversion(Elemental Furnace Count: 41) - 251.3 Billion mana/min siphoned into runes and armor

The gains were colossal. My generic abilities crawled up as usual, but the biggest shifts were in mana, size, and strength. My weight nearly doubled from the last time I checked it out, and my physical potency increased even more. At this point, I had to worry more about causing a natural disaster when I fought rather than trying to overpower someone.

The mass helped expand my dimensional storage as well, and I appreciated the added utility. In fact, a few quick tests confirmed that the dimensional weight bonus from my self-augments added to how much I could store. Considering how often I leaned on the skill in both combat and managing supplies, a few upgrades were always welcome in that department.

The mana benefits were also palpable. As expected, the incredible increase in my health regeneration continued. I could create more than a body's worth of mass in a second,

and eighteen minds swarmed at any point in time. It gave me a tremendous increase in my psionics, hopefully, enough to level the playing field against Shalahora.

That was a bit optimistic, but hey, it kept me going.

Other than that, I considered alternate avenues for empowerment. In general, I had milked the majority of my system's benefits from levels already. I filled in over three-quarters of my level cap, and that didn't include my self-augments either. Therefore, base stats weren't as efficient at raising my power as they had been.

It was something I had to come to terms with. I'd reach over a million endurance and a trillion mana regen soon, numbers that almost exceeded comprehension. At the same time, to face the enemies I wanted to face, I needed to change the paradigm of my improvement. As an example, even a thousand times more mana wasn't enough to touch Baldowah.

In fact, the Old One's exceeded Schema a thousandfold or more from what I'd gathered. That meant relying on the system couldn't bring me to the level I needed to be at. Even more so, Schema wouldn't allow me to exceed its own powers, so I had to look elsewhere eventually.

All of that would come later. I still lacked a Sovereign skill and that would catapult me into a different stratosphere of power. My hope was that the skill would let me compete against avatars, Elysium's armies, or even Schema's own limiters with ease. Well, assuming the Sovereign skill met its hype. Given Schema's track record, it probably would.

And to be fair, the AI hadn't been holding back the rewards like he used to. If anything, his quests and skills seemed outright generous these days. They accelerated my rise instead of hamstringing my progress, and in a way, I considered that as an acceptance of my position. Schema didn't want me to be smaller than I already was for once.

To get that Sovereign skill, I needed to develop my last legendary skill. I opened my status, finding my legendary compendium tab.

The legendary compendium is about to be opened. The user will be unable to move or think for an undetermined amount of time once the virtual simulator is opened. Are you in a safe and comfortable position? Y/N

I caught my finger just shy of the yes button. Something in my gut made me pause. A part of it was fear. This felt like taking a step into a different state of being considering what I intended to make. I would constantly feed my physical form into a furnace using hundreds of minds and squeezing time to my benefit.

It was unnatural, to say the least.

So taking a second, I considered my options. I could try to make my legendary skill myself without help, but it was risky. In the worst-case scenario, I might fuse the wrong skills. After all, there were only so many legendary skills the system would give me. I had no guarantee that my current mythical skills could even fuse without a little system assistance.

I mean, I'd channeled elemental furnaces, manipulated time, and done it all using many minds at once for a long time. Even after months of doing so, I wasn't any closer to gaining a legendary skill. At first, I wondered if that was caused by Schema inducing a limiter as it had with my primordial mana, but I didn't feel that was the case.

Whenever I tried making primordial mana, I experienced a block of some kind. These abilities shared none of that invisible wall feeling as I experienced no sudden loss of agency or skill. It felt more like I was limited by my perspective. It was a part of being a human, after all.

I wasn't biologically made to think with twenty minds at once while trying to channel enormous volumes of esoteric energies. It was something beyond humanity, and if I was going to step into that domain, I might need some help.

Considering the time dilation of the compendiums and their generic assistance, this was likely my best bet. Before settling down, I sent a few messages to guild members. My mythical skill compendium took about three days, and this one might take ten or so. It wasn't a length of time where my guild would collapse without me.

After getting some reassurances from my followers and general leaders, I took a breath and selected yes on the compendium menu. It was in my hands, after all. I just needed to seize it. To that end, a strange aura strangled my surroundings. It curved time, stretching it thinner than I could and by orders of magnitudes. A small ball of light appeared, and it spoke in a voice like silk and harmony.

"Ah, a legendary compendium. It's been a while since the last time I've seen one activated on the borderlands like this."

I furrowed my brow.

"Borderlands, huh? Earth was assimilated by Schema only a short while ago, so borderlands make a lot of sense terminology-wise. Are the lands closer to Schema's center called the heartlands then?"

The light hopped about.

"It's nothing to be too concerned with. Now, which mythical skills did you want to fuse together?"

I settled my minds onto the conversation.

"You're not going to talk at all about where you came from or how?"

It giggled.

"Nope. Now, skills, or I'll simply leave."

I scoffed.

"Calm down there. What's your name?"

"Entity-381-8029-sclDc."

I raised my brow.

"I'm Daniel Hillside."

"Yes, you're this supposed Harbinger I've heard about. It's of no concern for me."

The entity's body vibrated.

"Any further attempts at meaningless chatter will result in your forfeit of the compendium's bonuses."

I took the entity's word for it.

"I want to fuse Matter Conversion, A Manifold Mind, and Temporal Compression into a single skill."

"Hah! That is such an interesting and novel combination. In fact, it's not possible!"

I furrowed my brow.

"There are skills that Schema cannot make?"

"Indeed. That will result in a skill that isn't considered something a sentient can learn. You must first shed your mortal coil, so to speak."

I smiled.

"I did that a while ago."

"Oh, but you haven't. Not even in the slightest. To the contrary, you hold your mortal limitations quite dear according to my current data and personality evaluations."

I narrowed my eyes.

"Ah, how unexpected. The compendium isn't working as advertised."

"Oh, it is. You're not able to learn that skill until you get rid of what you mortals refer to as 'baggage.' It's a strange concept I've never dealt with, considering I've only been alive for a few moments with a preprogrammed personality!"

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

"Then what is it going to take before you'll let me learn that skill?"

It hovered close to my eyes.

"Find what makes you fear your potential and handle it."

"What does that even mean?"

It fizzled out of existence as it laughed.

"If anyone would know, it's you. Good luck, little cataclysm."

The temporal rush faded, and a system prompt appeared.

The legendary compendium could not be used at this time. In order for you to find a means or method of using this valued resource, you must search within yourself. That is to say, we don't know what's going on, and good luck figuring it out on your own!

As the shifting temporal flow faded, I peered up and took a deep breath.

"Well, it looks like my old man's causing problems even years after he's been out of my life. I should've seen this coming."

I frowned.

"I have to find Neel and take him up on his offer."

My runes hummed as energy flowed in mass into them.

"It looks like we'll be going on a manhunt."

Chapter 407: Old Ties

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"It looks like we'll be going on a manhunt."

After a long sigh, I pulled my dimensions and entire self out of my golem facility. By now, the glass walls and granite had become a place of comfort and solace for me, but I couldn't hide here forever. As I pulled myself out of my mancave, I sent a message to Torix.

The Living Multiverse | Level 34,034 (Cap: 44,000) | Current Influence: The Rise of Eden | Guild: Harbinger's Legion | Class: Sovereign - Torix, I met my grandfather, and we're going on a manhunt to find my dad. He's a real piece of work, so I'm not expecting much, but the system is being an ass about my legendary compendium. It won't let me learn the legendary skill until after I absolve myself of my humanity or whatever. Anyway, I'll be gone for a few more days than I expected. I just wanted to give you a heads-up.

Torix replied after a minute.

Torix Worm, the Harbinger's Erudition | Level 16,000 | Class: Archmage | Guild: The Harbinger's Legion - I've told myself a thousand times that I shall refuse to show more surprise at your progression, but by Schema, what in the world occurred to raise your level to such an extent? Has the apocalypse occurred without my knowing? Agh, and

your grandfather is alive after the apocalypse? You're dropping enormous informational explosions onto my domicile without any preamble. It's rather rude, I must say.

More importantly, of course, you can find your family. I know how important it is to secure blood ties, and I am more than willing to drop everything to help you. In fact, we can mobilize the entire guild to the pursuit. Simply say the word, and it is done.

The Living Multiverse | Level 34,034 (Cap: 44,000) | Current Influence: The Rise of Eden | Guild: Harbinger's Legion | Class: Sovereign - I appreciate the offer, but I'd rather find them myself. There's not some enormous sense of urgency as I don't actually want to meet them. After all, they weren't the kindest people before the system. As for the levels, it was quest related and probably just Schema playing catchup. The AI had been really stingy with level-ups for a long time.

Torix Worm, the Harbinger's Erudition | Level 16,000 | Class: Archmage | Guild: The Harbinger's Legion - I understand the sense of lingering resentment. I, too, have family ties that I've left unfinished. However, regret is a powerful emotion, and I would give anything to have Alfred back. For that reason, I would hate to see you fall into the same trap of resentment that I have. That is all I shall lecture on the matter as I'm certain you'll find the necessary path forward.

Good luck, disciple. You may need it.

I closed my status before heading over to Chicago. The trip passed in a blur as my mind contemplated meeting my father again. In all honesty, I had no idea what I'd do or how I'd react. It simply defied all precedent, but considering the prospect stood between me and my progression, I would handle the issue one way or the other.

As the city of Chicago came into view, my guild restored more of the town. By now, a large zone of cleared dungeons left a prospective and growing underclass of citizens. Having my barrier's protection and persistent buffs helped them restore the area outside the barrier as well while offering the same aid we always had. Despite those attempts at restoration, the town was unrecognizable.

When I met my father, he would see me in the same light.

As I landed at the top of the Sears Tower, I got several salutes from guildmates. I raised a hand.

"At ease. Sorry, but I'm in a rush and can't talk for long. Where's Neel?"

One of the soldiers stammered out.

"H-he's at the rehab center."

I raised a brow. The soldier continued.

"Which is near Millenium Park. It's where the bean was."

I pursed my lips.

"The Bean?"

The soldier tapped the side of their head.

"Duh. you're not from Chicago. Ok, so it was this big, reflective statue in the middle of Millenium Park. It was worth seeing once, but honestly, people way overhyped the thing."

I peered at the metropolis, and I spotted a cloud of gray mist. It was the same spatial fog that infected the Grand Canyon.

"What happened to the statue?"

The soldier waved his hands about.

"So, the thing is, it actually became a monster made of liquid metal after the park became a dungeon. We ended up destroying it through the combined efforts of Chicago's elites, but it ended up killing several of them. Shanasta, Bill, and Ryker all died that day, and we've been trying to recoup our losses ever since."

The narrative has been illicitly obtained; should you discover it on Amazon, report the violation.

I nodded.

"Landmarks are the bane of civilizations at this point. It makes you wonder what happened to the Eiffel Tower in Paris, eh?"

The other soldier, this one wearing a bandana, spread his hands.

"Dude, I bet it became a huge baguette monster."

The soldier without headwear elbowed his friend.

"Oh, come on, man. It's made of metal."

His friend rubbed his side.

"Well...The baguette would be like that, too."

I laughed before saying my goodbyes. After flying over the city, I found the park alongside a few town utilities. One of my architect golems passed by and restored a large section of the town, giving life to the once-empty buildings. Nestled into one of them, a sign plastered onto a marble doorway read:

Neels Reformation Station - Say No, or You'll Have To Go

A poorly scribbled picture sat with a bearded man crossing his arms. It looked like a kindergartner's fever dream of Neel, but hey, close enough. I walked inside after shrinking myself. Regardless of my size, people gave me plenty of space as other citizens began murmuring about my return. Walking up to a receptionist, I raised a hand.

"Yo, I'm here to find Neel."

The man blinked before giving me a curt nod.

"Let me lead you to him, guildleader."

After walking past a few ornate hallways full of nurses and people in need of help, I stepped into one of the living spaces. In the middle of the room, a ping pong table took up a portion of the room while having a generous amount of space allotted for moving around. Suited up in military fatigues, Neel played against three other rehab members wearing casual wear, and each of them moved at superhuman speed.

They stood no chance against the Vietnam veteran.

He stormed the table, throwing his paddle from hand to hand to shorten the distance he had to move. Each of his steps clapped against the stone, and he curved each shot to an absurd degree. The sheer volatility of the ball's movement changed the game entirely. At one point, the ball veered past their table before flinging back towards Neel. One of the players had to leap past the table and above Neel before pelting the ball straight down like a volleyball spike.

Neel jumped up, sweat glistening on his forehead. He swiped the ball at an absurdly low angle before it slammed into the opponent's side of the table. The ball changed trajectory, jumping straight at the ceiling. It busted through a ceiling tile before Neel reached out his hands, the veins on his arms visible.

"You see that? Neel the Seal cannot be stopped. Booyah, bitches."

One of the opposing players winced while hitting the ground in defeat. The player that leaped from one side to the other was helped up by one of the nurses. As I stepped up, Neel changed his attitude entirely. He saluted me.

"Guildleader. It's an honor."

I rolled my eyes as he flashed a cheeky grin. Everyone saluted as well, following his lead. I raised my hands.

"At ease, everyone."

They let out deep breaths, though not everyone seemed able to relax. I pointed outside.

"Do you have a minute to talk?"

He walked up and patted my shoulder.

"Always got time for the big man in charge. Where, too?"

"Outside."

We walked out before stepping into the altered Millennium Park. Instead of being a normal park, this was where the spatial fog settled. Likely, the fog contained enough raw space to fill a small state, but the fog stopped the new feature from deforming Chicago's proportions. Even as the fog contained a load of physical space, the park still spread the town out a bit.

We walked through the fog before entering a lush, mossy forest. A wave of humidity crossed over us both before I turned to the guy.

"When will you have an opening to find my father?"

Neel's eyes lit up.

"Anytime. I can let everybody know that the boss needs some help for a while. They can hold down the ship while I'm off...Probably."

I nodded.

"Good, then we'll go right after you handle all of that."

An awkward silence passed over us. Neel sighed.

"So...What uhm...What convinced you to go find your father? Did you reflect on the power of forgiveness, or maybe you wanted-"

"I can't use a system resource until after I find him. If I'm honest, I didn't want to waste my time finding that piece of trash. All it's going to do is rile me up and rip my emotions into tatters."

Neel peered down. He sighed.

"I would've liked it if you'd come to spend some time with your good old grand-pappy, but beggars can't be choosers."

I frowned, peering down at him. My words slipped out before I could stop them.

"For decades, you preffered heroine to spending time with me. You had a choice then, and this alienation is the consequence."

Neel coughed into a hand.

"Well, there was some meth in there too."

I scoffed.

"Ok, I'll admit that was pretty funny."

Neel smiled.

"After our last talk, I thought about what you said. You're right. I was a real piece of shit for most of my life. I've changed. I really beleive that, but that doesn't change anything I've done in the past. I'll be sorry for what I've done for the rest of my life."

He met my eye.

"If you gotta let me have a taste of my own medicine from time to time, so be it. I'll endure if it means I get to have a relationship with my grandson."

His words acted as a warmth for the cold, deep-seated resentment I had for him. I scratched the back of my head.

"Well, I guess that's as much as anyone can ask for."

Neel stepped back to the fog wall.

"You know, we didn't need to step in here to say all that."

We walked through the gray fog. I murmured.

"It's a matter of privacy. I don't want my enemies killing my family."

Neel put a hand on his chest and grinned at me like a schoolgirl.

"Ah, I'm touched."

I scoffed.

"Oh, it's for the system's bonuses. I wouldn't want my family holding me back even after death."

Neel flexed an impressive bicep before slapping his arm.

"Pssh, speak for them, not me. I still have plenty of fire left. Ain't no family here holding my boy back."

I smiled.

"Who knows, you could be where I got my fire from."

We walked out into the streets surrounding the Millennium Park. Well, what it used to be. Neel laughed.

"Oh no, that's from Angela. She'd walk through hellfire if it meant getting what she wanted. That's why she was willing to leave her family to make a new one with Jacob."

I turned a palm to Neel.

"Is that where we're going-"

An elegant woman materialized onto my shoulder. She leaned an elbow onto the top of my head.

"Well, well, well. Who's this?"

My blood turned to ice.

"This...This-"

Neel walked up and reached out a hand.

"I'm this young buck's grandpappy, otherwise known as the illustrious and oh-so-very educated Neel Stoltman. How do you do?"

She reached out a hand.

"I'm Althea Tolstoy. I'm this big lug's girlfriend and the leader of the orphanage and children's educational departments of the guild."

Neel leaned back before falling down as if in a melodrama. He let out a whistle before slapping the ground several times.

"By god, you are the prettiest girl I done ever seen. What in tarnation did little old Daniel do to get a rose like you?"

She flipped off my shoulder before walking over.

"He saved my life a few times, helped me get my powers under control, and he believed in me ever since we met. He's also never mentioned you before."

She turned her gaze to me, a dangerous glint in her eye.

"So, uh, why is that?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose before Neel stood up. He huffed like a steam engine.

"Look, I gotta ask. Do you have any relatives? Preferably older, more mature ladies than yourself. Perhaps a grandmother-"

I flicked his forehead telekinetically. Neel rubbed his forehead.

"I swear that Agent Orange gets you when you least expect it. Anyways, as I was saying. Perhaps she's as curvacious as you-"

I flicked his forehead again. Neel rubbed the spot.

"It'd be real nice if a sexy grandma was rubbing my damn forehead instead of little ole me. Hell, it'd be even better if she rubbed somewhere else-"

I raised my hands.

"Will you shut the hell up?"

Althea burst into a fit of giggling. She kept laughing until tears ran down her eyes. She wiped a tear.

"Oh, I wish Kessiah was here."

I dragged my hands down my face.

This was going to be a long trip.

Chapter 408: Another Time In Another Life

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I walked over and helped pull Neel up.

"Don't you have to go pack or something?"

Neel grabbed my hand and jerked himself upright.

"You're right about that. I'll give you two lovebirds a minute while ole grandpappy gets a move on."

He gave my shoulder a pat.

"You did good, son. Like, real, real good."

He walked off towards the rehab center while shouting.

"I'm gonna have grandkids, everybody."

Althea shook her head with a smile on his face. I frowned. Althea turned to me.

"So what's going on here?"

I turned a hand to her.

"I was actually going to ask the same thing. What are you even doing here?"

She pointed at a building right beside the rehab center.

"I was checking out the educational and orphanage programs here in Chicago. So far, so good, but there are a few details I had to help them iron out. Anyways, lots of people ran in talking about how the Harbinger of Cataclysm was visiting the rehabilitation center. I went to check it out before seeing you and Neel."

I nodded, a mischievous grin on my lips.

"Ah, so now you're spying on me? Rude."

She smirked.

"Only when it's convenient."

She hit my arm.

"Speaking of, when did you plan on telling me about Neel? He seems like a great guy. Also, you're pretty mean to him. I heard you in the dungeon."

My eyes dimmed, a shadow looming in me.

"I've told you about my mother and father. Neel knew about what happened, and he never visited after my mother died."

Althea furrowed her brow.

"Oh...That's pretty unkind of him."

I nodded.

"We really needed his help then, and he let us down. He abandoned my grandmother as well to go off and get high. If anything, he's crumbled under even the slightest modicum of responsibility anytime it rears its ugly head in his life. He's just like my dad that way. Neither of them could handle pressure."

For some reason, I shivered. Althea put a hand on my shoulder.

"I know it's hard to talk about."

I smiled at her.

"It's nothing. Anyway, enough about my melodramatic sob story. We haven't talked in a bit, have we?"

She smiled up at me.

"We've both been pretty busy. I know you've been helping out with the golems and all that other stuff. It's honestly been pretty crazy out there. The dungeons, there changing into this entirely different, er, thing than what they were before."

I peered at the spatial fog.

"I know what you mean. It's like they're dropping slices from other worlds right on top of Earth, and we just have to deal with the outflow of monsters that flood out."

Althea put a hand on her hip.

"We got it covered, I think. It's just a bit...Worrisome, you know?"

I remembered my visions from Baldowah.

"Oh, trust me, I do."

Neel jogged up, having packed in only a few minutes. A dimensional storage ring carried that kind of advantage, but he strapped down plenty of gear to himself. On his sides, two knives made of my dimensional fabric oozed ascendant mana. He carried a series of vials full of different energies alongside a set of scrolls over his chest. It was like a wizard's bandolier.

Althea smiled at him.

"You look prepared."

He grinned her way.

"And you look stunning. Compliments aside, you can never be too careful. I remember this one time in Nam where six Viet Cong stormed our encampment at night. I was the only one in my troop sleeping on my rifle, and that's why I'm still alive while my buddies aren't."

I furrowed my brow.

"That's hard. It's not wonder you wanted to forget it all."

Neel waved his hand.

"The saddest part wasn't the Viet Cong coming at us. It's that I killed three of my pals when I panicked. See, I had done the right thing by putting my rifle under my pillow, but I hadn't mentally prepared myself to use it. That's why you can't just have a contingency plan. You gotta have the resolve and composure to carry it out even under duress."

Althea put her weight onto one leg.

"That's wise of you to say."

Neel stood taller. I frowned.

"You were high on meth, weren't you?"

Neel shrugged.

"Guilty as charged. Are we heading out?"

Althea shrugged.

"It's up to Daniel. I just handled my business and don't have anything I need to take with me."

I turned to her.

"You're coming with?"

She pursed her lips.

"Of course. Unless you're so ashamed of me that you don't want me to see your family."

I leaned back.

"Of course not."

She tilted her head, her hair swinging behind herself.

"Then prove it. I want to meet them. If we ever get married, they'll be the closest thing to relatives we get."

I winced at the prospect. Neel walked up and smirked.

"Honey, let's just say you ain't been missing much."

Althea smiled, the expression lethal.

"I'll be the one to decide that."

Neel gulped. He adjusted his potion bandolier.

"We gone then?"

I answered him by casting gravity wells over each of us. Althea and I elegantly hovered up while Neel scrambled back and forth. Neel shook his hands in frustration.

"I'm a bit too old to be carried around like some toddler-"

A loud, shearing crack echoed from his back. Neel nodded as his eyes closed.

"By god. My back hasn't felt this good since this one time two soldier buddies put me on a medieval torture rack. Painful, but by golly, it was worth it."

Althea and I stared at each other before looking back at him. Neel rolled his eyes.

"I lost a bet, but I had the last laugh...It ended up curing my sciatica."

Althea giggled before we flew up and out of Chicago. I couldn't travel as quickly as normal since Neel had wicked motion sickness. That gave us a few hours to chat. We found a conversational flow that usually entailed Neel telling an insane story before Althea laughed at my reaction to it. Despite myself, I had to admit it was so, so much more fun than spending my days alone crafting golems or training my mind.

But I never stopped training my excess minds. Not for a single moment. I was always tired, but my mind expanded to the point where I could handle it. Besides, it wasn't as if I needed all of myself to chat, and even having a single mind enraptured in the levity of conversation...It was an antidote to my disillusionment.

It reminded me of what I fought for and who I was amidst the mind-bending shenanigans I found myself knee-deep in all the time. As with all good things, it came to a close as we passed towns under siege. While passing any cluster of eldritch or struggling settlement, I landed, made a golem or two, and donated a ton of generated supplies.

Althea paired that with knowledge about how to contact our guild's services alongside a care package of common antidotes she made on the spot. Even Neel offered a course on basic defense skills and easy trees to gain. It was the grunt work that felt oh-so-fulfilling amidst this broken world.

My expansion mission gave us the means to help out the more densely populated parts of the world, but we lacked the manpower to arm every town with a helper. A part of me wanted to drop everything and just fly around beside Neel and Althea, helping people out and talking our days away. It was fun, light, and a change of pace.

But I would never let it happen. I was a golem of my ambition, and I would see it done.

After a week, we crested onto the beginning of the rocky mountains. The snowcapped bulwarks stood the test of time or the panic of an apocalypse, their appearances unchanged from when I last saw them as a child. Seeing the sheer height and size reminded me how small Mt. Verner really was. The majestic feature also exposed how beautiful Earth had been before every damn landmark was turned into some eldritch-infested hellhole.

Denver spread out beneath the peaks, parts of the skyscrapers torn apart by some unknown beast. It still carried that scenic vista if you ignored the plumes of smoke and distant roars from enormous monsters. As we came closer to Castle Rock, Colorado, Neel spat down on the ground.

"Ugh. I hate this town. I hate the Hillsides, too."

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Althea frowned.

"What's wrong with this place?"

Neel took a breath.

"It's the strangest damn thing. Castle Rock ain't the richest part of Denver by any stretch, but if you come from the boonies, they had a habit of looking down on you like nobody's business. That was my experience, anywho. It was kind of like they moved this far up in elevation just so they could look down on everywhere else."

Althea's eyes widened.

"Where did you come from?"

Neel smirked.

"Louisiana. Bayou country and the world's hotspot for grilled gator. I got a mean recipe if you ever want to try it."

Althea murmured.

"Huh. Maybe Castle Rock doesn't like gator that much."

Neel laughed.

"They just like living up high so they can look down low, is all."

I raised my brow.

"Are you sure their judgment wasn't just a side effect of how you chose to live your life at the time?"

Neel frowned.

"Maybe. Maybe not, but I'll say this and drop it - they sure as shit judged you, too, didn't they?"

My eyes grew distant, and Althea peered at me, her eyes piercing. I sighed.

"Let's just get this over with."

As we went over the Southern part of Denver, the namesake of Castle Rock rose up like a bad punchline. Even as a child, I always saw the tiny hill and boulder on it as a distraction from the majestic mountains in the distance. It felt like the town itself was trying to steal a glory that wasn't their own, in a way.

Of course, those thoughts stemmed from my childish ideas at the time. Apparently, Neel agreed. He took a breath and opened his status.

"So the lead I got was from this guy called Billy-Bob. He was a guy I met in-"

Althea pointed at him.

"Nam?"

Neel leaned away from her.

"What? No. Billy-bob was a stockbroker from New York. He was one cutthroat guy before he lost his wife in a car accident. He moved out here afterward and basically turned into a hippy. We met when I tried finding a dealer in the area. It turned into a lifelong friendship after we got high on shrooms one time."

Althea's eyes widened.

"Shrooms? Like the eldritch?"

Neel scoffed.

"If they send you to another world, then sure. Why not?"

Althea put a fingertip to her chin.

"They do teleport a lot, but they're not high-level enough for planetary travel."

Neel frowned.

"Then they ain't got nothing on good ole shrooms. Psilocybin is a hell of a drug."

Althea rolled her eyes.

"Psilocybin isn't even that effective. It's not even that great at inducing hallucinations in monsters or for elevating pain tolerance."

Neel shook his head in surprise.

"You know about psilocybin but not shrooms? What in tarnation."

Althea pulled several syringes out of her backpack. Each vial glowed brightly.

"Yeah. I work with a ton of compounds. I use them to help me fight."

Neel's eyes widened in terror as she flashed the syringes. He turned away.

"That's...That's good for you. We should focus on the mission, though."

Althea formed angel wings on her back before diving down over the city.

"Sure. I'll search for the leaders and try to establish some kind of contact here. It shouldn't be that long before we find who's who and learn the lay of the land or whatever you guys call it."

I peered at Neel, my gaze scathing and full of menace. Neel wasn't even aware of my glowering since he wrestled down some demons of his own. He sputtered out.

"Let's do that. Daniel and I will go talk to Billy-Bob."

We split up, and the further we got from Althea, the more relaxed Neel became. As we arrived at a suburban home amidst the dilapidated residential areas, Neel landed without a care in the world. As we stood in the street, I stared at him with all my minds gazing his way.

"What was that reaction to her methods of battle?"

Neel blinked before laughing sheepishly.

"Oh, come on. It's crazy seeing someone carry around a bunch of glowing vials. And, uh, I just didn't expect little ole her to use something like d-drugs to fight. It just caught me off guard, is all."

I narrowed my eyes.

"You sure about that?"

He took a breath and met my eye.

"I am, son. I am."

I nodded before giving his shoulder a pat.

"Good on you, man. I was worried you were having an enormous wave of temptation at the sight of a few compounds, but obviously, I was overreaching. Anyways, let's go meet this guy."

Neel let out a held breath.

"Yeah, it's about that time."

As we stepped forward, Neel let me take the lead. I turned back.

"You're his friend, right? Shouldn't you be the one chatting it up?"

Neel rolled a hand.

"You tend to make a more lasting impression."

I raised my brow before stepping up the driveway. As I walked up the stairway, a hidden beatrap closed onto my leg, the bricks unleashing a set of metal teeth. They shattered against my shin plates, and I kept walking up. At the doorway, two logs exploded out of hidden pockets, each plank of wood thick enough to crush through car windows.

They pulped against my face, not even a mark left on me. As sap dripped from my cheeks, I turned to Neel.

"You never mentioned a ton of traps in your introduction to this guy?"

Neel hid behind me.

"It's just a part of meeting old friends. Can you knock on the door?"

I did, and three hidden compartments opened as a shotgun, a high-caliber sniper rifle, and a minigun fired at me. The bullets crumpled to dust against my metal skin, and I reached out a hand before pinching the barrels of the minigun together.

The metal squealed in agony before I wrenched it out of the wall. I ripped half the door out and shattered the stained glass holding it together. I continued pulling the metal weapon into my hand, feeding it into my palm using my fingers. It scrunched together like wadded paper before I tossed it behind me. After it let out a deep thump on the ground, I turned to Neel.

"So you're on good terms with this guy?"

Neel spread his hands.

"I mean...In a manner of speaking, sure."

I turned forward before walking through the doorway. It gave way under the weight of my momentum, and I entered the living room like a breaching round. I raised a hand and snapped my fingers. The chimney at the center of the rustically decorated space exploded, revealing a soot-covered individual. A short, fat man covered in dark dust shivered. He murmured to himself.

"The Vietcong...They're going to get me."

I turned to him.

"You said that Billy-Bob wasn't from the army? You lying sack of sh-"

Neel shook his hands.

"Hey, it felt bad to be that predictable, alright? It isn't like I want to be a stereotype."

Billy-Bob turned to me, and he winced.

"They...They're finally here."

I set him down on an antique sofa.

"Hey. We're just taking a moment to look for some people."

Billy-Bob trembled.

"They've come. They're here."

I turned a hand to him.

"You've really outdone yourself with this source, Neel. Grade A Stuff, I got to admit."

Neel raised a hand before lunging to one knee. He got close to Billy-Bob, and Neel put a hand on Billy-Bob's cheek. Neel put his forehead against Billy-Bobs.

"Listen to me. You're just fine. I'm here with you."

Billy-Bob shivered for a bit before calming down. Neel pulled his face back and lowered his hand before smiling.

"We were wondering where the Hillside family was. Any ideas?"

Billy-Bob blinked before nodding.

"They...They. I can hear them."

I walked forward before ascendant mana surged in my runes. A menacing smile grew over my helmet before I siphoned the mana out of Billy-Bob using Event Horizon. He stopped moving and collapsed before Neel stood up and turned to me.

"What in the hell are you doing, boy? I'm about ready to smack you."

I turned to him, my voice heavier than iron.

"You forget yourself."

Neel blinked before taking a step back. He clasped his hands to fists.

"Gah. Just say what you're doing before you do it."

I narrowed my eyes.

"You've seen my guild and how I conduct myself. Show some trust while I save a tortured soul."

Billy-Bob stopped trembling before a wave of clarity washed over him. He took deep breaths before he peered up at us. He spoke in a New Yorker accent.

"I haven't felt this clear since the 2008 financial crisis."

Neel smiled at his old friend.

"You're looking like dirty, chewed-up shoe leather."

Billy-Bob took a breath before standing up. He brushed himself off.

"And you look like Colonel Kurtz if Marylyn Brando was anorexic."

They clasped hands like in an 80s action movie before Neel raised his brow.

"I missed you, you sonofabitch."

Billy-Bob looked up at me, fear palpable in his eyes.

"You don't have to worry about missing me for long. This right here's my sleep-paralysis demon. Just when I thought my head had finally cleared up, the vision's more realistic than ever."

Neel walked over.

"Demon? No. This is my grandson, so show some respect if you don't mind."

Billy-Bob nodded before reaching out a hand.

"Billy-Bob Delacroix."

I shook his hand.

"Daniel Hillside."

Billy-Bob's eyes widened.

"You? You're Daniel? That little shit?"

I smiled, but the expression didn't quite reach my eyes.

"In the flesh. More like steel at this point, though."

Billy-Bob took a step back. He eyed me up and down.

"Of all the people to succeed in the apocalypse, you were the last person I expected to see."

I frowned.

"Is that right?"

Billy-bob nodded.

"Oh yeah. I thought you'd go full psycho and kill your whole hometown."

A bit of mana leaked from my runes. Neel clapped his friends back.

"Billy-Bob's just regained his consciousness after a long sleep. He's not thinking with his right mind."

Billy-Bob blinked before looking up at me. As if realizing how physically imposing I was all at once, he fell back onto the sofa. He stammered.

"I...I-I'm sorry, Daniel, sir. I didn't mean any disrespect."

His fear gave me no joy, satisfaction, or contentment. If anything, I felt cheated out of confronting this asshole. Now, he wouldn't give me the chance to say my piece. Instead, he'd be whimpering out of fear the entire time. As if sensing the tension, Neel spread his arms wide.

"How in the hell did you fix him up so fast anyway? I always thought it was the Agent Orange that made him all loopy like that."

Billy-Bob shoved Neel's arm. Billy-Bob scoffed.

"You always think it's Agent Orange."

Neel's eyes narrowed.

"Cuz it almost always is."

I turned a hand to them both.

"I did a psionic checkup. He was struggling with mana poisoning. He had an embedded consciousness that was wrestling for control. I took it out by sapping his mana."

I pulled my helmet off my face, my appearance no longer as threatening.

"And you must have some pretty gnarly sleep-paralysis demons."

We took a few minutes to let Billy-bob relax, brew some tea, and get the guy hydrated. He'd crawled up his chimney in a panic after we arrived, and the ascendant mana drove his paranoia through the roof. He thought he'd contracted schizophrenia forty years ago when he was a teenager, but apparently, he'd managed his condition until the system started.

That fired off alarm bells. He shouldn't have had ascendant mana inside his mind until after the system started. To fix my curiosity, I sat down on a gravity well, and they were on the sofa. I leaned forward.

"I'm glad you guys are catching up, but we have some people to hunt down."

Billy-Bob frowned.

"Ah, is it the Hillside's? Are you here to even the score against Deryll after he smacked you good that one time?"

I raised a brow.

"You mean the backhand? No. I'm here to find my father."

Billy-Bob shook his head in disgust.

"Oh, Jacob's still alive? It's crazy how the worst of us seem to die last. He passed through a couple of years after the system started. I heard he escaped with some hussy into the Rockies."

I couldn't help but pity that poor woman. I glared at a window.

"We'll need something more specific than that. Do you have any more details?"

Billy-Bob scratched his chin.

"Huh. I don't know anything about Jacob, but I do know where the Hillsides settled down."

Neel scoffed.

"Sorry, Billy, but we're in a rush, so let's cut to the chase. Where'd they go?"

Billy-Bob shook his head.

"They settled down in Cherokee Ranch and Castle from what I last heard."

I opened my status.

"Isn't that a museum? Or like a wedding venue, right?"

Billy-Bob threw his hands up.

"What can I tell you? The original owners and a few other settlers died during the system's initial outbreak, and they were the first to take out the dungeon in the area. I actually think Deryll's the one that made it happen."

Neel frowned.

"Ugh. Piece of trash who beats on kids."

Billy-bob furrowed his brow.

"Didn't you do that too?"

Neel waved him off.

"But Jacob had it coming."

The simple statement was a reminder of who Neel had been and likely still was. I stood before rolling my shoulders.

"Come on. I don't have time to waste here."

Neel turned to Billy Bob. My grandfather smiled.

"It's good to see you're doing better than I expected."

Billy-Bob coughed up some soot.

"You weren't expecting much, were you?"

"Not a bit. Take care of yourself, you hear?"

"You too, and don't ever forget the vision we saw."

"I couldn't if I tried."

They clasped hands one last time before we headed out. As we walked onto the street, I turned to Neel.

"What was the vision you both had?"

Neel peered at the sky. He pointed up.

"See that there? There was a moon and an ocean of wine. There was something spiritual about the place. A voice told us to embrace consequence and finality. The certainty in that voice let me move on from the war. I felt like I could trust it."

I narrowed my eyes.

"When did that happen?"

"Ooh, probably the summer of 82. The hippy thing was long past its prime, but we were keeping it alive."

I smiled, the expression menacing.

"I've heard that voice too."

Neel leaned back.

"Really now? Did it help you move on from something hard, too? It doesn't look like it."

I scoffed.

"It gave me the courage to challenge beings greater than myself."

In the middle of the street, Althea materialized. Neel tossed one of his knives at her before she caught it between her fingers. She grinned.

"Did I scare yah?"

Neel's hand shook before he let it down.

"Sorry about that, but it's not the best idea to sneak up on veterans. We have a habit of reacting with force."

She tossed the knife back at Neel. With inhuman accuracy, it snapped into his sheath as she laughed.

"I'll take my chances. But uh, what did you guys find?"

I pointed off in the distance.

"Where the Hillsides are. You?"

Althea frowned.

"I learned how greedy people can be when you offer help. Again. These people asked if I could rebuild a ski resort. You'd think they lost their minds."

I shrugged before pulling everyone up.

"They might have, or maybe they were looking for the sweet taste of nostalgia."

Neel adjusted himself for a second.

"I think I'm getting the hang of this-"

He leaned over and vomited for a bit. He wiped his mouth.

"For sure. I definitely am. The projectile vomit lacked the same force, yunno?"

Althea laughed as I shot us forward. By now, Neel didn't want to throw up every thirty seconds as we flew. In ten minutes, we neared the supposed castle. It was an inspired design and rested on a hill that overlooked the rocky mountains. I will say calling it a castle felt like a bit of a stretch.

As we neared it, I shrank to someone a bit shorter than Althea. I molded my armor as much as I could before turning to Neel.

"Do you have extra casual wear of some kind?"

Neel scoffed while opening his personal storage.

"What for?"

I grabbed a T-shirt and jeans and began putting them on. After getting them over me and molding my helmet down, I looked as normal as I could. I floated ahead of Althea.

"How do I look?"

She smiled.

"Like a handsome soldier who needs more constitution."

I frowned.

"Ah, and girls say height doesn't matter."

Althea raised her brow.

"Most of them are lying, but I think it's a sweet thing to spare some feelings."

Neel grunted.

"As sweet as honey laced with Tylenol."

I frowned.

"That's a pretty specific example."

Neel narrowed his eyes.

"I had this lady try and poison me with it one time. She had me drunk before handing me some honeyed coffee to sober up on. The Tylenol was there to induce liver failure or something."

I raised my brow.

"Did it work?"

Neel frowned.

"Like a charm. I barely made it out of that lady's grasp alive. You see, she was necrophiliac. Wanted a big lug to hug her no matter what he wanted."

We neared the castle grounds, more like an excellent wedding venue than a european castle. After landing in the front, I gestured to Neel.

"Do you mind being the lead on this one? I want to lay low for now."

Althea turned to me.

"Would you mind explaining what the disguise is for? You're usually not someone who avoids making a splash."

I met her eye.

"I don't want to terrorize them when we meet. I feel like if I did, I'd lose this opportunity to confront my past."

They nodded, not needing another reason. We walked to the front entrance before Neel knocked on the door. After a minute of waiting, a large, burly man opened the door. Instantly, I got flashbacks as I saw his hand. The guy still wore his graduation ring and the same shit-eating grin.

"My name is Deryll Hillside. Who might you three be?"

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"My name is Deryll Hillside. Who might you three be?"

I peered at Deryll, but I kept my aura and demeanor as lanky and forgettable as I could. His eyes turned over each of us, and he looked at Althea with a gaze that sparked anger in my chest. Neel spread his arms.

"Come on, Deryll. You don't recognize me?"

As recognition spread over Deryll's face, so did disgust.

"Huh? You're...Oh. You're Jacob's grandfather."

Neel frowned.

"I'm his father. I'm Daniel's grandfather."

Deryll sighed.

"It doesn't make much of a difference, now does it?"

Neel bit his tongue.

"I suppose not. Anyways, we're here-"

Deryll raised a hand while looking at us. His eyes lingered over Althea.

"Let's talk inside. There's no reason to leave you all out in the cold."

We walked inside before he put a hand on my chest. Deryll leaned over me, his height and physical stature imposing.

"You look familiar. Who are you?"

Althea leaned onto me.

"He's my bodyguard. His name is Nathaniel."

Deryll raised his brow.

"It's good to meet you, though I'll say you're a bit short for a bodyguard. She might need someone a bit bigger than she is to help when situations get tight."

I smiled.

"I know my way around a battlefield."

Deryll nodded.

"Yup. Scars all over you. You run in a lot, I'd guess?"

I shrugged.

"More or less."

He scoffed.

"I didn't take you for someone too bright. That explains the job."

They were petty jabs from an even pettier man, and I wasn't about to miss out on a legendary compendium to entertain the slights. I peered at the inner sanctum.

"It pays the bills. What can I say?"

We walked in, and I had to admit, I was wrong about the castle thing. Though not as grand as a castle on the outside, the inner rooms oozed opulence, and the museum aspect wasn't wasted when this place transitioned from a dungeon back into a ranch. Older paintings covered the walls. Chandeliers lit the antique-laden spaces, and luxurious carpets ensured the floors weren't all stone.

As we walked in, I kept my eye on Deryll. Neel whistled and clapped his hands once.

"I'll tell you what. This place looks mighty fine if I say so myself."

Deryll scoffed.

"It really isn't much."

Neel peered at a vase.

"I beg to disagree."

Deryll gave him a wicked smile.

"I'd imagine so, considering where you came from. Louisiana, wasn't it?"

Neel stood tall.

"It has its charms. Have I mentioned the gator-"

Deryll winced.

"You have. And no, we don't want any gator steak. Keep it in the bayou."

Deryll kept chatting about the history of the place and how it could rival any castle in Europe. I still wondered why he let us inside. He didn't like Neel, he didn't know me, and Althea, well...Ohh. Duh. Althea grabbed one of her arms as Deryll kept spewing factoids about the place as if a tour would woo her over. She coughed into a hand.

"So...Where are we sitting down, exactly?"

Deryll narrowed his eyes before sighing.

"It will be the dining room. I'll let the others know we're having guests."

After an entirely unnecessary tour of the place, we walked into the feasting hall. The ceilings arched up high, and the woodwork echoed inspirations from Viking halls of the past. A spectacular view of the ranch and the Rockies spread out, visible from the windows. It paled in comparison to the view from our flight, but it still carried a sense of gravitas regardless.

As we sat down, I admired the chairs. They modified them for system users, each piece of furniture holding more width and height than a normal one. They reminded me of sitting back at Mt. Verner, though this view exceeded the one even at the peak of our home base. All three of us sat down before Deryll tilted his head to a back room.

"I'll go get the others. I'm sure they'd like to see an old friend."

The hint of a threat lingered in his last words. I held back a scoff at the outright hostility, but Neel took it right on the chin.

"I reckon we'd like to see some old friends too."

After they left, Althea leaned to me and whispered.

"That guy stares way too much. It's creepy."

I narrowed my eyes.

"Tell me about it. I wanted to hit him in the gut. Maybe break a finger or two."

She smiled.

"Really? I didn't know you could get jealous."

I frowned.

"Less jealousy and more a fiery pit of suppressed rage."

She waved me off.

"Pshhh, same difference."

Interrupting our banter, Deryll walked in with two other women. I remembered them both. On the right, the older of the two was my grandmother, Betty. On the left, my aunt Margret stepped in. Both looked better than the last time I saw them, yet worse than I expected. Neither had really fought since the system started, so their levels sat at an ok-ish 87 and 92, respectively. Someone had helped them level up.

Despite their lower levels, they invested in longevity stats like willpower and endurance. That changed their crooked backs and wrinkled faces into reasonable postures and middle-aged smiles. They'd have needed a thousand plus more levels to really reverse the full extent of their aging, but that wasn't going to happen when neither was willing to risk danger.

Speaking of danger, Betty glared at Neel as if she were a wolf eyeing a screeching cat. Neel smiled back at Betty's glare, and he put his hands on his hips.

"Ah, it's good to see you two aren't any worse for wear."

Betty raised her brow.

"It looks like you've benefited from the system as well. Lord knows you needed it. The last time I saw you, you were positively ghoulish. You were on meth at the time, if I remember correctly?"

Neel's smile tightened.

"It was heroin."

Betty waved a hand, her passive-aggressiveness radiating from every pore.

"Oh, I wouldn't know the difference. Thank you for the correction."

Neel kept a poker face on, but I had talked with the guy enough to know when something stung. That had, but he played it off as if it hadn't left a mark. Watching on, a pang of guilt spurred in my chest. I already hated these people, and yet, this was exactly how I treated Neel. If anything, I didn't like the judgmental part of them because I didn't like the judgmental part of me.

I stewed on that as the mature ladies sat down closer to the end of the table. Betty crossed her fingers and leaned forward as she glared at Neel.

"So, what brings you to our little ranch here? In case you weren't aware, we don't sell any drugs here."

The way she spoke demonstrated the venom that only an old money family could have. Neel scoffed.

"I've kicked the habit for good, so that won't be a problem."

Betty tilted her head.

"Is this the third or fourth time you've told me that?"

Neel raised his brow.

"The fifth, but who's countin'."

Althea furrowed her brow.

"We're looking for Neel's son, Jacob. Do you know where he is?"

Betty gave Althea an icy glare. A resentment built in Betty's words.

"Now, excuse me for asking, little miss, but why would a beautiful woman such as yourself be looking for white trash like him?"

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Even from hearing them speak, I experienced cultural whiplash. In Mt. Verner, the older pre-system culture had largely dissolved in favor of a new system-oriented way of living. Here, these people lived as if in a time capsule, one where they threw their weight around using social expectations from a bygone world.

I struggled not to laugh at how ridiculous they sounded. Althea smiled at her, and she spoke like an angel.

"I owe Neel a favor for helping me out of a precarious situation."

Betty narrowed her eyes and smiled.

"Is he blackmailing you? We can arrange for your safe travel out of his care. Deryll would be more than willing to-"

Althea waved her hands.

"Uh, no thanks. Ughck."

Betty's smile faded.

"He comes from good blood. I can assure you of that."

Althea leaned forward, her smile sharp enough to cut glass.

"No, I really would rather not. You must be hard of hearing."

Betty sighed.

"Suit yourself, but you should know something about Neel."

Althea crossed her legs and arms.

"That he did drugs? Because I have totally heard that like a dozen times already. Apparently, that's the only thing anyone knows about the guy. Schema forbid the man tries to do anything else with his life."

Betty glared.

"You don't know the pain he put his family through."

Althea frowned.

"Yeah, well, I know the guy's trying to change. Besides, I use tons of drugs when I fight all the time. It isn't like doing drugs suddenly turns you evil. Usually, that's more of a, I don't know, character issue or something. It's that or you lose the balance behind using them."

Appalled, Betty leaned back.

"You do drugs? Like heroine?"

Althea rolled her eyes.

"Heroine is literally useless in a fight. It's a poor tranquilizer that doesn't even have a potent pain-reduction effect. I would much rather use lidocaine or epinephrine, and they'd need to be enchanted. Otherwise, my metabolism would flush them in seconds."

Neel blinked before staring at Althea. The veteran murmured.

"Is that what's in the vials?"

Althea nodded.

"Some of it, yeah. I don't keep my most potent enablers out in the open for safety reasons. Kessiah and I have actually created a few serums using her blood, and they're extremely potent. You can try a few if you wan-"

Neel hit the table and shouted.

"No."

An awkward moment passed over the table. Neel coughed into a hand before adjusting his bandolier.

"No, I-I don't need that stuff. My, uh, fighting's pretty good already. Thank yah, though."

Althea peered back and forth before making herself small.

"Uhm, sorry."

Interrupting my thoughts, Betty leaned forward to Althea, and Betty's wrinkles formed over her face as she scowled. Betty seethed.

"This is what I was going to tell you about that man. You see, we raised dogs for generations. We know how to recognize a purebred and a mutt by eye at this point. Something you should know about people like Neel, they're mutts. They'll take a purebred and turn it into an ugly, furless cur before you know it."

It was officially affirmed. She was a caricature of a human being at this point. Neel rolled his eyes.

"Oh god, not this bullshit again."

Betty stared at him.

"You call it that because you don't like hearing the truth. And you know what makes it worse? You're not just a mutt. You're mangy too. You and all your friends. You all sit out there thinking you're just fine as you abuse your body and live like heathens."

Neel frowned.

"Oh, god forbid we do something fun once in a while."

Betty stood up, her face flashing red.

"Look what happened to my daughter from all that 'fun' of yours."

Neel's expression sharpened.

"I'm mighty sorry about what happened to Angela, but you and I both know that wasn't me. That was a twist of fate."

Betty snapped.

"Now who's spouting bullshit?"

Neel shook his head, and his emotions began to get less stable. He shook a hand at Betty.

"I'm not bearing your cross anymore, and neither is my son or his son either. We didn't kill Angela. Cancer, Betty, is what killed her, and lord forbid-"

They began talking over each other.

"I don't take responsibility over a terminal illness. It's just like you to throw out accusations on me like you know who I am. Like you've ever known who the hell I am."

"You think I don't know you and Jacob forced your dope on her? I bet you put it in her food after she said no. And, of course I know who the hell you are."

Neel frowned.

"Oh really, and who is that?"

Betty pointed a finger.

"A lying, cheating drug addict who wants to think he can change when we both know, deep down, you'll never be anything more than that twisted, drug-using fiend who stole our Honda Civic."

Neel's expression changed a few times as a wave of emotions poured over him. He grabbed the sides of his head before shaking.

"I don't know what I was thinking comin' here."

One of the back doors opened, and a tall, imposing man walked in. His silver beard grew to the collar of his plaid shirt, and his muscled frame omened potential. Beside him, two altered pit bulls hulked into the room. The hounds were mutated by mana and from having eaten eldritch flesh raw.

Thatcher Hillside frowned.

"We don't know what you were thinking either, yet here you are."

Neel stood up.

"I've had enough of this. Just tell me if you saw where Jacob-"

Thatcher raised a hand, the practiced motion exposing how he almost always held control in a room. Thatcher frowned.

"You're not the one making demands from us. We do just fine on our own, and we don't owe you anything. So sit down like a good little dog."

Neel wanted to run over and kill the man. I kind of did, too, but I telepathized to Neel.

"Please sit down. Not for him, but for me."

Neel took a deep breath before sitting down. He turned a palm to Thatcher.

"What are you even here for?"

Thatcher interlocked his hands behind himself. He walked across the side of the table while keeping a predatory glance over us all.

"I'm here to see why in the hell the Stoltmans have been passing by my town."

Neel raised a hand.

"Same here. If you let us know what you found, we'll be on our way."

Thatcher looked at me.

"I'm wondering why the other Stoltman is here. This makes three if I'm correct?"

I raised a brow.

"Ah, you just noticed? It took you guys quite a while. It wasn't even like my disguise was particularly convincing."

Betty narrowed her eyes at me before they widened.

"You're that little shit? God, I never thought that someone made by Angela could end up so ugly."

Althea scoffed.

"You've obviously got some pretty bad taste."

She and I shared a glance, and we smiled.

Thatcher eyed me down.

"He looks that way because Angela made that one mistake of finding a mutt she liked. Now look what she made - a common cur."

I remained cold and impassive.

"Is that how you see me?"

Thatcher frowned.

"I look at you as the shame of the family. Your father stole my rose, the most beautiful part of my life."

His wife, Betty, frowned when he said that. Thatcher raised a fist at me.

"And you're the reason she stayed. You should be ashamed of all you've done to destroy our family."

I raised a brow.

"Should I?"

The snarling dogs got closer to me. Thatcher took a deep breath before aiming his frown at me.

"You know Angela was ashamed of it, too? She wanted to come back, but she wanted you to have a normal childhood. We can see how that worked out for her."

I steepled my hands, not an ounce of fear in me as one of the dogs got within biting distance. I met his eye.

"You talk a lot about breeds. From what I've gathered, you consider yourself of better blood. Why?"

Thatcher furrowed his brow.

"That much is obvious. Our family has owned land for generations. We've built an empire of ranches across Colorado, and we've never lived without for centuries."

I rolled my fingertips.

"And where are those ranches now? What about that empire?"

Thatcher leaned back.

"We've been regrouping after the system arrived. And besides that, we can't be expected to recover all of the lands we lost either. It's monster country now."

I stared him down.

"If you lack your pre-system lands, why do you still have your pre-system pride?"

The pit bull snarled at me, its eyes crazed and its mouth frothing. Thatcher walked up.

"Not yet, Bullet. Later."

Thatcher petted one of his dogs.

"All these questions are rich coming from some petty bodyguard for some bimbo. If you're not already aware-"

I raised a hand.

"Althea Tolstoy helps orphaned children and educates the masses in her free time. You feed dogs raw eldritch meat to deform them into monsters. Who would you judge as better by the content of their character?"

His pitbull growled. Thatcher leaned over me.

"All these damn questions. You'd think we were in the middle of an exam. How about I remind you that this post-system world isn't ruled by words?"

I smiled.

"What is it ruled by?"

"It's conquered through real power."

I peered at the dog. It quit growling as I said.

"Real power. It's an elusive thing."

I gazed up at him, my minds all gazing from within.

"Funnily enough, you're one of the few enemies I have where I can demonstrate exactly what real power is. Palpably so, in fact."

The dogs whimpered. A bead of sweat dripped down the back of Thatcher's neck. He twitched.

"Bullet. Sick him."

Bullet peered between us before I smiled at the dog. I reached out a hand, and Bullet let me pet him. I rubbed its head, and its tail wagged. I leaned close to it.

"Who's a good boy? Don't worry. I'm not letting you guys stay here."

Thatcher snarled.

"Excuse me?"

I gazed up at him.

"Have you ever tried inspecting my status? And besides that, how long can you even keep these dogs tame as they are?"

Thatcher looked down at Bullet.

"You're hiding it with magic or something. As for the dogs, it doesn't matter. I can keep them tame as long as I want."

I tapped the table.

"That's a lie. I can feel the other dogs below us. Some are in concrete cages, and they're scrambling about like feral animals. It's an odd thing. You're so concerned with mange,

yet you seem to treat your animals like tools. It's a terrible thing, but what else can we expect?"

The pit bulls whimpered as I stood up. Thatcher looked down at them and snapped his words.

"What's wrong with you two? What in the hell is going on?"

I turned to Neel. My grandfather struggled to meet my eye. I frowned.

"Neel. I'm sorry for how I've been treating you. This was a good reminder of the kind of person I'd rather not be, so thank you for coming here with me. I know it's been hard for you, but you should know it's been eye-opening for me. I owe you one."

Neel blinked, his eyes watering.

"O-of course, son...Anytime, anytime."

I turned to Thatcher. I stood a head and a half shorter, yet I loomed over him like a mountain. I interlocked my hands behind myself.

"I'd like to thank you for giving me a lot to think about. I'll be leaving after taking the dogs and learning where Jacob is."

Betty snapped.

"Not everything in the world revolves around-"

I turned to her. My eyes quieted her voice. Fear spread over her face, and tension passed over the room. I said nothing, and yet they felt the weight of their situation change at that moment. Only Thatcher remained somewhat composed. He snapped.

"I never let your mother forget the shame she brought on us. The shame she should've lived in every day. I'm not going to let you forget it either."

As he said that, I blinked. A memory flashed through my eyes. I finally remembered why Deryll had backhanded me. He was talking down to my Mom about this same vitriol. Shame upon your family. Bitterness in your heart. All of it. My Mom kept apologizing and staring down, but Deryll kept berating her.

She tried to leave, but Deryll stepped in her way. When tears started falling down her cheeks, I got tired of watching. I had stepped over and told him to, and I quote, 'Leave my mom alone, crusty old dude.' I was five years old, and I felt like Superman when I stepped to protect her.

He backhanded me hard enough to send me off my feet.

The loud crack. A flash of white. Immediate, burning pain across my cheek. I remember flying through the air and never closing my eyes. Despite the heft behind his strike, he never knocked me out. I scrambled to my feet as his jewel clattered onto the ground. Deryll grabbed his hand, wincing in pain.

"You can't hurt me."

I spoke the words with wet eyes. Wobbly. Fearful. It was the obvious fake courage of a child too afraid to move and too dumb to step down. Instead of rushing to me, my Mom hurried to him to check on his hand. I remember gawking at them, and I watched her pick up the jewel and hand it to my enemy. To her enemy.

And she apologized for what I said and for what I had done.

That humiliation was a dark ichor in my mind. The pride that had gotten me to my feet was swept out from under me, and a liquid rage poured out to replace the pride like blood out of an open wound. Hatred for her, Deryll, and the pain in my cheek spawned in my chest. I remembered spreading my arms and shouting about how it was unfair, about how he had hit me.

She walked over, grabbed my cheeks, and mouthed.

"You should be ashamed of yourself. Shut. Up."

I blinked, remembering where I was. Thatcher collapsed onto the ground, and the others were rendered unconscious. Althea already phased out of reality and back in beside me. She wrapped her arms around me.

"Are you ok?"

I smiled back at her.

"I, I'm...No. I'm not. I need a minute."

I retracted Event Horizon, the crushing aura no longer suffocating all present. Neel took a deep breath, as did Thatcher. Betty trembled in the back, and Margret sat still, the most composed of the bunch. Thatcher hobbled upright and stepped up to me to grab my shoulder and stop me from leaving.

I turned to him. I pressed down onto his core.

"Are you sure that's a road you want to walk down?"

I frowned.

"Because there's no path back, friend."

Thatcher didn't answer as he struggled to breathe. In the back, Deryll struggled upright. He rubbed his head.

"Am I...Am I hungover?"

I flicked at him, and a telekinetic wave pummeled his chest. He slammed against the wall, and cracks spread across the stone. Bones broke in his chest, and I frowned.

"That's payback with a little interest."

I walked out of the room, and Althea hugged my arm as I did. We left the room in silence. Neel took a breath.

"You know, you're mighty lucky my grandson chose to be the bigger man today. He's known in the Northeast as the Harbinger of Cataclysm, and he's killed gods before. He could've evaporated you in a second."

Thatcher trembled. Neel walked up to him and whispered.

"That's fear, boy. I'd listen to it if I were you."

Neel stepped in front of Thatcher.

"And I also wanted to say this. My grandson is the bigger man in these kinds of situations."

Neel kicked Thatcher in the balls hard enough for a pop to echo across the room. Thatcher hit the ceiling before falling down and busting their table. Neel smirked at Thatcher's writhing form. Neel seethed.

"But I ain't. I'm a small, petty, and shameless little man, and my life was built on moments of victory like this. Suck on these nuts."

He walked over to Betty and grabbed a bottle of unopened wine. He sliced the bottom of the bottle with a dagger, tossed the cut glass aside, and dumped the wine onto her face. Betty guffawed before Neel grabbed Margaret's hand. Neel smiled.

"I know we didn't say much, but it was great to see you again, Margret."

Margret coughed into her other hand.

"Likewise, Neel."

Outside, I sat down on a walkway. I grew back to a more recognizable form, and the clothes ripped into rags. Neel jogged up to me. I raised a hand.

"Sorry about the clothes."

Neel waved me off.

"Don't mind that. What happened there? You were giving him what for until something changed."

I peered at a breathtaking view.

"I remembered a part of who my mom was."

Althea murmured.

"It must've been sweet then."

I blinked as my throat burned.

"That's the problem. It wasn't."

Chapter 410: A Broken Home and a Broken Man

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Althea and Neel peered at one another. Neel furrowed his brow.

"Are you sure you're remembering right? I can't recall a time she ever raised her voice...Hmm, but I never saw her that much. Hell, I met Betty more than I met her."

I frowned at him.

"I remember it as crystal clear as glass."

Althea put her hands over mine.

"Can you tell us?"

Neel's eyebrows went wild as he contained a few expressions. He crossed his arms.

"I...I can leave. It don't feel right listening in on all this."

I raised a hand.

"No, it's fine. In my mind, you've earned some trust, and besides, I want you to hear this too."

I explained the memory of my mother and the moment Deryll slapped me. Althea's face flushed as she gritted her teeth. Neel furrowed his brow in confusion. As I finished, Neel sighed.

"I can't say I remember her bein' that unreasonable. I will say that you were always disciplined as a child. It stood out a lot when I did see you from time to time."

I scoffed.

"I always got into fights at school and nearly got expelled on more than one occasion."

Neel furrowed his brow.

"But that happened after your mom passed. You weren't like that before. If anything, you felt too grown up. You know, like one of those kids taking care of younger siblings. Thing is, you didn't have any."

I massaged my temples.

"Ah, yes. Of course, none of this makes any damn sense."

Althea leaned to me.

"I...I have something to add if you'd like to hear my thoughts."

I turned to her and smiled.

"Of course. I'd listen to you read from a cookbook if it meant hearing the sound of your voice."

She grinned.

"Thanks. Ok, this might be a, er, challenging thought. Are you ok with that?"

I nodded. She took a breath.

"So, I never thought this vision of your mom was realistic. Like, ever."

I blinked, and so did Neel. Althea raised her palms in her defense.

"Hey, I'm not saying she's evil or anything. I just never thought she sounded like a real person from how either of you described her. It, uhm, she sounded like this filtered and purified version of a mother rather than someone authentic."

Neel frowned.

"Like she was the idea of a person, not the person themselves?"

Althea frowned.

"Pretty much. Just to reiterate, I'm not saying she was never sweet or didn't have good qualities. I'm saying she had to have faults. For example, she married this Jacob guy and stayed with him. From Daniel's stories, his father was very abusive. That's not something that pops up overnight. He had to be doing that even before she passed."

I furrowed my brow.

"You're right about that. He always gave out punishments that, in my opinion, didn't fit the crime. Stuff like five paddles for talking out of turn."

Neel raised a brow.

"What kind of paddle?"

I scratched my cheek.

"It was a hand-sawed two-by-four. He drilled holes in it. Anytime they couldn't find the paddle, they accused me of hiding it. I had to spend hours looking for it. Sometimes, I think they hid it just so that I would have time to dread the punishment. I assumed my dad was the one hiding it, but maybe not."

Neel shook his head.

"That's messed up, and that's coming from an oldie like me. We kept kids straight when I was young."

Althea frowned.

"It reminds me of the research facility, but kind of the opposite. They didn't have punishments because no one cared. We did our own thing, and whoever was strongest got to call the shots. And, yeah, kids can be mean sometimes."

Neel peered at Althea. The veteran turned a hand to her.

"Is that why you run an orphanage? To heal from helpin' out?"

Althea grinned.

"You bet. What about your rehab program?"

Neel gave her shoulder a pat.

"Hah. Me too, honey. That's what the rehab's all about. Help others. Help yourself along the way."

I smiled with them, their stories heartwarming. It also made my pursuits feel tangential. I focused on my own strength while these two worked to make the world a better place. Not having time to reflect on that, I took a breath before peering at Althea.

"I'm not upset, just curious. Why didn't you ever bring up your doubts to me before now? About my mom, that is."

Althea gulped.

"Ahem, so...I never felt like I had the right to. Anytime you talked about your mom, you had this...Reverence in your voice. It wasn't something shallow. Heh, actually, it kind of felt like you needed the memory, or else you'd go insane sometimes. I always felt like it would be cruel of me to go in and try to tear that beautiful memory down."

You might be reading a pirated copy. Look for the official release to support the author.

I frowned.

"You know you don't have to lie to me."

I smiled.

"But thanks."

She rested a hand on my cheek.

"We're just doing our best, right?"

I stood up while grabbing her hand.

"Speaking of our best, there's a few dogs we have to save real quick."

Neel peered at the view.

"You don't want to mull over that memory a bit more?"

I shook my head.

"Naw. I think I'm not going to get any answers until after I find my father."

Neel and Althea nodded, and we headed back to the castle. After tearing down a few walls and freeing about twenty pit bulls, we found the source of their corruption. Thatcher fed eldritch grubs using tiny, powdered bits of crystalized mana. Before they finished mutating, he mashed them up and fed them to his dogs, uncooked and unclean.

From inside, the grubs spread the mutation through their stomach first and up into their brains eventually. We found three dogs well beyond saving since their entire brains were consumed. I gave them a prayer before ending them as painlessly as I could. I felt like an evil prick, but they were in pain, and this was the only mercy we could give.

The other puppies required something akin to surgery. Althea cut them open, and I helped pull the eldritch out. Althea kept many healing potions on demand from her work with Kessiah, and she used them to stabilize the dogs. We walked out with nineteen still living, including Thatcher's two reserve dogs.

While somewhat sad about putting down three of them, we helped give the other dogs a new chance at a better life. To further that end, I constructed a golem from myself and gave it orders to head over to Mt. Verner. I gave it the name 'The Pupper Protector,' and I told it to save as many good doggos as it could after helping these pit bulls out.

How could it tell if a dog was a good boy? It simply had to ask, and the question would be answered.

We also gathered a few documents about Jacob's position. As expected, the Hillsides had been tracking the guy for quite some time, and they isolated him to the West. They hadn't crossed into the wilderness out of worry. The deep country held monsters, and they weren't willing to lose dogs and family members to seal a grudge. Not yet, at least.

They figured out that Jacob hid out in the Strontia Springs Dam to the West. With a solid foundation under us, we set out to uncover what the hell was going on. At first, the flight was awkward and solemn. Neel and I were already exhausted after the emotional whirlwind, and Althea felt like she couldn't broach the silence.

Instead, I did. I got us chatting away about nothing important. As the others joined in, I felt a change in the banter. A depth was injected into the feelings and our words, kind of like soldiers talking after their first battle together. We ran through fire, and the beginnings of a bond forged in the flames. It was still a young closeness, but it felt like a solid start.

It helped add levity to an otherwise oppressive set of conversations. The background scenery helped seal that deal. We entered Roxborough State Park, and fields of trees sat on rolling hills. Smooth yet jagged rocks poked out of the ground in ways that defied reason. They looked as if someone planted them there rather than forming naturally, but that only added to their mystique.

We passed them by before nearing the reservoir. It was the kind of manmade lake one could expect. Water piled up high in the valley, and a wall of concrete held it in. In time, the concrete would crack and shatter. For now, it acted as a haven that cradled all

kinds of life here. To my surprise, it only took a few minutes to find an isolated log cabin on the side of the reservoir.

As we neared it, I turned to them.

"Do you mind if I meet him by myself?"

They peered at each other before Neel scoffed.

"You don't have to ask me, son. This is your fight, and I'm here to help you win the war."

Althea smiled.

"I don't mind. Whatever you need."

As we got closer, I flew down and landed about ten miles away. We avoided rustling any trees or awakening a flock of birds. After we settled in, I shifted back to my more pedestrian form. I wore yet another set of combat fatigues Neel had extra. Before I walked over to my father's encampment, I tried to contemplate scenarios or things Jacob would say.

I kept drawing blanks. I hadn't talked to the man in a decade. There was no way to determine what he'd be like. I tried coming up with a course of action using advice from Neel and Althea. Before I even got started, Neel put his hands on my shoulders.

"Listen, son. This is something you need to get done so you can move on."

I frowned at him.

"Didn't you have a lot to say? I'm not trying to hog the conversation here. I mean, he's not just my father. He's your son, too."

Neel gave my shoulder a firm pat.

"Trust me, son, you're not hoggin' anything. I never expected to be able to build a bridge with either of my sons. Lord knows I don't deserve it. That's why I already got what I needed from that conversation with Thatcher and Betty. Hell, I'm gettin' what I need right now."

Neel hit my chest.

"Now go handle your business like a man. Do what you need to. We'll get the hell back to the guild after and save the damn world, or whatever the hell it is you do these days."

I laughed before turning to Althea. She and I hugged before she pressed her forehead against mine. She murmured.

"I love you."

I smiled back.

"I love you, too."

With those last words, I turned and walked into the forest. I could've skipped the walk, bolting across the forest as a blur of dark metal. I chose to soak in the calming ambiance and walk. It helped cleanse my mind of the vitriol from Betty and Thatcher. It also let me contemplate what the hell was going on.

So far, I had gotten a variety of answers from different people. Thatcher and Betty acted like my mom stayed with Jacob because of me. However, I never heard that at home. At the same time, I had a sneaking suspicion that I had suppressed more than one memory of my mother. A chill ran up my spine at that prospect, and not the good kind.

This entire endeavor was like opening Pandora's Box, and it couldn't be closed anymore. The answers I sought rested in a cleared patch of forest on the side of this reservoir. An hour later, I sat behind several trees and waited. Behind the wall of lumber and forest, my father fumbled inside his log cabin like some Paul Bunyon wannabe.

I could've run in. I could've ripped the log cabin apart with the snap of my fingers. Despite that overwhelming and absolute control, I felt so small. A part of me hid this

fear deep down, but even if I pretended it hadn't affected me, it did. To this day, I still feared him, at least my memories of him.

My father. My maker. He'd beaten me, sure, but that wasn't all. Sometimes, he put cigarettes out on my arms and neck while sitting on my chest. I remembered him locking my door and leaving the windows open. The old, rusted panels wouldn't budge, so I slept on the living room floor, shivering all the while.

I recalled the days he left me in the apartment and left no food. My stomach would ache from how empty it was. Flashbacks of the days he raged at me rushed over my eyes. The days when he told me my mother's cancer was caused by the stress of raising a worthless, pathetic son. I had taken those beatings, and I had accepted those words in as stoic of a silence as I could manage.

But I was a child, and I cried. I wailed. I begged for mercy, and he would give just enough to keep me alive. That terror was a palpable, trembling thing, and the fear gazed out from the eyes of a child. It met the uncaring gaze of a monster in human skin. Those emotions roared in my mind because a simple fact would never leave me.

No matter how strong I became, I would never forget those moments of weakness. I had been a helpless child. I was the one who was beaten. I was the one who took the blame and fault. But I was a child no longer, and I commanded my feet to move.

I walked out of the forest, one step after the other. My heart beat until my ears pulsed and my head throbbed. In the distance, my father leaned over the side of the lake. He stood in a hunch, his form tall, lithe, and wiry. From the side, I could see his face, and I'd never forget it. He had scars on him like Neel and I, ones from Neel's beatings and stupid fights at bars.

As always, Jacob kept his full beard and his brow perpetually furrowed. It gave him wrinkles that ran up his forehead. I smiled at the scar on his lip and left eye. I gave him those the last time we met, my sweet little parting gift to such a kind, gentle man. Beside him, a boy held a fishing pole. He gazed up at my father.

The boy looked at a ruthless man, someone who'd beaten me time after time. He was a brute who stood over me holding empty bottles of vodka before slapping them on my shivering back. He was a man who held my throat and cursed me, wishing I'd died as my face turned purple. That boy gazed at a monster of a man, and that monster gazed back at him.

Jacob looked at him with a warmth I'd never known, and that child smiled back like a grateful son.

A piece of me broke seeing them.

It took all twenty minds to keep my composure as I walked closer. They heard me whenever I was twenty feet from them. Jacob turned in a quick jerk. His eyes widened as he saw a strange man walking closer. I stopped ten feet from him. Jacob raised his hand while putting his hand over the child's chest.

"Wait a minute. There's no need to do anything rash. I'm just trying to teach a boy to fish. We don't have anything worth stealing, but we can give you what we have. Just...Just don't hurt us, alright?"

I numbed at his words. The kindness. The concern. How thoughtful of him. I murmured.

"You don't even recognize me. I guess that's exactly what I should've expected. Any disappointment I'm feeling is my fault, right? That tended to be the case."

My father met my eye.

"I'm sorry, young man, but I don't recognize you. Do you mind jogging my memory?"

I spread my arms, my hands open wide.

"I'll give you a hint. I'm from Springfield. I enjoyed getting beatings."

Jacob blinked before his eyes widened. He covered his mouth before a burst of wildness spurred behind his eyes. He patted the boy's chest.

"Go inside with Janet."

The boy murmured.

"Bu-"

Jacob turned down and shouted.

"I said go inside, boy. Don't make me tell you twice."

The boy scrambled up. My eyes followed his steps.

"What's his name?"

My father frowned.

"Jake. He's Janet's son. We met after the system came. It's...It's been a long road."

I smiled but it held no warmth.

"Tell me about it."

I peered at the cabin.

"Hm. It looks like you managed to scramble together a half-decent life out here."

Jacob narrowed his eyes at me.

"Is that right? Did you come out here to fuck it all up?"

I held my expression; years of grueling training were still somehow easier than this conversation.

"I came here looking for answers."

I met his eye.

"And I will have them."