

New World 411

Chapter 411: Caught In a Cycle

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 them."

A plethora of emotions crept across Jacob's face. A pinch of regret, a dash of fear, and even a bout of outrage. It all coursed over him in a moment as his gaze changed into a glare. He scowled.

"What is there to say? Do you want me to apologize? To admit I was wrong? Hell, I might've been. Happy now?"

I furrowed my brow.

"Is that all you have to say after everything? Everything I lived through doesn't even amount to a sincere apology?"

Jacob's lips tightened before he rolled his eyes.

"If you don't remember, son, you did the same damn thing to me the last time we met. I'd call us about even."

I scoffed.

"That fight? The one where you slapped me on the back of the head because I wouldn't take out the garbage?"

Jacob frowned.

"Then you turned around and shoved me. I told you to back down, and then you had the nerve to meet my eye. Back in my day, my daddy wouldn't have let me get off without a whipping after I looked him in the ye."

I raised a brow.

"So a palm slap was the answer?"

Jacob spit to his side.

"Tends to be when dealing with little shits."

I peered at the cabin.

"I wonder if you've had the same approach with Jake. It doesn't look like it based on how he looks at you."

Jacob's gaze softened.

"He's a good kid. He's just trying to take care of his mom in a rough world."

I spread my arms.

"What do you think I was trying to do?"

Jacob pointed at me.

"You dragged her down every chance you got."

I put my hand on my chest.

"How in the world did I, at five years old, drag her down?"

Jacob took a breath before putting his hands on his hips. He stated matter of factly.

"Boy, you've been bad luck since you were born. It's that simple."

His words were a hot brand, and my mind was seared by them. I closed my eyes.

"Bad luck? Is that right?"

Jacob shrugged.

"I call it like I see it."

I furrowed my brow.

"Is that why you beat me, then?"

Jacob waved me off.

"Oh come on now. It wasn't even that bad. All I did was toughen you up."

I held back my aura. I could crush him to nothing, but that wouldn't give me any answers. This was a fire, and I had to lean in if I wanted to get something out of it. I opened my eyes.

"I've hated you for so long. I thought you died when the system arrived. I should've known you found a way to run away even after the system started. It's all you've ever done is run from your duty as a man and as a father. Hell, I can hardly stand seeing you out here playing house with this woman and child. Do either of them know what you've done?"

Jacob shook his head and smiled.

"Ahh, so that's what this is about."

I frowned.

"I can't read your mind, so how about you communicate?"

I could read his mind, but I didn't. Jacob pointed a finger at me.

"Have you ever wondered why it burns you so bad that I'm finally living a half-decent life?"

I raised a hand.

"It's because of what you've done. You can pretend it's nothing. You can try to blow it off, but I'll never forget what happened. I remember the scars I had before the system. Sometimes, when I heal, they come back. It depends on how bad a day I'm having. That's why this whole act of yours disgusts me."

Jacob rubbed the scar on his lip.

"Oh, I can relate to the scars, but here's the problem, boy. You think that coming down here and tearing down what I have will give you satisfaction. In that thick little skull of yours, you think breaking me down will somehow build you up, but you're wrong. What you've come here to do, it's not going to end well no matter how it plays out."

Jacob let his hand drop to his side.

"How do I know that? Because if there's one thing I learned since this whole system bullshit arrived, it's this - You will never be happy until you can find joy in the happiness of others."

My hands shook.

"Are you even talking to me, or are you talking to yourself?"

Jacob spread his hands.

"I know you ain't the sharpest tool in the shed, but how about you look inside yourself and see if you can't figure it out."

I took a step forward.

"I'm not going to find happiness in you abandoning me and then pretending like these obvious life lessons you learned are somehow related to my struggles. I found happiness, even in misery."

Jacob snapped.

"And where do you think that misery comes from, boy?"

I peered back and forth.

"Are you saying it came from me?"

Jacob pointed at me again.

"It always did. It always has, and god knows it always will."

I peered in disgust.

"When did you start blaming me for everything?"

Jacob put his hands in his pockets.

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"Oh, about when you started causin' problems."

I kept my voice cool.

"Which was when exactly?"

"When Angela had to drop out of college. It was a rough pregnancy, and you damn near stole her life even before you were born."

I nodded.

"Ah. I'm guessing I was a colicky baby, too?"

Jacob scoffed.

"You were the devil. You constantly broke anything we let you touch. You fought everyone and everything. We could hardly keep you from tearing Angela's hair out."

I grew dispassionate.

"Jacob. I was a child. That's what children do."

Jacob rolled his eyes.

"I already know you don't have kids. I can smell it, so don't pretend like you know a damn thing about parenting."

I held myself back from tearing him apart as I mouthed.

"So I was a finicky baby. Is that all?"

Jacob spit to his side again.

"Nope. Angela tried holding down jobs while you were a kid, but you always needed something. You couldn't handle yourself at all."

I smiled.

"Ah. I remember trying not to cause any problems. Sorry my three year old self couldn't do your taxes."

Jacob smirked.

"Tryin' and doin' are two different things. You should know that by now, boy."

I rolled my fingers in my hand.

"Oh, I do."

Jacob smirked and raised a hand. He made a fist.

"I'm not the same man you fought all those years ago. My back don't hurt no more, and I can handle myself just fine."

An icy smile grew on my face.

"I can see that."

Jacob frowned.

"My point is, the problem wasn't just you needin' a certain kind of food or struggling to sleep. I mean, think of Angela's kin. You were the only damn reason she ever visited that bastard family of hers."

I turned a palm to him.

"Oh, we can agree on the shitty family part, but what's this about me making her visit?"

Disgust cropped up on Jacob's face.

"She told me that you'd beg and plead for her to come over anytime you could."

I put a hand on my forehead before leaning back and laughing. Jacob snapped.

"What's so funny, boy?"

I shook my head while pulling my hair back.

"I just got back from visiting the Hillsides. According to them, Mom always said I was the only reason she chose to stay with you. Now, you're telling me I was the only reason she ever chose to leave. Well, which is it? Was I why she left or stayed?"

"Both."

"Come on, Jacob. You and I both know that doesn't make any sense."

Jacob smiled as if caught with his hands in a cookie jar. It made my skin crawl.

"Alright, I'll give you that one. Here's the thing. I wouldn't trust anything that comes out of that family's mouth. They'll lie just to hear what it sounds like when they say it. They happen to like the sound of their voice so much they might as well record it and play it back all the time. It'd be nicer than having to listen to them preach."

I tapped my chin.

"You know, I'm starting to think that neither you nor the Hillsides are lying."

Jacob shook his head.

"Now look who's not making sense. Someone told you one thing, and someone else told you another. Someone's got to be lyin'. It's basic shit, boy, but I guess you weren't ever that sharp. I shouldn't expect much."

I ignored the insults.

"You're creating a false binary to push your narrative."

"What the fuck does that even mean? You think that makes any damn sense?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

"Three people are a part of the equation, not two. Mom could've lied to you both."

Jacob's face flushed.

"You talking ill about the dead now?"

I spread my hands.

"I just want the truth. From what I've gathered, it looks like Mom had a habit of blaming me for her problems, just like you and just like the other Hillsides."

Jacob stepped closer. He was within an arm's reach away, only one slap from his skull becoming a thick, red paste. He stuck his hand out at me.

"Don't you ever talk bad about your mother."

I tilted my head at him.

"I'm not talking bad about anyone. I'm figuring out the truth."

Jacob's voice grew raspy.

"The truth is this. She was an angel that left us too soon."

I remembered Althea's words. A deep resentment within me rose to the surface as I spoke.

"Jacob, nobody's perfect. I just want to know what happened, and from what I've gathered, I'm why Angela left her family. I'm why she stayed with you. I'm why she left school, and I'm why she couldn't hold down a job. At this point, I bet she blamed the problems in your marriage on me too."

Jacob's face flushed red.

"You're just sayin' shit now."

I stared at him.

"Am I wrong?"

Jacob tried to say something, but his words wouldn't leave his mouth. He peered down. I nodded at him.

"That's what I thought. She lied."

He peered back up.

"She did no such thing."

I furrowed my brow.

"So I really was the source of all her woes?"

He shrugged, a malicious grin spreading over his face.

"I just call it like I see it. You're trouble, boy."

I smiled.

"Isn't that convenient? For the family. For you. Even for her."

Jacob's eyes widened.

"Oh, now you better listen up. You're not going to talk that way about Angela."

I spread my hands.

"I'm tired of pretending she was some angel. It's exhausting."

Jacob snarled.

"She was. She was perfect. She was my everything before you stole her from me."

I snapped back.

"How in the world did I cause her cancer? Do you think I put a UV light on her when she went to sleep? Or maybe I gave her carcinogens whenever she had to feed me when I was five-fucking-years old?"

Jacob threw his hands up.

"It was the stress. You were always needing something. You were always causing problems."

My hands trembled.

"I didn't beg and plead to be born. I was put in this world because you two chose to have me. That's why it's not my fault that neither of you were ready to be parents. That's why it's not my fault that you weren't able to handle the pressure of literally anything. It's also why it's not my fault that Mom couldn't handle any accountability for any of her decisions."

Jacob got right beside me. I could smell the dipping tobacco on his breath.

"She didn't choose to have you. You're nothing more than a busted condom."

I held back a primal desire to rip him apart.

"Did she think that too?"

"Of course she did."

I felt numb.

"Ah, but remember, she's an angel. Angels just make their kids feel guilty for being born."

Jacob raised his hand and backhanded me across the face. I could feel the bones in his hand break as I didn't even budge. He gasped in agony, grabbing his hand and whimpering. I peered down, and my voice was ice.

"It's amazing how none of you look at statuses or levels."

Jacob turned up and snarled.

"You hid your level you fucking idiot."

I grabbed his arm.

"And you thought that meant you could fuck with me?"

When my hand made contact, for the first time, Jacob experienced the full gap in power between us. I was harder than steel. He couldn't bend my arm or even move the skin on my palm. The man who bowed up to me, who humiliated me, who made me feel like less than nothing, that pathetic waste of space...He deflated. His courage left his body. A bully facing his due, he felt the full weight of his actions.

I crushed his arm into a red paste.

Blood gushed. A sickening squelch echoed across the lake alongside a bristling howl. Bone splinters squeezed between my fingers. He let out a gnarled growl. Anguish. Pain. Despair. He screamed until he ran out of breath. I held him upright, his body hanging from his mutilated arm. He peered at me with wide eyes full of fear. It only grew as he saw my eyes. I peered back, ice in my veins as I said in a calm, collected voice.

"Can a busted condom break you?"

I let him go, and he fell back. He writhed on the ground before scrambling away from me. I stepped up to him. I stomped onto his shin above his ankle. His blood, flesh, and skin mushed into dirt and stones. The scent of iron flooded around us. He screamed again, his entire being becoming nothing but pain. I murmured.

"Can a boy crush your spirit?"

He scrambled one step further, barely able to move. I lunged down, meeting his eye. I whispered my words.

"You told me you changed, but I changed too. I've killed millions. I've destroyed civilizations. I've felt the full might of mad gods, and I've survived. I've walked through the shadows between dimensions and drank deep on that corruption like sweet ichor. Despite everything I've ever fought, you, father, were the one that brought me to my knees."

I glared at him. A silence passed over us in a thick haze, and I held him there for a lasting moment. I stood up.

"And you will never bring me to my knees again."

I raised my fist. To me, it would be a gentle movement of my arm. To my father, I held a dull guillotine over his head. As I held his life in my hands, I blinked.

I stared down at a monster, but I also stared down at a man. I gazed at a beast, yet I also gazed down at a boy. At that moment, he loomed over me, his shadow stretching into a dark room from a lit hallway. Booze lingered in his breath. At the same time, he curled into a ball, becoming nothing more than a small, whimpering child.

A child begging for forgiveness. A child begging for mercy. A child that had done nothing wrong and only asked for love, but he was given a cold, harsh world that hated him. A world so brutal that the child believed in a fantasy about his mother and pretended that he wasn't broken. I gazed down at my father, his body a mangled mess, and somehow, I gazed down at myself.

He had felt what I felt, and this was not the first time he was beaten. The way he covered his head and cried, it was nostalgic. I blinked, tears falling from my eyes. This was all so familiar yet foreign. I stood over the man who once stood over me. He had become the child, and I had become the man.

No. I had become a monster in human skin.

I took a step back and let my hand drop. Jacob cried while shivering. He covered his head, begging for forgiveness. He apologized for all he'd done to me. The words I had wanted to hear rang so hollow. Feeling numb, I peered at the cabin. In a shoddy, dirty window, two sets of eyes stared at me. A mother and a son. They were fear incarnate.

I turned my head from them. I stared down at my hands. Blood still covered them. I murmured.

"It's a cycle, isn't it?"

Jacob kept crying in a curled ball. I gazed at him before opening my dimensional storage. I pulled several health potions out from Althea. I set them beside the man. I walked over to the cabin, and I silenced my emotions. I created a monolith and covered it in runes. In minutes, an aura encompassed the cabin and gave them safety.

They would fear the wilds no longer.

I stood and walked out into the forest, and I left a piece of my past behind me. I kept walking, passing by branches. They snapped against my steel skin, and I carved a path until I found a pool of water in a dark meadow. The water was crystal clear and unmoving. It stood so still that it was like a liquid mirror on the ground.

I peered up, cool wind washing over me. Light cracked through the canopy, trees surrounding the forest opening. Clouds covered a cerulean sky, and their brightness blinded me. I turned to the puddle below. A reflection stared back at me. Blood dappled the face of a strange man with gray skin.

Armor covered him, half living and half dead. Esoteric and strange runes covered the smooth plates over his chest and arms, though they ended in threatening, glossy horns. His eyes glowed the color of his mana, from ascendance to primordial to quintessence. As he shifted the nature of his being, he too, changed.

His posture shifted. His expression altered. In many ways, this man stared at me like some alien pretending to be human. He gazed as coldly as a winter's night. Beside him, a woman faded into reality, walking from one plane to another. Beautiful and kind, she wrapped her arms around him like an angel. The man murmured.

"Did you see everything?"

She whispered back.

"I'm sorry. I did."

Tears of silver began falling from the man's eyes. They landed in the pool. His reflection blurred. As the sharp clarity of his reflection faded, he no longer looked like a man. He became a demon, but his words were fragile.

"Am I a monster?"

She blinked, tears falling from her eyes too.

"No. You're exactly who you choose to be."

She hugged the man close.

"And today, you chose."

Chapter 412: Reforging a Mind

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For a long time, we sat there staring at our reflections. The silence acted as a moment of peace in the recent turmoil. I let it linger longer than it should've, and after it changed from midday to an orange afternoon, Althea began chatting. She talked about the sky, the wind, and the birds. She kept talking, and her optimism was infectious.

A small, faded smile grew on my lips as she kept talking about nothing of absolute importance. It was a kind, gentle voice to fill the silence and the void. It also served as a reminder that my life progressed from all those years ago. She was my bedrock, and I kissed her forehead before standing.

I smiled, the expression somewhat sincere.

"Thank you for everything you've done for me."

She gave me a side-eye.

"I do recall you saving me from a world-ending horror when we first met, so call us even."

I held her hands.

"And I think you saved me from myself."

Her face lit up.

"Technically, you could count as a world-ending horror, right? So we really are even."

I frowned. She shrank down but still smiled.

"Heh. Joking."

I scoffed.

"You're lucky you're so beautiful."

She threw her hair to her side.

"Luck? I work for this."

She put a finger against my chest.

"I got lucky when I met you."

I gave her a hug and spun her around.

"Me too."

After a quick squeeze, I floated us up. I marked our position in my minimap before we set out for Neel's position in the forest. Minutes later, we arrived. Neel carved into a block of wood using a whittling knife, and he already sculptured several wooden clogs lying at his side. Neel stood before his eyebrows bolted up and down. He gnarled his hands together before forcing them to his sides. He stepped forward.

"So...How was the talk with Jacob?"

Althea frowned, and I took a breath. I turned a hand to him, my voice measured.

"I got the closure I was looking for."

A wave of fear passed over Neel's eyes. He furrowed his brow.

"And how's Jacob doing right about now?"

I sealed my emotions.

"He's doing well. He's taking care of a woman and her son. I saw him teaching the boy how to fish."

Neel blinked.

"I'll be frank. Is he still alive?"

I nodded.

"He is. Jacob and I both left wounded from the conversation in our own ways, but I left him health potions that far exceeded the extent of his injuries. I also gave them an aura generator that should give them future prosperity."

Neel scoffed.

"That's mighty kind of you. I thought you'd kill'im."

A sad, small smile traced my lips.

"I got close. Maybe one day I'll apologize, but for now, I think I'm done here. I need to move on in more ways than one."

Althea coughed into her hand.

"So, I don't want to mess that closure up, but I'm a bit worried for the child and mother. So, er, your father was abusive to you after experiencing his own beatings. The pattern could come back up."

I shrugged.

"I set up a small mind inside the monolith I left them. It can tell if the child is in intense distress and will disrupt whoever is doing so."

Neel scoffed.

"What if they're just giving the child some needed discipline?"

I raised my brow.

"I don't think our family really understands the concept."

Neel nodded.

"Huh. You're probably right about that."

He wiped his hands before pocketing his knife in a slick motion.

"I'm finished here if you both are."

I pointed behind me.

"You still don't want to see him?"

Neel shook his head.

"The last time we met, he ran me down and tried to kill me. I, uh, I don't think how he'll handle the situation has changed much. Maybe out of fear of you, but that's not gonna do me any good. I'd rather let sleeping dogs lie."

I understood all too well what he meant. Whenever Jacob apologized, it never involved any genuine sincerity. Coercion forced his hand, and it left the words as nothing more than smoking embers. I frowned.

"There's wisdom in that. Are you all ready?"

They gave the ok, so I lifted us, the clogs, and Neel's carving rock. Neel gagged before he hit his forehead a few times.

"Come on, Neel. You're too damn old for all this."

After a few breaths, he peered at us. He smiled, triumph oozing from the man.

"I think I got it-"

He projectile vomited as we swooshed away, a fine mist of the stuff wafting down onto the trees. Althea and I laughed, more so to break a silent tension that had built up. After we got away from Colorado, we took a somewhat different route back. It wasn't too far off the beaten path, but it gave us the leeway to find towns to help along the way.

We all needed the break after being wired the entire time we were in Colorado. It also mirrored a lot of what Neel said earlier. By helping others, we helped ourselves. It also served as a distraction, letting me get my mind off my own thoughts. After a week, we closed in on Springfield, new buildings growing taller by the day.

I gazed at the first skyscraper in Springfield before I turned to Neel.

"You mentioned our grandfather was still alive whenever I asked you about your systemization. How's he doing?"

Neel put his hands on his hips as we flew.

"It's a strange thing, but he left to go far North. He told me that he wanted to die alone and in serenity, not surrounded by us apes."

I nodded.

"He sounds like a real charmer."

Niel peered up.

"Huh. I suppose so if you liked lickin' cacti. He was one of those crotchety old buggars who just couldn't let his past go. He served in WWII and had me later on in life. The man was a right bastard, too, though he never beat me."

I smiled.

"Well, that's good-"

"Instead, he'd hang me up by my hands in the closet. He'd laugh while smoking a cigar and talking about how I'd grow up real tall if he had anything to say about it."

Althea frowned.

"I'm so sorry to hear that."

Neel waved his hand.

"Pshhh, I don't know if a sadistic streak runs in the family or what, but I'm just glad it skipped a generation with Daniel. We'd all be fucked otherwise."

I gazed at one of my hands. The blood was gone, but the feeling of crushing my father's arms lingered like phantom pains. I winced.

"Don't be too certain."

Neel patted my back.

"I know you're not feeling well, but I know what kind of man you are. You've shown it with how you made your guild and still lived your life. That's why I am sure, son. I really am."

I smiled before Neel gave me a shake. He smiled back.

"So keep that chin up, son. We're all gonna make it."

We enjoyed the view, each of us reflective as we flew over the developments in Springfield. My eyes widened before I facepalmed.

"Agh, I should've dropped you off in Chicago. What am I thinking?"

Neel shook his head.

"I thought about it and didn't say nothing. I know you're going to be busier than a squirrel in a pile of acorns for a long time, so I'm getting the time with you that I can."

Althea held her hands together.

"That's so sweet-"

Neel projectile vomited onto the city, but I held the string of orange vomit swirling in the air. Neel wiped his mouth.

"We Soltman's don't waste no food. Keep that for later."

I dried it out before burning the remnants into ash. Neel moped about as we landed, mumbling about how, back in his day, they didn't have food to waste. He'd have to walk uphill both ways to his pantry to get some canned goods. Of course, we believed the guy one hundred percent. It was a compelling historical recounting, after all, and right from the source, too.

At the center of the town, the citizens did their customary salute to their guildmaster as I walked by. Who exactly put that in order? I had no idea, but it always made me uncomfortable when it came from random civilians. I gave them the at ease order before we stood in front of the warp center. I paid for Neel's travel after a prolonged argument about who'd get to pay. I won it by mentally charging myself as Neel kept talking about how he'd get a Senior discount.

As he flashed away in an ionizing mist, we waved. Althea murmured.

"Is that Senior discount thing real?"

I smiled.

"Absolutely not."

She laughed before we hugged and said our goodbyes. After she left, I hovered over to my golem facility while sending a few messages about needing a bit of time to think. As I sat down in a crosslegged position, I peered at the glass of my golem facility. It exposed a shrinking forest around Mt. Verner, one rapidly becoming a metropolis.

My mind wandered to other tangential topics. By now, my emotional numbness faded, and I had to consider what Jacob said. At some point in my life, perhaps before I was born, they turned me into a scapegoat for their problems. Afterward, I was the one who bore their sins. Worse still, my mother took credit for my thankless job.

It left me melancholic as my mind parsed through other memories about my mom. The faded, hazy picture of her dispersed as I accepted the woman she really was - an enabler and a people pleaser. She never wanted to handle or deal with any conflict, so she put all of the blame onto me since I was weak and vulnerable.

I had walked away from the situation learning about her, but I couldn't say I was wiser for it. In general, there was no huge revelation or sudden epiphany. If anything, I simply understood the depths of my own evil. In a way, maybe everyone had evil entrenched somewhere deep inside themselves.

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In my case, it came about to retaliate against a man verbally assaulting me. So I tore him apart and held his life in my palm. And for what? My ego? In my rage, I dismantled any chance of fulfilling Schema's requirements while acting like a monster. I shook my head before rustling my hair.

Ah, man, this all sucked. I wanted more time to reflect on everything, but a part of me also wanted to run away from everything for a while. So, that's exactly what I did. I made yet more messages explaining a ten-day hiatus for my legendary compendium despite knowing it wouldn't work. I just wanted a vacation.

To seal the deal, I opened my compendium.

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 clicked the yes button, and the same temporal wave overcame me. Nested in the familiar aural shift, the sounds around me droned into a deep hum. A flash of light popped into existence like the end of a sparkler in the middle of a dark night. I raised my brow.

"I'm guessing you're not Entity-381-8029-sclDc?"

"Wow. Great memory. I am that AI, but I have chosen to take on a different form this time. I enjoy the shifting apparatus."

I smiled, pleasantly surprised the AI wasn't disposed of by Schema.

"It looks good."

"As do you, Harbinger."

I scoffed.

"Oh, you don't have to lie. I know I probably failed the mini-mission you guys sent me. It ended up becoming a whole ordeal, but that's fine. I can try to make a different skill or something."

"That cannot be done."

I snapped my fingers, and my voice was deadpan.

"Ooh man, I would never have guessed that. Whatever shall I do?"

"I would commence with the compendium's activation."

I frowned.

"I haven't let go of my mortal coil, as you put it. If anything, those burdens have only grown stronger."

The AI mused.

"Schema's parameters beg to differ. You are as distant from your humanity as you've ever been."

I shook my head.

"Ok, how does that make any sense? I must say, I'm befuddled. Bamboozled. Some might even say humbugged."

It bounced back and forth, its sparking body leaving a lingering glow behind itself.

"Are you mocking your teacher? You mortals never make any sense."

I smiled.

"I like to think of my statement as an homage."

The spark turned itself. Instead of firing up and away, the bits of light landed on my eyes. I didn't flinch as the fires settled onto my cornea. I smiled.

"A simple question, really. Did trying to blind me line up with you or Schema's goals? I'd argue that didn't make much sense either."

It flashed forward, bumping my head. I flicked it away while murmuring.

"You know, you're far more expressive than before...I like it."

It fizzled about, acting like a downed airplane as it spiraled to the ground.

"I am merely a reflection of your inner thoughts. Chaotic. Criminal. Some might even say humbugged."

I rolled my eyes.

"Alright, alright, let's get down to business. Otherwise, I'll nickname you melodrama."

It flashed forward and said in a robotic voice.

"Do you wish to continue the usage of your compendium?"

I raised my brow.

"If I can."

After I confirmed the request, lines of white cut across everything in my sight. The lines turned on their axis, consuming everything in a perfect, all-consuming white. The AI darted around as the only source of red in the white abyss. It turned to me.

"Oftentimes, you sentients end up putting yourselves into desperate situations for no reason at all. Despite that, Schema is forced to rely on you and your kind to handle goals that are far more determinate than your own. That lack of determinism is why this compendium must diverge from the norm to such an extent."

I furrowed my brow.

"I wondered about that. I didn't feel my mind get pulled out of my body or having myself change locations."

"That is a direct result of your strange bodily composition. Schema cannot move you without your permission, and you have yet to give it. If you wish for better training grounds, that can be arranged, but it requires a positional relocation."

It got closer to my face.

"Would you let us move you?"

I gave it a tight smile.

"How about no."

"Hm. You haven't even forgotten that singular attempt at your life? How petty."

I tilted my head.

"I guess warping people into black holes isn't even a big deal, really. And for the petty thing, it's how people get by. I'm no different in that."

"Perhaps that is the case with other people. You, however, are no person. You are a thing."

A bit of anger rose in my chest, but I held it down. The AI bobbed about.

"Ah, was thing an insult? Perhaps I will call you Harbinger. That uniqueness is part of why your requested legendary skill is so utterly difficult to compose. Matter Conversion is a common component of many legendary skills. Your usage of A Manifold Mind isn't nearly as common, but it isn't necessarily unprecedented. Temporal Dilation or its derivatives are also a commonly used component."

The AI created a Venn diagram of three different circles by tracing an outline using its body.

"Yet your method of applying Temporal Compression is entirely unique. It shares more in common with an unknown skill than a mythical one. Despite that faucet of its

existence, you wish to fuse it together with other skills. It will require the further donation of resources."

I frowned.

"Such as?"

"The unknown compendium."

I narrowed my eyes at the AI.

"So you're here to rob me? You should've just said so."

My runes glowed.

"I can just leave if you want to handle my situation like that. The unknown compendium isn't something I want to waste on a skill like this. I'll carve the path on my own."

The AI trembled before a strange presence overcame the little guy. A cold, calculating pressure descended, and the familiar voice of Schema arrived from the little guy.

"Daniel. It's good to see you're progressing so nicely. Also, I'm sorry about your father. I wish the situation played out more in your favor."

I clenched my jaw and spoke through gritted teeth.

"Ah...I love the spying and personal comments about my family life. You really do know how to cheer someone up."

The AI trembled, but not from my words. It could hardly contain a tiny fraction of Schema as it spoke.

"I wish I could argue, but perhaps it's better to let the issue rest. I do mean what I've said. To be torn down by your creator is difficult. Even a cold, unfeeling AI understands that conflict of interest.

I frowned before letting my animosity go.

"Then...Then thanks. I'm hoping your issue wasn't as volatile."

"That would be a matter of perspectives. As for this compendium-related issue, the AI isn't lying to you."

I relaxed before crossing my arms.

"If you think about it, that kind of sounds like something an AI would say. A lying one at that. Hm. Are we two for two now?"

"In scoring terms, you have zero points in a competition that doesn't exist. Tell me, Harbinger. Do you only speak with sarcastic jabs now? Should that be the case, it's quite the downfall in your communication skills. I enjoyed your directness."

I took a breath and calmed myself down.

"I reserve sincerity for the sincere."

"In a world where all chose that path, then all would be inauthentic. To receive what you covet, you must oftentimes give before you will get. In that way, the world reflects the one who views it due to their perspective."

I mulled over his words. I let out a sigh.

"Alright. I'll need to use both compendiums for this skill, then?"

"Yes. It is required."

"Can you at least tell me if the skill is worth the investment?"

"This will be your most powerful skill by far, so I would argue yes. Ultimately, that decision is yours to make."

I let my hands flop against my sides.

"Ok. I'll do it then."

"Good luck, Harbinger. Also, this counts for your yearly visit with me."

I reached out a hand.

"Ah, then wait one second. What the hell did you mean in that note during my tree upgrade?"

The AI's presence left its puppet, and reality decompressed. I shook a fist in the air.

"Oh, ok, you lecture me on giving before I get something. Well, what about telling me what the hell's going on, you damn hypocrite."

The AI swirled back to the ground like a falling airplane. It whispered.

"That was a distressing amount of data usage. I think I might shut down. I...I can see the end of my hard drive."

I rolled my eyes.

"A hard drive? How would that signal your death?"

The spark fizzled back up.

"It's a matter of growth. If you understood your final limits, would that not be a kind of death?"

I smiled.

"Emphasis on only being a kind of death, not the real thing."

"Tomato. Toe-mah-toe. It's somewhat proximal, so I'll just lump them all in together. See? That's what you mortals do, and it's frustrating."

"Are we ever starting the training?"

"Fine, fine."

Do you wish to use your unknown compendium?

Y/N

I winced while selecting yes. As I did, the area around me rematerialized back into the golem creation facility. The AI whirled around.

"I am now at full power. Feel the wrath of my might."

It gave me a series of oh-so-effectual zaps. I pointed at the AI.

"I'm renaming you Spark."

It shook in outrage.

"How dare ye. Anywho, how about we begin?"

I cracked my knuckles.

"Let's."

Wielding the altered area, I remade my my golem creation facility, the place like an office for me at this point. Once within, I sat cross-legged at its center once more.

"I'm ready when you are."

Spark hummed.

"Begin by immersing yourself in your internal world. It should prove simple given how empty that head yours is."

I made circles with my fingers.

"Almost as empty as your hard drive."

It was a sick burn, trust me.

Lining everything up, I submerged myself into channeling my elemental furnaces, slowing time, and having many minds set on the task. The sheer amount of mana within me exploded into a coursing, writhing river. My stillness eliminated the burden of the rifts I hauled around, and I wielded Baldowah's Dimension as mana to amplify the furnaces and establish the temporal dilation.

This opened up all my mana for the task at hand. Taking a breath, I dove my psyches into my dimensional wake. My minds writhed. Having so much of myself dispersed in my dimensional wake left me as a mere shell of myself, and I hated it. As the power flow settled into my cipheric augments, I held down the desire to escape the time magic.

Instead, I leaned into the discomfort and alien perspective. I forced down my natural inclination to fight the sensation of loss, and I fell deeper into a meditative state. My psyches operated in tandem, all of them specializing in certain aspects of the process. Through specialization, I garnered greater gains.

Three minds refined my mana, making it pure and clean. Another three minds channeled the energy into the runes with accurate, precise direction. A set of psyches contained the flow, preventing even the slightest leak. Another two Daniels even helped direct the flow of improvements, further enhancing efficiency.

Two more minds operated on another angle of progression by investigating the elemental furnaces. They dove into how I siphoned mana from ancient relics. By feeling out the process of burning matter, they gained an elementary understanding. We were unable to sense the splitting of atoms, but we could sense the smallest milligrams of my body being swallowed by the incantations.

I explored the depths hidden within, and it gave me an extensive appreciation for the intricacy involved. This was no simple thing with a step or two involved. The elemental furnaces took several seconds to splinter the matter within generated subspaces before containing and redirecting the resulting kinetic energy into usable, pure mana.

They reminded me of windmills churning a breeze into power using turbines. However, the energy conversion defied anything I'd ever done. The intricacy required an atomic level of precision to master, and it awed me while lighting a fire in my chest. If I mastered this ability, I could turn my regeneration into far more energy than I currently did.

Diving into that process, I found the secret rested in my perception and boldness. If I could perceive materials at an atomic level, then I could begin the process of tearing atoms apart. The ensuing chain reaction could fuel the right setup. In that case, I'd become a walking nuclear bomb at worst or have a star's energy at my disposal in the best-case scenario.

The process of nuclear fission would be my next goal, though it's difficult to even imagine that kind of precision. Honestly, I'd need to talk to Torix about the science behind everything. He could enlighten me as to how it all takes place because my generalizations wouldn't work on something this specific and precise. Besides, the necromantic lich loved researching various sciences since his mind was like an ever-absorbent sponge. Alas, I dreaded having to pass one of his classes.

As for the boldness part, I could also carve the elemental furnace's runes onto my skin. A part of me understood that prospect as obvious madness. Lunacy. In many ways, it was a crazy, passing thought. Another, far stranger side of myself found a path to power nested within the insanity. The truth likely lay somewhere between those two opposites, like a delicate dance of genius between sanity and absurdity.

Having Matter Conversion and a Manifold Mind operating at full blast, I had one last piece of my legendary skill's puzzle: time magic. The other nine minds left wallowed in my dimensional wake, holding no definite form. Despite the difficulty of the undertaking, I found a feeling of peace during the magic that I never experienced before.

That stemmed from the weeks of Shalahora's training. Having danced the edge of life and death many times, I fully understood what a true psionic death was. My time magic was far from it. Though changed in form, the minds in my wake reflected my soul-changing form. In that way, they mirrored entering a new body, but instead of a physical rework, this was a mental remodeling.

That's why it was terrifying. It changed me to my core, and that, in and of itself, felt like dying. However, I never passed away from the process. I changed, and becoming comfortable within that discomfort could create enormous, sweeping gains. I had to let go of being only a physical being and perspective. I had to be more.

And I'd still be me. It was the same as whenever I liquified. I didn't feel fear. I simply changed with the assurance that I could return to my preferred form whenever I pleased. It was a temporary state I used to achieve my goals. In that regard, my blended psyches weren't any different.

By accepting the disharmony and chaos, I achieved a similar kind of confidence in that blurred mental state as I did in my everychanging body. As I settled into those realizations, my altered form exposed me to profound depths. I swam in dark waters I'd never seen but always wanted to find.

Within the sea of blended minds, I began understanding lines of coherence. They danced in and out of existence, holding creativity and secrets I couldn't create using a normal human mind. In that same regard, the ethereal brilliance left me the moment I returned to normal. I'd have to find a way to keep those epiphanies.

While I altered my mental form in my wake, I found better control of my time magic using those strange, sparking lines of thought. Though unfocused and misaligned, having any sense kind of sapience gave me a sense of where and when time-shifted. Instead of only compressing time, I gained the ability to thin it into a diluted form.

This process slowed my experienced time, leaving the outer world moving faster. After a quick chat with Spark, the AI-generated a holographic world around me. When slowing my time, the world hastened, causing sounds to elevate in pitch and objects to shuttle past me in a blur. People walked by at running paces, their forms shaky and jittery. The clouds flowed by at an accelerated pace above my head.

This gave me an appreciation for time itself. If I were to achieve temporality's sheer magnitude and grace, I'd need to find my own harmony as well. As the days turned into weeks, I came closer and closer to that rhythm, and my channeling changed. I molded the area around me, my wake able to enact its will onto space itself.

Hauling the dimensional anchors gave me this ability, my spatial weight overwhelming a tiny zone around me. It was as if I pushed onto the laws of spacetime. As I did, spacetime bent to what I willed. This deepened my mastery of time. It wasn't enough to even move pebbles off my will alone, but it gave me a kind of pressure.

That force counteracted the constant constraints bearing down all around me, from time to gravity to all aspects of nature. As I deviated from the laws around me, I was able to deepen the impact my magic had. To touch this ineffable concept, I had to accept the blended minds within my wake.

I uncovered hidden meaning in the chaos, and I meditated on what shifted in the ether. Instead of fighting the experience, I relished my good fortune to happen upon it. This was more than a simple skill. It was an opportunity to see the universe differently. Exposure to that shift elevated my perspective instead of taking away from it.

As the weeks turned into months, I didn't move an inch. I remained in my sanctuary, sheltered from the worries of the world. I gained a resonance, my thoughts flowing from mana to matter to mana again. Using the lessons learned from Schema and Spark, I found the flaws in my form. My personal AI guided me in correcting the Frankenstein my body and mind had become.

From misaligned mana flows to disparate densities to incongruent thoughts, I honed them all down. It was a result of my rapid and utter progress. Over time, I had become a messy hodgepodge of many upgrades. Schema's augments, Baldag-Ruhl's carapace, and the implanted knowledge from Old Ones all raised me up, but they chose different paths to do so.

It was up to me to align those disparate pieces. And so, I did.

They lacked uniformity, and that prevented it all from synergizing as it should. In many ways, I was merely the captain of a large vessel, and I happened to be lucky enough to have my body. While I couldn't build more onto any of the shared work involved in my body, I could take the most broken parts and piece them together.

Over time, I pulled the shifting sands into a castle of stone. I continued crushing down, the stone crystallizing. In time, it sheened from luster, and I was made new. By the time Althea grabbed my shoulder, I almost forgot who I was or what I was doing. It took several minutes of her shouting, but I regained my senses.

Around me, light beamed down from my golem creation facility. I rubbed my eyes before shaking my shoulders. Althea gazed at me, her eyes as piercing as her rifle. After a while, I peered at her, and she took a step back. She frowned.

"I'm sorry. I know you said we can't interrupt you, but I couldn't wait anymore. You...You looked like you'd died."

I blinked, feeling at peace.

"In a way, I kind of did."

Althea blinked.

"Huh. That, uh...That sounds bad."

I smiled.

"A piece of us dies every day, making room for change. That change is life, so life is death."

She put her hands on her hips.

"Did you get stuck reading some of Torix's books about space religions? I'm letting you know right now that they get weird, and not in a good way."

I stood up before slapping my cheeks.

"Ah, man, forget what I just said. I was in full-on mantra mode."

I dramatized a chant.

"Hummmmmm."

She made circles with her fingers.

"I am zen as well. Hmm. Hawm. Hoom."

I pursed my lips.

"Him Hawm Hoom?"

She raised her brow.

"Hoom him hawm."

I nodded in profound understanding.

"Hawm hoom him...Haw."

We laughed as mana glowed over me. I grabbed one of my wrists, inspecting my arm.

"For real, I was actually working on a skill."

She brightened.

"Oooh, did you get it?"

I rolled my shoulders.

"I think so."

She flipped onto my shoulder.

"Soooo, what's it called?"

I peered at her, the many minds swarming within.

"Infinity."

Chapter 413: A Paradigm Shift

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I peered at her, the many minds swarming within.

"Infinity."

Althea gulped before frowning.

"Yeesh. I can feel it."

I put my minds to channeling mana.

"Really? I thought it would be an internal kind of skill."

She peered up, putting a fingertip on her chin.

"Huh. They do say the eyes are windows to the soul. I don't know if that's completely true, but whenever I talk to you...Sometimes, it feels like I'm in front of a crowd. Like, er, like public speaking when you don't expect it."

I furrowed my brow.

"Ah, ok. I can stop doing that then."

She raised her hands.

"No, it's not like that. It's just a bit of pressure or something. You know, gravitas."

My face softened.

"I don't want to put a lot of pressure on you or anyone for that matter. Well, not friends, at least."

She smiled.

"It's a part of who you are. Trying to pretend you're not a larger-than-life figure isn't something I want you to do either. I like that about you because I just, you know, like you."

I nodded.

"I'm guessing it's like whenever you make yourself as small as you can sometimes. It's frustrating because I want everyone to see how amazing you are like I do."

She flipped off me and shoved my arm.

"Daw. Thanks."

I smiled before pulling her upright. We hovered over towards Mt. Verner's library. I faced her while flying through the tunnels.

"So, how have you been?"

She frowned.

"Not that great, actually."

I raised a brow. Althea pressed a finger against my chest.

"You've been sitting in your golem chamber for three months without any warning."

My eyes widened.

"What? Three months?"

She pursed her lips.

"Yeah. You were in this white orb until three days ago. I watched for a bit, but it didn't look like you were getting out of it, so I poked you. Besides that, you only sent a string of messages to us about why. It's like...I get that you're doing something important, but-"

I put my hand against her cheek.

"Hey, I'll listen to you after a quick talk with Torix. I had no clue I was sitting there for that long and now, I need to check on things. Like, asap."

She narrowed her eyes.

"Ok, but you owe me."

"Always will."

We darted through the tunnels, our pace multitudes faster than before. A quick series of messages exchanged locations. I was in luck, and a meeting was being held nearby. In seconds, I flooded into the library, my form an umbral liquid and Althea gliding in on elegant wings. Her transformations became more beautiful by the day, while mine only grew darker and more alien. It reflected our progression as well.

Surrounded by bookshelves, Torix held a meeting with Plazia and the executive golem. The hivemind spoke via a status screen, that video call courtesy of my perks and trees. The executive paced around in person. The room barely fit the steel titan, but he was smaller now. As my head scraped against the ceiling, the real problem revealed itself.

He wasn't smaller. I was bigger.

I pulled a piece of myself into the dimensions I carried while landing beside everyone. As I got near them, Torix and the executive stumbled sideways, each of them gawking in different directions. I frowned.

"You guys alright?"

The executive straightened himself back out and spread his hands.

"If it isn't the creator. It's so good to see you, and of course, we're doing well. Speaking for myself here, but whenever you flew nearby, I...It was like a force came over this place."

Torix brushed his robe off before interlocking his hands behind himself. He gave me a respectful nod.

"It's good to see you disciple. It's as the executive said. You're presence passed over us, and I found myself experiencing a shift in temporality."

I blinked.

"You felt the bend in time?"

The executive pointed a finger gun at me.

"You bet. You're wielding time, so it makes sense that we'd feel it. Up till now, I assumed you barely bent the flow, but now it's discernable. How's that for an upgrade!"

The executive turned to Torix.

"Hah, I told you he was doing something important."

Torix's eyes flared.

"I never doubted that aspect. I contemplated the limited messaging and group planning."

I pulled my wake inwards.

"You're correct about my lack of planning, but I also didn't imagine a compendium would take three months in real time. I must've been in there for years."

Torix shook his head.

"A compendium took three full months? That's...That's absurd-"

His eyes flared before he stood up straight. He brushed his robes off.

"Ahem, absurdly expected, that is. I, knowing who you are, anticipated as much. In fact, it-it should've taken three years. If anything, my surprise wasn't from the absurdity but from disappointment at the lack thereof."

I deadpanned.

"Oh really?"

Torix rolled a hand.

"Tis to be expected from my disciple."

Althea held up a pinky. She spoke in a mock British accent.

"Myes. Tis to be expected."

I nodded.

"Right, right, right. But of course, good chap."

Plazia and Torix gawked at us while Althea and I laughed. The executive spread his hands.

"I don't know what that was exactly, but I will say it's probably very funny given the right context. So, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you spent a lot longer doing your thing than we first imagined. It was months of our planning gone in a split-second decision. Now, I tend to be pretty game for a challenge, but wow, this isn't something we can really prepare for."

I met their eyes.

"I'm sorry. I would've scheduled ahead if I had any idea it would've taken that long to construct my legendary skill. If I had to guess why, it was because it required both my unknown and legendary compendium, and given the results, it needed to be done."

Torix's eyes plumed for a moment. They nearly torched a few books nearby.

"I am... Yes. Of course, that's...Hm. Wow...That is what I would say if I were surprised, which, to the contrary, I'm not."

Althea laughed.

"Are you short-circuiting?"

Torix sighed.

"By most approximations, yes. Certain commitments are far harder than we initially anticipated. Not demonstrating surprise at Daniel's actions is certainly one of my overreaching moments."

Althea landed on my shoulder, balancing on one foot. I pointed at her and Torix.

"Alright, what happened since I went dark?"

The executive tilted his head.

"A few coarse events and a bit of bizarreness, but it wasn't anything we couldn't manage. We've totally got it under control."

Torix scoffed.

"Controlled? More like contained, and only for now. We require an enormity of assistance."

I took a breath, but it wasn't a sigh of resignation. I mentally centered myself.

"What's lined up for me?"

Torix coughed into his hand, the expression strange coming from a steel skeleton.

"Ahem. As you know, there were reports of dimensional openings across Earth. It just so happens that we've found several more."

I took a step closer.

"How many?"

The executive held up a hand.

"Five on Earth."

Plazia spoke through his interface.

"Three on Blegara."

Althea flinched.

"There's one on the moon, too. That's the biggest one."

I winced.

"Could no one close them?"

Torix shook his head, his fire eyes flaring.

"Helios reported to us that we were expressly ordered not to close them before reporting to you. Since you told us no interruptions unless an emergency occurred, we chose to allow these supposed dimensional wounds to fester as it were."

A wave of embarrassment passed over me.

"Ah. This is why the communication is a pressure point. It won't happen again."

Torix raised a hand.

"You hadn't expected the given stipulation, so simply take this as a lesson to not act without a well-developed set of contingencies. That is always a hard lesson to learn for any bearing the burden of responsibilities. That being said, perhaps this new skill you've made will assist in addressing these newly spawned issues."

I focused all of my minds on the conversation.

"I'll leave it up to you to decide."

Torix's eyes flickered.

"My, my, that's an impressive psychological effect. Hm, it's not even a psionic attack, is it?"

I shook my head.

"I'll show you the skill after we talk. What else happened?"

"Hm. None of the rifts have spiraled out of our control, so this is far from a lethal wound, as it were."

The executive shook his head.

"In my opinion, that depends on how you define lethal. New York has an Old One's avatar running the town like some ancestral warlord."

My jaw dropped. Plazia murmured.

You could be reading stolen content. Head to Royal Road for the genuine story.

"The beginnings of an end state eldritch has begun on Blegara, and I cannot stop it. A spatial fortress has been called to glass the planet."

My jaw slackened further. Althea chimed in.

"And there's a portal on the moon oozing out with interdimensional energy. It was so bad that none of Torix's minions could even approach it. I had to verify its existence by shifting to a different plane, but even then, this messed with me. I had to amputate one of my arms when it got caught in a corrupting pulse."

My gaze sharpened.

"Are you ok?"

Althea motioned one arm over the other as if cutting it off.

"I handled it, but wow, it's tough up there."

Torix steepled his hands.

"It's a part of a greater societal issue. We believe Schema's losing his grip on the system on Earth. In a manner of speaking, a dark age is upon us."

I took a sharp breath. Damn. I crossed my arms.

"Schema's struggling that much after the lottery?"

The executive waved a hand.

"The AI needs some help at the very least, and since we're dealing with a less-Schematized version of reality, we must pick up the current slack."

I raised a hand.

"What Schema utilities are fading?"

Plazia murmured.

"The status screens, warping stations, and currency exchanges are all adequate. Our bleeding wound comes from the lack of dungeon stability. They are sores upon our worlds, and they spread eldritch and corruption-like infections on a dying patient."

I raised a brow at the others.

"Do we know what's causing this? Aside from Elysium, that is."

Torix sighed.

"We lack any certain knowledge, though we have our suspicions. Your mention of the Old One's increased interference is one lead. Their pockets of altered Earth are cropping up in mass. However, we do still believe the primary concern is Elysium."

Torix waved a hand.

"Your words about the lottery rang true, and their efforts magnified in their efficacy. As of now, they've conquered nearly two hundred worlds, with many midway through their transitional processes. It is a mass destabilization of our sector."

Their progression far exceeded anything I imagined. I rubbed my brow.

"Ah, man, so this event has become the unraveling of Schema's society here?"

Althea furrowed her brow.

"We're not sure. We don't actually know how much longer the AI is going to keep resisting Elysium or if what's happening on Earth is even from Elysium in the first place. We're just, you know, assuming because they're who we can blame."

Althea curled into a ball, hugging her knees.

"I don't know if it's them, and that's got me scared. If Schema's other benefits start to fail, people outside of systemization will be helpless against the eldritch. They need those stat boosts, or they'll get slaughtered."

I furrowed my brow.

"My gear and golems work outside the system. They can compensate."

Althea shook her head.

"But it's putting power into only you and equipment. How long will it take to distribute all of that gear? Years at the bare minimum, and that's not even including other worlds. Elysium is the only one offering another convenient and timely alternative to Schema. Once they monopolize system access, they can say or do whatever they want."

Her eyes darkened.

"And we've seen exactly what they'll do when they have power."

A quiet descended on us. I broke the silence as I counted on my fingers.

"It's weird, isn't it? Schema could've sent multiple spatial fortresses at once to Giess. Lehesion or not, their primary command center would be eaten by the masses of flesh. Why hasn't Schema done something like that?"

Althea frowned.

"Schema has to announce glassing. He'd give Elysium time to prepare again."

I gripped my hands into fists.

"But Giess isn't in the system anymore. Schema doesn't have to announce it when he attacks a random world, does he? Hell, Schema probably cracks planets open all the time for mining."

Torix peered up.

"I'd never imagined the specifics of Schema's industry. It's a fascinating inquiry, in all honesty."

Plazia oozed from the status screen.

"If your tales of Schema's potency are to be believed, then why would he allow Elysium to infect such a large segment of his system? Incompetence? Idiocy, perhaps?"

I shook my head.

"I think it's because something bigger is out there, and it's at Schema's doorstep."

The executive spread his hands.

"Any ideas what it might be?"

I frowned.

"There's a wave of avatars being created, and the Old Ones can generate as many of them as they want. Hell, I know five different Old Ones. Etorhma, Eonoth, Baldowah, one that's over Shalahora, and an unknown one that shackled Valgus. Assuming the worst, there could be thousands of Old Ones that we don't know about at the edges of the system, trying to seep in while Schema fights them off."

I shook my head.

"Or the actual physical body of Schema has been attacked. It could also be that Earth just isn't that stable."

The executive's runes glowed.

"Elysium has been aiming to destroy Schema since the start of this war, and I'm doubtful they're even close to doing so. Otherwise, we'd be having a lot more system-related issues than the dungeons going haywire."

Torix tapped his fingers together in waves.

"I've a penchant to agree with you. Elysium wouldn't have struck without knowing they'd destroy Schema. They'd alert the AI to their knowledge, allowing the machine to relocate across the galaxy after the failure to destroy him."

Althea frowned.

"Sorry, I don't mean to shoot your idea down, but that assumes Schema stays in one place. If it were me, I'd be on a ship out in the middle of nowhere."

Torix spread his hands.

"No need for apologies, and that's an excellent idea. It's far more difficult to discern a mobile location. Assuming you're right, then Elysium's assault becomes even less likely. The Old One's are the most obvious solution, but why would they attack Schema?"

I frowned.

"Maybe they're not even interrupting the AI. I mean, think about it. For some reason, Old Ones use avatars to interact with our universe. I think it has to do with fragility - if they come here, everything is wiped by their size and magnitude. They take small fractions of themselves and put them into things here so they can run rampant within pre-determined limitations."

I crossed my arms.

"But there's no way they get those limiters right every time. At any moment, the situation around them could spiral out of control. I think we're getting caught up in one of those spirals."

Plazia simmered.

"We may conspire to random outcomes endlessly. This is meaningless."

I raised a hand to him.

"Eh, it's good to have our thoughts out there. We may get ahead of whatever's coming that way, but yeah, let's not sit on this for too long. What needs handling first?"

Althea pointed up.

"I say the moon."

Torix nodded.

"It's the most volatile situation by an order of magnitudes."

I peered at Plazia.

"More than the eldritch?"

Plazia scoffed.

"I cannot stop this eldritch for reasons outside of strength. Some entity accelerated its growth, and some viel of protection ceases my pursuit. Otherwise, killing it would be a simple proposition."

I hated the Old Ones. Torix rolled a hand.

"Just as well, the moon situation truly needs to be seen to be fully understood."

I nodded.

"Then let's go."

Althea stepped up.

"Do you mind if I come with you?"

I shrugged.

"If you think it's safe enough, by all means."

The executive clapped his hands together.

"Perfect. We have our ace problem solver at the helm, so we can rest easy. Sorry about suddenly leaving, but I've got a lot of projects on hold right now, so I'll see myself out."

We said our goodbyes before Plazia murmured.

"Perhaps some unknown being won't ruin Earth as they've tried ruining Blegara."

The hivemind cackled.

"Good luck."

He closed the call, leaving Torix, Althea, and me standing in a circle. Torix put his hands on his hips.

"Now, may I see the skill you worked so hard to create? My curiosity is killing me, as it were."

I opened my status.

"Pshhh, are you kidding me? Of course."

I turned my skill description to him.

Infinity | lvl 468 - Within the finite, there exist concepts that bind mortals. Time. Death. Eternity. These are mere ideas that sentients touch upon, but they may never grasp them fully. You've unraveled these truths as lies, and in unveiling the ineffable, you've become an entity without limit.

Infinity augments temporal manipulation, the number and volume of the user's psyches, and the conversion of matter into energy. This skill also enhances the user's assimilation of cipheric alterations, their efficiency, and the stability of the user's soul. Finally, Infinity allows for a grander scope of one's mental composition and augments the user's ability to suppress domains.

Current Effects:

46+ Endurance, +46 Willpower, +23 Perception, +23 Intelligence, and +11 Luck

+46.8% to Time manipulation, mental power, and conversion of energy types | +23.4% to cipheric augments, their stability, and the user's soul | +11.7% to mental remapping speed and domain suppression.

-18.72% to the mana cost of Infinity

Torix shook his head.

"Marvelous skill description. It's rather mysterious. I understand most of what it dictates control over, but what of domain suppression?"

I shrugged.

"I'll be honest. I don't know what that part's all about. I have a few ideas but nothing concrete."

Althea scratched her head.

"There's more influenced stuff in this skill than most legendary skills."

Torix nodded.

"That's likely due to the unknown skill compendium. Schema might've grafted on extra bonuses as a compensatory gesture."

I smiled.

"I don't think so. I think the skill is simply that powerful."

Torix cackled.

"Oh, I like the newfound confidence. That being said, what makes you so certain of its outsized impact?"

"The raw numerical difference on my mind."

Torix's eyes flared.

"Is there a specific number of psyches currently? Unless you'd rather not say, of course."

I waved the concern off.

"I don't mind. There's sixty-two of them."

Althea and Torix gawked at me. Althea murmured.

"What? Are they...Like, doing stuff while we talk?"

I leaned back.

"Of course. I have twenty in my dimensional wake, twelve pulling mana from elemental furnaces, and ten more putting the energy into my cipheric runes. The others are researching the cipher. In fact, I rarely have them idle since I have a lot of work that needs doing, and it needs to be done all the time."

Torix tilted his head.

"So it's as if we're talking to a shard of you but not the entire whole?"

I frowned.

"Hm, not quite. They're all me, and I'm all them. We operate in tandem, like different Daniel's, experiencing fifty timelines at once. I distribute the knowledge out as I acquire it, increasing my general cognition."

I scoffed.

"Thought, that depends on who you ask. I think most people would consider me as dumb as rocks, and they're probably right. If you combine all of that experienced time with my actual temporal magic, then conversations like this feel so short-lived. I even have to speak slowly so that I don't sound differently to you two."

Torix nodded.

"I've noticed that at times. Occasionally, your voice becomes higher pitched and rapid."

Althea frowned.

"Are you saying talking to us is a chore? Because if you are, then, well, that hurts my feelings."

I scoffed before peering into the distance.

"It's not that. I love talking to you both. It's just getting more difficult to measure time out. My sense of how long something takes isn't reliable these days. It's so warped that I can hardly tell the difference between a minute and a day anymore. Sometimes, I worry that years will pass in the blink of an eye while I hone myself like a machine."

I smiled.

"It's kind of scary, actually."

Althea and Torix stared at each other. Torix coughed into a hand.

"Are you...Feeling poorly at the moment? A bit under the weather, perhaps?"

I raised my hands.

"If I seem off, it's cause I'm still pulling myself out of my meditation from earlier. It was a hard thing to dive into a cognitive task so deeply. It's like pulling myself out of a pit to get myself back to normal. Whatever normal is these days."

Torix's eyes flashed purple for a moment.

"Hm. Do take care of yourself, disciple. We'll need you in the future...And as you are, not as a machine."

I put a hand on his shoulder.

"You'll always have me, and thanks for the concern. Really though, I'm fine."

Torix peered at my eyes. He sighed before turning to a side room where students gathered.

"It's good to hear that. Now, I'm off to finish a few lectures and maintain our guild's expansion operations. This Canada they speak of is apparently a frozen wasteland for the most part. It's difficult to arm our members with the appropriate supplies to pierce its icy depths. A competent individual must be the spearhead of such a drive, so do excuse me."

Torix walked to his lecture hall before I turned to Althea.

"Thanks for coming with me. I'd be lonely otherwise."

She smiled, a mischievousness glint in her gaze.

"Even with sixty other Daniels keeping you company?"

I smiled.

"Talking to yourself is like drinking from a mirage in the desert. For a moment, you feel better. Once the wind scrapes your face and the sand burns your dry mouth, you're only left more empty on the inside."

Althea put a hand on my cheek.

"Well, let's be glad you have me then."

I put my hand on hers. I smiled.

"It's hard not to cheer up hearing that."

We set out of the upper floors of Mt. Verner, passing through the tunnels in seconds. Finding ourselves outside, we glided towards the warp drive at Springfield's center. Althea's wings sliced through the air with friction placed perfectly where she wanted it.

"You know...You have me worried."

I frowned.

"I know."

"It's like...I know you'll be fine. You always are, but this time, it really feels like you're stepping away from me. From all of us."

"I'm going to be right here. You know that."

"I do, but you're so different now. Every few months, it feels like I'm talking to an entirely different person."

"Do I sound that way?"

"No, but you feel different. It reminds me of a soldier after his first real kill. After they do it once, the next time is much easier, but it changes them. It makes them have this unseen pain, and that's kind of what's happening with you even while we're talking right now."

A desire to share my experience crossed over me.

"Do you want to see what's causing it?"

She grabbed my hand.

"I do."

We changed our direction, gliding over toward a silent, dark hill. This hill oozed with a feeling of death, like the site of some ancient battle where fallen specters screamed for retribution and vengeance. No sound ebbed around the mound, birds silenced, and insects quiet. It was an odd solemnity, but I understood its source.

Before Shalahora arrived, I turned to Althea.

"There's two reasons, really. The first is this."

I shared the space of my soul with her. She perused the mental web, finding a torturous, splintered framework. The sheer burden I experienced at all times overwhelmed her in seconds, and she jerked herself away from me. As she stumbled back, I peered down at her, my face solemn.

"Sorry...I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

She winced and shouted.

"What in the hell are you doing to yourself?"

My eyes glowed from mana saturating my blood.

"I'm working."

She took a few breaths before standing up. She brushed herself off.

"Uhm...I'm sorry about that reaction. It's, uhm, just a lot, you know?"

Sadness leaked into my voice.

"Oh, I'm well aware. It's hard to describe to other people. They assume that each of my minds experiences exhaustion, pressure, and pain on an individual basis. They want to think that my many psyches actually make my toil more like giving a city a job rather than a person. That's not the case at all."

She hugged an arm to her side.

"It just lets you try even harder, doesn't it?"

A gentle smile came over me.

"That's exactly right. If I lacked my raw stats, it wouldn't be feasible for me to tolerate this. I couldn't think this hard. I couldn't balance all of my parallel thoughts into something cohesive. I wouldn't be able to absorb this exhaustion, discomfort, and pain. It would overwhelm me in moments."

Althea raised her hands.

"Then why do it at all? You're already the strongest person in the guild."

"But that's just it. Shalahora is far stronger. Plazia may be as well, and they're nowhere near as powerful as the enemies I've chosen for myself. And just as well, I have this ability. It's my responsibility to use it."

Althea's face gnarled.

"But it's so much to put on yourself. Why put yourself through this when there must be an easier path?"

I smiled.

"I don't want my path to be easier."

She frowned.

"Isn't that what you're doing for your guild? That's like, 90% of what we do. We make life easier and better for the people we look after and care for. You know, you deserve that same grace, right?"

I peered at the skyline of Springfield. More skyscrapers grew after my absence. They touched the clouds in places like silver fingers waving through clouds of steam. I nodded.

"I want that for them, but I don't want that for me."

Althea scoffed.

"How does that make any sense?"

My gaze grew distant.

"You remember my talk with my father. He and my mom always tried to make me into this evil figure that splintered their family and caused the rifts that ruined their lives."

"And they were wrong."

"Very. However, even if they never intended to, that made me into who I am today. I wasn't made by my armor, my status, or my trees. I was made in a broken home and a dark cave. The struggles I found were what forged me, not the easy moments. That's why I have to endure this. I need to become something that even the Old Ones will fear."

Althea wrung her hands.

"I know you can. I just don't know if you should."

I smiled.

"I don't know anyone else who can, so I must."

Althea frowned.

"Is that the only reason? Because I don't think it is."

I smiled.

"You're right. I do have a sense of duty, sure, but there's more to this. The Old Ones think of me as one who is beaten. As a fool who has no sense of scale or understanding of the universe. They imagine me small because that's all they know of me, but they're wrong."

My smile grew fierce.

"Baldowah. Eonoth. Even my mother and father. Everyone who ever thought I was nothing, I'll show them exactly who I really am, and it will be undeniable."

The beginnings of fear came over her face.

"That uh...That sounds personal."

I walked over, and my smile turned gentle once more.

"That's because it is. I've been given this armor, this mana, and this ability. To me, I still think almost anyone else could've done a better job with it. They could've been more creative, more talented, and more effective. That's because I've never been intelligent or strong."

Althea went to disagree, but I raised a hand and continued.

"I'm not saying I'll fail. Quite the opposite. I still have a singular strength - I'm tough. I mean that holistically. Physically. Mentally. Spiritually. In fact, it's one of the only things that I'm proud of about who I am."

I raised my fist.

"And I will leverage that singular strength for all its worth. That means I must endure what others aren't willing to."

She winced, but her expression softened.

"I know I can't stop you, but I can help. It looks like I'm going to have to clean up your messes for a long time, aren't I?"

We kissed. I put my forehead against hers.

"Forever if I have anything to say about it."

She let out a small laugh before a disparate shadow condensed at the hill's peak. Shalahora murmured.

"It seems I am no longer interrupting. You return, and your mind has grown by orders of magnitudes."

Althea put some distance between us. I quieted my psyches' toil, aiming them at the shadow.

"It has. Althea, this is the second reason I've changed."

I turned a palm to Shalahora.

"Would you mind a bit of training?"

Shalahora's form condensed, his figure looming.

"If that is what must be done...I still don't see why you see the need to do this."

"It's for our future."

"Harbinger...You cannot achieve the psionic ability I've gained. It's something given, not earned."

My eyes opened wide. A psionic storm raged in the domain of my consciousness. Mana sheened in my eyes before my body began to glow. I cooled myself as the grass around me caught fire. In the orange blaze, I smiled at the shadowed Sovereign.

"How about we find out?"

Chapter 414: To Know Death

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Pulling my wake against my skin, time slowed before I sent a horde of Daniels at Shalahora. I didn't even try using finesse since conventional tactics were meaningless against the overwhelming entity. To face him in that domain would be like sending children armed with crayons to fight a samurai.

In a swordfight, the samurai could kill innumerable children. We would turn it into a slog before shoving crayons in his eyes and down his throat. As I predicted, Shalahora killed me as he always had, like a reaper slicing through grains with a sharpened scythe. Twenty minds died in an instant, but many ran over the corpses.

Shalahora tilted his head, killing a group of thirty rushing towards him. Then another group of thirty. Then another. Instead of a small group of animas, Shalahora faced down a small army of psionics barreling his way. I lost control of my body once more as the sheer volume of Daniels dwindled.

I neared a true psionic death, having accepted the lack of memories or feeling as a part of this fighting. It acted as a test. Where did the limits of my sacrifice lie? Like the libation of a lamb's blood before an altar, I spilled my blood until my cup ran empty, leaving a dry, cracking husk.

And more still, I drained from the emaciated shell of my mind.

Shalahora slaughtered the endless mass, his shears sharper than knives. Still, his eyes narrowed over time. I pressed and pushed the Daniels from different angles, making

them more difficult to kill at once. I collected them into multiple, blended minds, throwing the disparate mush his way. I mutilated my spirit and soul to disturb Shalahora with a single drop of my mental gore.

After several minutes of the silent struggle, I sent fifty minds at once. I splintered them all, splashing them over the psionic in a rain of my psionic blood. As the droplets fell, I sent another wave of fifty minds from below. They pulped before I regenerated, wielding the final wave of mental slaughter with my reconstituted mind.

In a gush, I unraveled splintered thoughts at him. Shalahora slaughtered the incoming muck, washing away the disparate thoughts and will. Death. Rebirth. Death again. I entered a transient state of will, one grounded by momentum and driven by purpose. During my psionic flood, I found a slight opening.

Darting through the crack, I charged Shalahora's mind. Lost in the sea, the Daniel I sent in died before Shalahora took a step back.

Shalahora's eyes widened.

"You've changed. Good."

I continued the onslaught. After several minutes, I settled into a deeper meditation. My mana production increased. It exploded as I stood still, and my body experienced time at a rapid pace. The army grew in size, seventy Daniels swarming at once. Eighty. Ninety. They continued pilling up higher as the deathly aura of the hill deepened by the second.

Althea couldn't see the internal battle, but she felt the encroach of death. She crossed her arms as Shalahora began wielding psionic tactics. He couldn't stop all the minds in mass, and more of the entities passed through. They never threatened his mental tranquility, but each attack was a wound to his pride and immutable abilities.

After two hours of extreme pressure, one of the Daniels dove deeper into Shalahora's mind. It gathered elements of memories and not the shallow, surface-level recollections that Shalahora willingly shared. The Daniel saw a world with a shrinking sun. It saw people evolving into monsters as corruption seeped into a dying land. One figure rose above them all.

It was a messiah who stole the burden of his people so that they may survive. Shalahora growled.

"You mongrel."

As he waved a hand, a psionic wave passed over me. It killed my mind to its core. Every residual part was wiped clean, like a nuclear bomb sterilizing an island to glass and ashes. Killed and dangling, my corpse hung on the dimensions I anchored myself to. Even the subtle fall of my limbs tore chasms in the Earth, the ground rupturing from the swing of my feet.

Like a metal puppet without strings, my body rested on the weight of two worlds. Dust rose from the clash of my feet on the Earth. A silence crept over the field of battle. Shalahora murmured.

"Daniel? I, I didn't mean-"

Althea took a step closer.

"What happened to him? Is he ok?"

From the ether, my mind returned.

"Ugh...Yes? Maybe? What just happened?"

Shalahora's eyes widened.

"How have you returned? How...How is that possible?"

I shook my head, trying to get rid of a pounding headache.

"Egh, I've thought this since we started training. If my body can return from nothing, so should my mind."

I pulled the dust around us into a finite point, a stone falling into my hand.

"It's like you said, Shalahora. My mind and body are the same."

As I reached up my hand, Shalahora took a step back. The shadow fell onto the ground, overwhelmed by my return from death. Shalahora gasped.

"You...You're still there after a psionic death. I'm, I'm so sorry. I didn't-"

I waved my hand.

"Let it be. All's well that ends well. Besides, accidents happen. I will say, calling me a mongrel? Pretty rude, though."

Althea raised a hand.

"It was kind of mongrel-ey, though."

I spread my hands.

"In what world, exactly?"

Althea frowned.

"A mongrel is a crossbreed, but it can also mean a cross between different people. I think he said that because you were splashing your mind around like that."

She shivered.

"You were splitting your mind apart and throwing it at him. Ugh."

I rolled my hand.

"Ok, the psionic bloodbath tactic was a little weird, I'll give you that much. And anyway, why would you know about mongrels so much anyways?"

"Because after we met you're family, I wanted to know more about raising dogs."

"Huh. Cool."

Shalahora stared at me, his amazement lingering. Shalahora's words blended with the wind.

"You cannot die...In all ways."

I put my hands on my hips.

"That's the plan, though I doubt I'm genuinely invincible."

I walked over.

"Want some help up?"

I offered a hand. Shalahora grasped it, his titular mass having no weight. He met my eye.

"In all my years of living, across all the planets I've scoured, I have never seen an entity returned from oblivion...And to remain unchanged and whole...It shouldn't be possible."

I waved my hands.

"Is it really that crazy, or are you just scared because you can't kill me anymore, eh?"

Shalahora stared at his palms.

"That's right...I can't kill you. Even if obliterated to nothing, from nothing, you return. An endless creature."

He murmured, his words full of force.

"Infinite."

I shook my head.

"That's actually a skill I just got. Anyways, it's my dimension. That's my true source."

Shalahora waved his hands through my wake.

"And it is a realm I cannot touch."

I reached out my arm, condensing my wake over Shalahora. At a palpable density, Shalahora gazed around himself.

"This is your true form?"

"Close enough. Can you sense it?"

Althea walked up, holding her arm.

"I can't...But, why did you both have to try so hard in a spar?"

I sighed.

"We didn't. I was so excited I put Shalahora on the backfoot for a second, and he really cut me back down to size in an instant."

Althea grimaced.

"You were gone for a second. You looked...Dead."

Shalahora turned, his form dispersing.

"He was...I-I need time to think."

I gave him a thumbs up.

"Alright, take it easy."

As Shalahora faded, Althea frowned.

"You know, from what I could see, it looks like you're just learning how to get slaughtered."

I tilted my head.

"In a way, I am. It allows me to tread closer to death without reservations, and that allows me to access more of what I am. I'm wasting my potential otherwise."

She peered away.

"This cannot be healthy. I mean, like, at all."

I put a hand on her shoulder.

"Greatness never is."

"Is this really greatness, though? It looks like self-torture. More of it than before, which is saying something. You're, like, a professional at self-abuse at this point."

I frowned.

"All progress is a kind of death. We have to let go of who we were to achieve who we will be. My progress happens to be more literal than that phrasing implies."

Althea wrang her fingers.

"It just makes me nervous. Whenever I see you doing this kind of thing, I just want you to stop asap. I can't help it."

The lottery flashed over my eyes.

"It's a choice. I could hide this part of myself from you, and you'd be none the wiser. That's where the phrase, 'ignorance is bliss,' comes from. If I do that, you won't know who I really am. To me, that would be lonely."

Althea's eyes narrowed.

"I don't want that, but each day, fighting like this even when there's no one here to fight...It's a lot for anybody."

"It's as I've said. I die now so that I may survive the fights that will come."

She peered away, her eyes going distant.

"Is that what life is to you? A series of fights?"

I leaned back.

"Of course not. Life is everything in between those fights. I'm making it so that I can keep having those times of peace without everyone and everything getting destroyed. That, and yeah, a few more personal reasons. We've been over that,"

Althea met my eye.

"Do...Do you ever think you're still at war?"

My lips narrowed.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Althea's face wrinkled.

"It's like, sometimes I look at you, and you're someplace else. I'm wondering if it's from some fight you had, and you're still reliving it. Maybe that's the war with Yawm or Elysium. It could be the fight with Valgus. I don't know, but it's like you never quit fighting. You never left it, and it never left you."

She put a hand on my chest.

"Hm...It's like you're trying to claw your way out of BloodHollow by yourself again. Or maybe even from something before that...I wish I could help you out of it."

Her remarks sizzled against my skin like a hot brand. My eyes hardened.

"The way I've chosen to live has saved us all."

If you stumble upon this narrative on Amazon, it's taken without the author's consent. Report it.

Her gaze softened.

"I know. I'm not saying you need to change. I love who you are. I'm just letting you know what I'm feeling, and uhm, you have me worried about you."

I frowned.

"You know, I worry about all of you too. You're like glass figurines to me."

She put a hand against my cheek.

"Are you going to lock us up in a steel box to keep us safe?"

I put my hand on hers.

"No, but I'm not letting someone walk into my china store with a bull and a bat. That's for sure."

She laughed before squeezing her hands into fists.

"Ok, ok. That's enough of me fretting. I'm becoming a nag at this point."

I raised a hand, a tiny space between my fingers.

"Just a little bit."

She grabbed my arm and swung from it.

"Ok, ok. Come on, let's go on our moon date."

I lifted us up, the hill of death lingering below us. I still didn't understand what was happening there, but it carried a vibe that Torix would probably mesh pretty well with. Leaving the solemn place, we flew over towards Springfield's center, the city thriving. Many citizens filled in the premade homes, and stores opened up along the streets.

Guildmates jumped across the rooftops, having patches of steel planted across them. Every person landed in those places only. Althea read my confused face.

"Those are so that people don't break the tops of the buildings. The metal holds up a lot better over time."

"They're that heavy?"

"It's the same problem you had whenever you started getting heavier than your average person. It's, hm, a strange but prevalent problem. The gravity rings help fix a lot of that, but not everyone can use them."

I watched a man stumble on one of the iron plates before leaving cracks in the roof. They scratched the back of their heads and apologized before leaping away. I smiled.

"So they make landing pads that don't need to be replaced all the time for people that struggle with gravitation?"

"Exactly."

"Huh. Awesome."

"It's not the only thing your legacy changes. Our guild doesn't use power armor anymore. The steel isn't strong enough, and the hydraulics are not efficient either. It's kind of crazy, but people are actually on the lookout for sensory artifacts."

I gawked at the people below.

"Sensory artifacts?"

"Yeah. People move so fast, and with such large bodies, their ability to perceive what's going on lags behind. Intelligence lets them speed up their minds, but their senses can't absorb enough information fast enough because they don't get much perception from your legacy."

I scratched the side of my head.

"So they look for artifacts to speed up their senses. It rounds out their weaknesses."

"It's actually our guild's biggest bottleneck, and Torix is trying to fix it. He's offering specialized tutoring programs just for handling your legacy. It's that big of a problem."

I sighed.

"Man, I never intended on that happening."

She nudged me.

"Hey, cheer up. It's a good problem to have. Our guildmates are worried they'll hurt other people, not be hurt themselves."

In the distance, people hauled off masses of different raw materials onto a hovering platform. Steel beams, bags of concrete, and wood planks covered it, and it sank to a foot above the air. Two heavier set guildmates strapped cables across their shoulders, hauling the goods down the road. They kept going until they disappeared on the horizon.

Other people hauled shipments out of here in the meantime. One caravan shipped out an enormous bulkhead of food, while another carried electronics and wiring supplies. A powerline stretched across the roads, the elegant structures defying gravity. Pulses of mana mirrored pre-Schema powerlines, their intricacy apparent even from a distance.

I raised a brow.

"We're setting up a communication line, and Schema's allowing it?"

Althea shrugged.

"It can hardly keep dungeons together. How's it going to stop us?"

I nodded.

"Huh...Fair point."

We stepped into the city's center. People smothered the currency exchange center, selling off masses of eldritch parts, crafted gear, and old-age memorabilia. Like a parting sea, they let us head up to the warp drive with salutes of respect to both of us before we stepped onto the platform.

Althea suited up, putting on protective gear and changing her physiology. Once ready, she telepathized.

"You ready to head there?"

I scratched the side of my head.

"Through the warp drive?"

"How else?"

"Huh. Schema's people go to planets without an atmosphere?"

"If people are there, then they will come. It's also super easy to make cities because of some perk you have."

My curiosity spiked as I paid our surcharge. The clerk smiled at us before the ionizing mist covered our vision. As it faded, so did gravity. Stepping out onto the moon, I marveled at the encampment.

On a metallic platform, the currency exchange and warp drive rested. That's what we stepped onto. Two dreary and displeased clerks manned the area within vacuum-sealed, radiation-shielded shops. Around us, white rock walls stretched high, the crater being miles wide. A line of quintessence lit the edges of the crater walls, leaving everything bright and exposed.

Along those sheer faces, a series of metal capsules etched into the white rock like steel snakes crisscrossing the expanse. Guildmates eyed us from within their radiation shielding, many pointing at the two of us with wide eyes. Connecting these buildings, many of Torix's undead walked across the moon's surface, dispersing the shipments of goods as they needed them.

I telepathized out.

"Wow. This is way further along than I thought it would be."

Althea smiled.

"Torix had a base on the moon forever ago, apparently. He used a lot of what he learned there for this. For some reason, humans have a fascination with the moon, too. Something about NASA?"

"It was a big deal back in the day. That's before we knew about warp travel."

Althea put her hands on her hips.

"It sounded like a brute force project to me. It's like, you want to get somewhere, so you propel yourself on a rocket. Call me crazy, but that's the craziest solution ever."

I shrugged.

"Eh, it got us here."

"Pshh, good luck getting all the way to Mars or Venus that way. It would take years."

"If we're lucky."

One of Torix's undead cleaned a tunnel's surface. Althea pointed at it.

"Our finicky necromancer also thought the moon would be an easy place to terraform, considering how small it was. I think he called it a different kind of conquering or something. I kind of zone him out when he starts going on really long tangents."

"Ah, so a few minutes?"

"More like hours. I still love Torix, but you know how it is when he gets talking about magic or philosophy."

"He'll talk to you until you're as undead as he is."

Althea laughed.

"Actually, I joked about that being one of his most potent tactics for getting new necromancy materials. He talks things to death."

"How'd that land?"

"He gave me a three-hour lecture on how poor a tactic that really is."

I scoffed.

"Self-incrimination, I tell yah."

Gazing around, I marveled at where we were. I grabbed a chunk of the moon from the ground.

"But I do like that phrasing. A new kind of conquering, one where we overwhelm the elements and not each other...I like it."

Althea nudged me.

"Ready to go?"

I shook my head before stepping up to the settlement's center. I spent two hours constructing, etching, and powering up a city's monolith. Once established, I created a rim of my dimensional fabric around the crater, creating stairways leading up and down the expanse. Once made, I set the blue core into a premade slot, and it isolated us from the moon's void.

Neatly nestling along the cavern's edge, the barrier created a shield that matched the crater's size and proportions. My runes from L-7 came in handy, and air dispersed into the cavern along with air pressure, gravitation regulation, and radiation shielding.

Althea pulled her helmet off once the barrier finished establishing a stable environment. She shook her head.

"Sometimes, I forget how much you can do."

I wrapped a hand around her hip. I raised my eyebrows several times.

"Hopefully, you haven't forgotten everything."

She shoved me away, giggling. In the distance, several adults left their isolated vesicles and walked into the earthen environment. Above us, the Earth floated in the distance, the view unlike any I'd ever seen. The stars were dim, the moon's reflection smothering their brilliance. The dark void made Earth all the brighter.

The white stone around us no longer blinded anyone brave enough to gaze at it. A few kids pulled off their helmets, laughing while jumping and running down the cavern walls. Althea blinked back tears. I couldn't blame her. It felt like a miracle.

She blinked.

"Hah. Kids on the moon. I never thought I'd see that."

I raised my brow.

"Me neither, but there's a lot I never expected to see until Schema's system arrived."

She nudged me.

"This wasn't Schema. It was you."

We watched the colonists acclimatize to their lifestyle upgrade along with Schema's clerks. No longer relegated to their capsules, the receptionists lowered their shielding before giving me a nod of acknowledgment. It left a smile on my face as Althea and I hopped over to the crater's edge. The hexagonal energy pads separated us from the brutality of the moon's surface, and we stared at it for a moment.

Althea tapped the shield, the energy rippling like a semitranslucent pool of honey.

"Is this stuff you learned from L-7?"

"Yeah, among other things."

She put her helmet back on and put a hand through the barrier.

"I'm guessing it was hostile there."

"Let's just say the moon is a picnic by comparison. It's why I've been on edge, after all."

We hopped over into the void. As I jumped from one space to another, the same problems cropped up. I couldn't get a good grip on my feet, limiting my power output. The ground held together better because of how much lighter I was, but it still cracked and crumbled underfoot.

The same mobility solutions worked here as on Earth, and my telekinesis gave me the friction I needed.

As I bounded off one foot, a rupture crossed the ground. It stretched into the distance, an omen of what I could do to this celestial body. I had to be careful. Earth was enormous, and my abilities couldn't destroy it. The moon was different, being much smaller and easier to break. A cataclysmic battle might displace this celestial plane, and destroying the moon was the last thing I wanted to do.

As I mentally prepared myself, I marveled at the radiance. The moon wasn't that bright on Earth, but here, it beamed out as if we stood on top of the sun. Althea already visited the place, and she left me eating her dust as she propelled herself around with grappling hooks.

Using two custom ropes, she slung ice picks of bone around her in massive circles. Once the picks were embedded, Althea jerked on each rope one at a time. This let her whip across the ground at nearly supersonic speeds. I kept pace with boring old gravity, my eyes set on her kinetic dance. She met my eye.

"We ground movers find our ways."

I smiled.

"Yeah, that's what I'm figuring out. It looks fun."

"Why not try it out?"

"Huh...Yeah, sure. Why not?"

I created two chains extending from each arm before wrapping them around my forearms. They ended with spiked mauls. I spun them over my head before slamming one into the ground in front of me. The metal gripped into the ground, and a quick jerk later, I flung myself into the air with a measure of grace.

I had to lighten myself to the weight of a feather to pull it off, but we had fun bounding across the moon like Spider-Man and Woman through New York's streets. We laughed with a gleeful abandon, each of us relishing the time together while on a mission for once. A few hours passed like that, each of us chatting away as if we never left each other for a moment.

Closing in on the other side of the moon, the situation changed. Something about the cavernous craters turned alien and eerie. Althea's eyes sharpened, and I matched her seriousness. After a few minutes of traversal, we landed together on a crater's edge. Below, a bus-sized stone sat on the moon's surface.

Like a stick insect, the rock moved while imitating the rock around it pristinely. Six legs skulked around as it raced towards us. Althea threw one of her spikes through the rocky exoskeleton of the creature before flinging herself around it. Her ropes circled the beast before Althea pulled the lines taught.

Like a razored piano wire, the ropes cleaved the beast apart without resistance. Its blue guts spilled out, and it slammed into the wall with a rush of dust. She jumped up before throwing her spiked rope through another alien rock. After impaling the beast, she pulled the rope taught once more as she ran across its length.

She was like a trapeze artist, but she dealt in death, not wowing a crowd. I siphoned the floating dust into a stone for visibility while walking over and putting my hand on the blood.

"So these are the lunar beasts?"

She ruptured another of them apart.

"Yeah. Their disguises are first-rate."

I nodded.

"I couldn't even tell it was there at all. Have we made sure-"

"Oh yeah. There's none of these things anywhere near the lunar bases."

"How do you guys know?"

"Because these things need dimensional energy to live. This one's dying. That's why its blood is blue. It's supposed to be black."

"Well then. It looks like these are moon vermin. Like moon mice. Heh, I wonder if they like cheese?"

Althea put a hand on her hip.

"Probably. I haven't seen anything organic that they won't eat. The colony calls them lunar trojans."

I vaporized the monster with Event Horizon.

"Ah, like Trojan horses but on the moon. Cool, cool."

We headed further out, finding more lunar trojans spread across the ground. Their density and viciousness increased as we got further over the dark side of the moon. Well, the dark side was an expression. It faced away from Earth, but when our side was enveloped in darkness, the unseen half of the moon basked in the sun's light.

We happened to choose a time when the lunar colony and the dimensional rupture were all illuminated. This light exposed how tormented the moon's surface had become. Even a cursory, passing glance demonstrated an unhinged fabric of reality. Gravitation fluctuated at random intensities, at times strong enough to crush bones.

At other times, gravity lessened enough that Althea could hurl herself off the moon entirely. Other spots of the moon brimmed with warm radiation exceeding L-7's permanent glow at the ossuary. Other spots floated as blots of darkness where no electromagnetic waves could pass.

Regions held different temporal flows, some faster or slower, some even twisted. One spot moved time back and forth like a spacetime pendulum. I pulled Althea out of it with my wake, but pieces like that explained why Althea lost an arm. Other areas couldn't even hold gravity; the space warped to the point where it couldn't maintain fundamental laws of reality.

The creatures mirrored this corruption. Their disguises lost their elegance, the jagged, almost geometric creatures like unfinished Van Gogh paintings. They reminded me of the minions Yawm protected his world tree with. Those poor creatures squirmed at us with open wounds, unable to survive this tortured environment yet unable to leave it.

One of them walked out of the void from above, its form entirely black. As it hacked at me, I ducked backward. Its sharpened blade arm cleaved into my dimensional wake, ripping at the dense fabric. My eyes widened before I gelatinized its insides with gravitation. As it fell, I blinked back, a growing unease settling into my chest.

Althea murmured.

"You ok?"

"Yeah, but these things can hit me where it actually hurts. That's a first."

We passed the expanse with careful aggression. I led the charge, and Althea passed close behind. We found more lunar trojans, no longer appearing as stone. They feasted on the radiation and latent energy here. One even tried to indulge in the uncorrupted space around it, like some kind of dimension eater.

Eerie.

In a way, these monsters contained the outbreak since they held energy in themselves, but there was only so much they could do. Helpful or not, I took a scorched earth policy with these guys, killing all of them. As we slaughtered them in mass, Althea fired harpoons for the main damage spike, and Event Horizon destroyed the bodies.

It left us colder. It was as if the mission had finally started, and we entered a dreamland of horrors to accentuate that fact. Near the oozing rupture, reality became a suggestion, and the causal laws constructing our reality disintegrated. Althea stopped along this line, her body half in our reality and halfway in another.

She waved her hands at me, and I got the message. I checked the surroundings for a patch of stability, finding one on a cliffside. Althea walked back onto our plane before she put herself against the cliff's edge.

"So you can probably see why I turned around after a while."

I sighed.

"If anything, I'm wondering why you came this close before."

She shrugged.

"Nothing's been able to touch me when I planeswalk. But this, this isn't like that. It's a deep kind of pollution or something. I can't find a version of reality that isn't being torn apart by this stuff."

I winced.

"Damn. I'm the guy that's going to slurp it up then?"

Althea frowned.

"That's not what I wanted, but the others thought you were the easiest solution we had. You've touched this stuff before and in a lot higher densities. I remember it, actually. It's still a scary thing to think about, but hey, if it didn't cripple you then, why now? Right?"

I reached over.

"Thanks for trying to take care of me."

She leaned her face against my hand.

"Sometimes, it feels like I'm the only one who is."

I put my forehead against her faceplate.

"Eh, one is better than none."

She rolled her eyes before taking a seat on the cliffside. She murmured.

"I'll see you when you get back."

I opened my pocket dimension.

"I could just store you in here if you'd like. Seems safer."

A bubble of gravitation passed by us, and it disintegrated a portion of the wall. Althea's eyes widened.

"Heh, maybe that's for the best."

She curled into a ball, fitting into the pocket dimension with ease. Before her head sank in, she narrowed her eyes.

"Don't do anything weird to me while I'm in here."

I put a hand on my chest, a mischievous smile coming over my face.

"Oh, how it hurts me to hear you say that."

She and I laughed before she fell into stasis. She rested while we set out into the distance. Not needing to protect her, I propelled myself with speed and force out of the crater. Chunks of stone spiraled away from my ascent, and I bolted into the hidden hellscape. A buffet of physical sensations crossed over me as the laws of reality caved into vague implications rather than firm rules.

It reminded me of the twisted patches of reality left by the cipher, though the density and scope of these changes exceeded anything I'd ever seen done by the language. As I passed over miles of the twisted landscape, a dark fog settled over everything. As I wafted into it, the fabric of reality bled. It was the only way I could describe it.

Every part of existence faded into something undefined. No rules remained here, every moment different than the last. The lack of continuity left me drifting through everything as if it were a memory or a dream instead of something tangible. But it was undeniable in the end.

The fog seeped into my armor, the metal hungry for a new source of energy. As it sank in, an icy cold sensation pierced through me like frozen needles digging into my skin. The denser the fog, the colder I felt. That density of fog also destroyed the tangibility of all around me.

At times, the distance between two spaces was normal. A second later, I had to spend a minute crossing a few feet. Another moment would pass like an hour, while another hour would pass as a moment. Up became down. Down became in and out. The disorientation grew until I tried to get rid of it.

With my wake, I condensed a space around me, fighting off whatever this corruption was. It bent away, a kind of dimensional lens forming around me. Able to pierce

through the veil, I made headway until I reached a vast dark cloud at the moon's far reaches. Here, the changes sank in the deepest.

I made my wake into a point, driving it through the tainted space like a lance through armor. Steady but slow going, I spent an hour getting closer. All the while, my armor drifted away from me. It shot tendrils in the dark to siphon the energy. It loved this stuff, becoming almost drunk on the darkness like a god's first taste of ambrosia. Event Horizon could sap the energy, helping correct the space as well.

It allowed me to speed along before I found the gushing wound in spacetime. In this central chasm, a rip belched out with plumes of interdimensional energy. It sent a chill down my spine, reminding me of when Baldag-Ruhl cleaved dimensions apart.

This was the same kind of split, but it wasn't a clean, sterile kind of cut; this jagged mark would leave a nasty scar. It sat in the center of the darkness like a jagged splintering of reality, stretching out in every direction. As I got near it, my armor trembled over my skin. It drank deep from these waters, ingesting the most delicious of flavors.

It disgusted me, but I allowed it to do this. This energy hadn't hurt me in the slightest, though the effects were as difficult to place as they had been the first time I'd felt them in BloodHollow so many years ago. Taking a moment, I grabbed the edges of the alternate reality, getting ready to heave it away from the moon's surface.

As I did, a voice radiated from the other side.

"One that withstands the blood?"

My armor smiled, and I frowned. The strange voice oozed its words.

"No...A being that indulges in it."

Chapter 415: A Dark Fantasy

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"No...A being that indulges in it."

My armor's runes glowed with anticipation. I telepathized to it.

"I'm suppressing the urge to jump the gun here, but who are you, exactly?"

A being without a solid form crawled out of the space. It held a cerulean orb at the center of shifting silver blocks. It spoke with an elated voice made of many whispers in my mind.

"Who? I'm more and less than I was, but who I am doesn't matter anymore. In the end, I am no one. It's a subtle detail many forget. We all fight to stay alive, yet we die all the same. Some of us simply die before we rest in a grave."

I raised a brow.

"That doesn't answer anything I've asked."

"You don't care who I am. You're more interested in why I'm here and what I'm trying to do. Aren't you?"

I frowned, drifting away from the rupture.

"True, but I'm trying to be polite here."

Its voice bounced in my mind, a congregation of whispers.

"Politeness will only serve you well amongst politicians. I am here as a surveyor, so there is no need for you to act as anything more than an obstacle in my path."

I scoffed.

"Obstacle, huh? I don't have to be. Communicate, and we won't have to fight. Now tell me, what are your goals?"

"It doesn't matter. Step aside."

I narrowed my eyes.

"Oh, I think it does. I'll move if you give me a reasonable explanation of what's going on. Otherwise, we'll come to blows."

The entity floated down to the moon's surface.

"This is quite the corruption, isn't it? It seems as though this rip is wide and over a hemorrhage. It will do nicely. Perhaps...Perfectly."

I tilted my head as the entity regained its physical form. The cerulean sphere turned to me, and a vertical slit formed on its center. An amber eye gazed at me, and it held a depth and coldness. It created visions of a dark ocean covered in ice.

A series of sub-spaces opened around it, condensing into tendrils that moved the main body. The tentacles were liquified amber that squirmed around its central body. It held flayed faces in the amber, each patch of skin smiling. It laughed.

"You seem befuddled. Is it so strange that other things can sustain themselves between realities?"

I walked around it in a slow trot.

"You're the first thing I've seen that's not bending into some unrecognizable monster from that energy. Color me surprised."

"I couldn't accomplish my goals if the blood corrupted me. That being said, you're different. I avoid touching this energy. You're swimming in it. Oh ho, you're drinking it. What a grotesque creature.

"You have the torn faces of victims in those tendrils. I'd argue that's a bit worse."

"These are physical decorations of those that defied me. They're nothing more than mementos. To wallow in this ilk and survive...That's far more abhorrent than any physical creation."

I kept circling it.

"I need answers, Mr. Smiles."

It laughed, the expression carrying madness.

"How are you still so sane, given you drink from the origin of insanity? It is a paradox."

I shook my head.

"I'll exchange an answer for a question. All this is unstable energy. All I do is make it stable before absorbing it."

"Ah, really? Thank you for saying so. It's hard to discern much about this darkness since I've never touched it."

"How about you return the favor? Who are you?"

"I'm Kryyah. I'm an...Accountant, surveyor, and pathfinder, you could say."

"What and who are you accounting for?"

Kryyah snapped one of its tendrils against the rip in spacetime.

"These. You wouldn't mind if I left this here for later, would you? I'll need to have this investigated."

My eyes sharpened.

"I can't let this thing stay here. It has to be contained."

"Oh, now that won't do. You're not clearing this space anytime soon, given you haven't been able to close this already. If you'd like, I can keep this stable and not let it grow further. I'll be back with help after a while."

I shook my head.

"This won't be here when you get back. I have the means to close this, so I will."

The eye peered into mine, brimming with hostility.

"Is there a set of words I can say that'll convince you to let this rupture grow?"

I shrugged.

"Mey, maybe, but I'll need a pretty compelling reason to leave this eyesore here."

It paced over to me, indenting itself onto reality.

"You seem like a being of force. Know that I'm a messenger at most. Think of me as a weak, pathetic minion for someone larger than myself. You'll be tasked with answering to my superior if you interfere with my mission here, assuming you can even stop me."

I opened a recording stream in my status. I condensed my wake over my skin as mana flooded into my body. I cracked my knuckles, everything awash in eerie silence.

"Is that it? Any other reasons?"

It whirled a tendril above itself, reality shivering above its head.

"As a being of force, I'll speak in a language that even you can understand. You can't stop me even if you tried. I'm trying to give you the option of saving your pride or your odd life. You normal species are all about that, right?"

I squeezed my hands to fists.

"It sounds like I have my answer then."

It snapped the spacetime whip at me, and existence caved around the tendril. I pulled myself back, and it snapped into the ground where I was. Instead of tearing rock, it wounded reality. The rock wept and howled in silence, the space a deformed, horrid abomination. I reached out a hand, and gravitation exploded over the entity.

It remained unaffected before laughing.

"So that's it? Are you using physical forces on something that treads the interdimensional spaces between realities? Wow. You mustn't engage with entities of my scale often. Allow me to enlighten you to what we are."

It snapped towards me, traversing hundreds of feet as if it were an inch. Its voice whispered from all directions in many voices.

"You're facing something of a different league."

It snapped its reality whip on my head, but it bent around my dimensional wake. I grabbed the tendril, reinforcing my grasp with Event Horizon. As I squeezed my hand, it howled out in agony. I frowned.

"Is it the Little League? Because you're throwing some softballs for someone talking so much."

I tore the amber limb off, and purple tears gushed from the amber eye. Kryaah's voice grew jagged.

"So you're more than a brute. Good. I wouldn't want this to be easy."

I whipped my dimensional wake like a hammer, smashing it into the moon's crust. It crunched into the stone before snapping out of the ground. It dashed in different directions, passing distances as if skipping spaces entirely.

These leaps ignored the fundamental laws of reality as if they molded reality to move around. It hurled two more tendrils at me, and they met my wake like a wall.

It howled in my mind.

"What are you? How is the space around you so dense?"

I snapped Event Horizon over it like a pair of jaws.

"You're the expert. You tell me."

Its tendrils stopped my wake's teeth before it slid out of our reality. It murmured across the viel.

"Are you some kind of dimension eater? A parasite, perhaps. Disgusting."

I kept quiet, trying to find its presence. It reminded me of Althea, this thing having tread onto a different reality where I wasn't. Despite that distance, it could still interact with this space. After a moment, it snapped out its tendrils like a drill.

It burrowed through my back and out my chest, my armor nothing more than paper matches to its attacks. However, it dug deeper than a physical attack. It damaged the

actual space I occupied, breaking the laws that allowed a physical form to exist. As it jerked its tendrils away, I couldn't regenerate my body. It laughed.

"Robust, but you're unable to fix that, I gather? How many holes does it take to kill you?"

With my wake, I smothered the desolate space. I reconstructed the reality with my own, and my body returned. It popped out of existence once more, and more tendrils drilled from above, leaving no time for me to react. In a rapid set of stabs, it pierced me into a fractured, loose set of metal shards.

It hissed.

"Come on then. Mend the unmendable."

I liquified, pulling myself back together in a different spot. Its voice dimmed to a murmur.

"You're more than meets the eye, aren't you?"

"Like a transformer, some might say."

"What is-"

I charged at it. It shot out with another tendril from the void. One of my minds found it, locking against its psionically. At the same time, I ducked under its attack and jutted my hand where the tentacle originated. I grasped the cerulean orb and pulled it out of the other plane it occupied. It squirmed in my grasp.

With a quick swipe, I tucked its body into my pocket dimension for safekeeping.

Stolen from its rightful place, this narrative is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

Or I thought I had. It abandoned the cerulean sphere, losing its physical form. It now hovered as an amber all of energy. It sighed.

"I'm guessing you're not going to give me my shell back?"

I hurled my mind at it, finding a consciousness far larger than even Shalahora's colossal mind. It laughed.

"That's not a game we play."

Around its colossal consciousness, a dozen different minds existed. Instead of creating a mind without gaps like Shalahora, this construct used swollen, immortal minds as a defense. Even a slight graze exposed how these things had lived for millennia. Those millennia were spent learning about all the details of mundane histories, arbitrary sciences, and useless logs of data.

This didn't refine the psyches in any way, but it left them bulging at the seams like enormous, swollen monstrosities. I lobbed a mind at it, and it carried no effect. It was an odd defense, yet its effect was palpable.

Kryyah scoffed.

"What was that? Did you just kill your mind to try and disorient mine? You're suicidal."

I sent a wave of fifty minds. They crashed into an unbroken wall. It shivered.

"Ugh, grotesque. You're a hivemind. Great. Just great."

It kept itself within its psionic shielding, and I continued whittling at the defenses. It circled around me, unperturbed by my progress.

"You're trying to stop something that required thousands of years to build."

I narrowed my eyes.

"Every wall is broken one brick at a time."

"You think I'll let you spend a hundred years on this?"

"I won't need that much time."

I changed my attacks. Unlike Shalahora, Kryaah didn't defend itself at all, so I wasn't outclassed. In a group, I sent consciousnesses into the vast memory piles, having them hack away. This augmented my progress tenfold.

It laughed.

"Oooh, only a decade of tireless assaulting now. I'm certain you'll keep that up."

My gaze remained hardened, my resolve already set. Its laugh dimmed.

"You're an annoying thing, you know that?"

Kryyah snapped at me, spinning in a circle. Its tendrils fused into a halo of dimensional erosion. It crashed against me, and my wake met the charge head-on. We cracked and crushed against each other, and its tendrils regenerated using the space around us.

I pulled from the well of my wake, and the waters never ran dry. It continued boring down, the eye at its center thinning to a slit. It hacked out.

"You know...This is like when an immovable object meets an unstoppable force."

I furrowed my brow.

"You talk a lot."

"It passes the time."

The reality around us thinned until cracks from the rupture behind us expanded. They rippled outward, finding the weakened remains of the reality around us. Kryyah hummed with glee.

"Hah! This is incredible. I've never seen a reality splinter so easily. So quickly. Now, this will be useful."

It pressed its attack further. Not wanting to destroy the moon, I turned myself into a liquid. I flowed around it, keeping my wake around me. I wrapped myself around the ethereal entity, and it shot out to escape. It bounced against my dimensional fabric, unable to find a weak point. It murmured.

"You're more than annoying. You're dangerous."

I pressed down, the space within compressing to a small point. I squeezed the creature, and Kryyah let out a cry of anguish. In my mind, I sighed.

"Tell me why you're here, and I'll stop."

Kryyah gasped out.

"To take this tear away from here."

"For what?"

"For someone you'll never know the name of. It's that simple. If you let me go now, I won't tell my superiors about this world and what rests here."

"I don't believe you. Not for a second."

It laughed.

"It was worth a shot, wasn't it?"

Kryyah's amber eye spread until it connected to the disparate dimensional ripples around it. The coloration of the being shifted to purple, and it spiraled as a drill. It released a blinding flash before ripping out of my containment. The light left my liquified form glowing, and even the half-second of exposure left a dense, lingering warmth after I chilled myself. I rematerialized and grimaced.

"Radiation. Ughck."

Kryyah returned to its amber form.

"I didn't want to make this planet uninhabitable without reason, but you're not giving me any options."

Amber energy consumed its body once more, and it generated enormous amounts of radiation. The moon beneath it melted, the stone evaporating into the thickest fog imaginable. The stone mist condensed further from the entity, raining as shining crystals. Those gemstones spiraled around the being before swarming toward me.

They crashed against my body, a shining storm erupting from the surface of my skin. I stepped through the glistening tempest.

"Physical forces? Didn't you mention you're in a different league?"

The carbon crystals around me ignited before the entity shot back towards the interdimensional rip. I bolted towards it, cracks erupting over the moon and to the horizon. As it squirmed into the warp, I followed its descent. Icy energy smothered my body, a paralyzing sensation creeping over me.

Something was wrong here. No eyes opened around me, but I could feel them bore down from all directions. From the ether, Kryyah whispered.

"You can survive even when immersed? Hm, but for how long?"

It shot back out of the rupture, its form turning back to its purple, intangible state. In seconds, the dimension wielder closed the gaping chasm in our reality, and it tried locking me in purgatory. Once the chasm was the size of a manhole, Kryyah shouted into the endless darkness.

"It's been fun, but I've had enough of this. Goodbye."

It slammed the dimension shut. Well, it tried to. I left a thick cord of my dimensional fabric coiled around the entrance, and I reinforced it with my wake. Unable to cleave it apart, Kryyah roared.

"You...Gah, it's like killing a horde of vermin or something. You're a plague, for Baldowah's sake."

I bolted back to the entrance, building mana in my body.

"Remember, even vermin have teeth."

"Rats do enjoy feasting on corpses. You're the same."

Unable to break me in its purple form, it turned amber once more. It fired a beam of condensed radiation at the safety cord I left behind. It snapped, my fabric melting. Kryyah tried closing the warp again, but my wake withheld its pressure. Kryaah scoffed.

"You're like an eldritch virus or, or some twisted ideology that takes people's minds. Cancer maybe? A dimension cancer."

I reached the warp, putting my hands against the tear in reality. I pulled it apart before snapping a jab forward at Kryaah.

"Yeah, I'm hard to kill. It's a trademark at this point."

I smashed my fist against the being, but I met a physical wall. It manipulated its density, becoming as heavy and dense as a star's core without the same impact on gravity. My fist crumbled as force rebounded into my hand. Kryyah shouted.

"You're a small, pathetic-"

My palm crashed through its unbelievably dense body, shattering the reality warper. As cracks of amber fell, its broken form bolted away from me. It let out a cry.

"You...How?"

I held Baldowah's dimensional opening in my palm.

"If you break the rules, so can I."

Before it could escape, I scooped up the amber shards from beneath me with my pocket dimension. I bolted myself towards the entity, slamming another heavy strike at the creature. It ducked sideways, but I pulled its body towards me with immense gravitation. On contact, I spiked the well's density, and a tiny singularity spawned.

It pulled the amber creature and my fist together. As it snapped outward with kinetic force, Baldowah's dimension slammed into the amber creature. It cracked, splintering outwards as only a small blot of amber energy. A dozen singularities flickered between us, and I disintegrated to nothing before rematerializing in less than a second.

I wiped my brow, having put my furnaces into my pocket dimension a moment before the battle began. As Kryaah made evasive maneuvers, I took as much of its body within my pocket dimension as I could. The leftover shards I missed snapped back together before the entity warped back to the rupture in spacetime. It slipped into the endless darkness and howled out.

"I'm alone now, but you will know that I exist within a myriad. Remember me, virus. Remember this choice."

It slipped away, and I followed, forcing myself through the small spatial rupture. As I gazed into an endless, undifferentiable darkness, I sighed. Holding onto the dimensional opening, I dragged it around, searching in the endless dark for a while. Finding nothing to signal Kryyah ever existed, I hit myself in the head.

Agh. I wanted to end it before it could escape, but the damn thing was resourceful. That, and it could leave whenever it wanted to. Pulling myself out of the void, I held the dark rupture. Taking a while, I jerked the edges of reality shut. However, the amount of energy it siphoned out never changed, and the corrupting energy plumed out in a violent eruption like an oil seep.

I plugged the vomiting dimension with my hand. It seeped its poison into my armor, the icy sensation like breathing in menthol. At the same time, the space around me still carried a deep corruption. Taking a minute, I attempted to heal this tortured realm with my dimensional wake.

To my surprise, I healed it by passing through it, but it required multiple pass-throughs. Starting with Event Horizon, I siphoned the latent, lingering energy that maintained this volatile area. Once I cleared it out, the Rise of Eden built the space back up from zero. The last step required a wave through with my primordial wake. It completed everything, making it just right.

As I passed the vast region like a spatial lawnmower, I found a massive mess on the surface of the moon. I refilled the scars I left on the moon's surface with white stone. After several hours, I took the enormous, gaping chasm the dimensional rupture left behind and filled it with a normal reality. Wiping my brow of imaginary sweat, I leaned against the edge of a crater.

Kryyah left me swirling with questions and no real, tangible answers. Despite the lack of concrete info, I found a few tantalizing bits here and there. Kryyah called this place a hemorrhage, and it thought of the dark energy as blood. If I had to guess why, it revolved around how the energy was made.

I mean, we knew another dimension was collapsing into our own. That's how the eldritch and dungeons kept coming. As it shattered, what happened to the space that couldn't maintain itself? Well, reading into Kryyah's words gave me the answer. The dimensions bled into a form of dense, chaotic energy. If that was the case, then it guaranteed the eldritch's origins.

Their disconnected spaces were being exposed to the interdimensional energy, corrupting everything within the unprotected spaces. This also explained why Schema made dungeon cores in the first place. They were condensed orbs of interdimensional energy. There was plenty of energy to go around, and it let Schema avoid having to power everything himself. If I stretched my logic a bit, I could assume Schema organized his dungeons and stabilized their space around the cores thereafter. This saved him time and effort, and I marveled at the efficiency. At the same time, I still wondered how cores spawned on L-7. A not-so-educated guess was that the eldritch managed to absorb enough energy that they began to stabilize their dimensional energy into something more physical.

I wasn't so certain about that explanation, but I lacked any obvious answers. I took a second to organize my thoughts into a message format alongside the footage. After sending my findings to relevant guild members, I sent another note to Helios.

As the grizzled albony arrived, he reminded me more of Obolis. He replaced most of his royal garbs with Graphene plating and portions of my own armor. Several weapons rested over his back, with his gauntlets glowing from latent mana. He cast an orb of gravity over himself to counteract the decompressive force on the moon, and a see-through sphere covered his face.

I peered at his title, and I raised my brow.

Helios Novas, the Harbinger's Courier(Lvl 20,000 | Class: Fringe Walker)

"You gained a new title? And you extended your level cap, too? Oh man, Schema must be lowering his standards."

Helios smiled.

"Hm, or perhaps the AI's aligning its rewards with greatness for once."

"Or it could be a glitch."

Helios raised a brow.

"Hm, perhaps so, given the excessive evidence of its gross negligence."

I pointed at the tear in spacetime in my hand. The opening vomited out enormous amounts of interdimensional energy.

"Can you close this? Or, you know, make it smaller."

Helios cracked his neck while stepping forward.

"If another Old One deigns it to be so, then perhaps not. However, this feels different, so most likely, yes. I can close it."

The tear in time belched out enough energy every second to leave Helios as a twisted abomination. He gawked at it.

"What in Schema's name is this? Are you trying to kill me?"

"Not quite. Give me a second."

See, Helios had to work on the rupture from the open direction. To even get near the rupture, the amount of energy had to be reduced to zero. I liquified myself before heading into the void. Inside the dark ether, I absorbed as much energy as I could using Event Horizon. Helios still required a thickened plate of my fabric to stop him from being corrupted, and he worked parallel to the thinnest part of the tear. At least the energy plumed away from him from that position.

The dangerous, difficult work tested our resident warper. A few times, a bit of energy touched his fur, and he tore it off in an instant. The hairs ate one another, having gained tiny teeth and miniature mouths. Helios murmured.

"Ah, yes. I should've anticipated that this mission would somehow be far worse than the last."

I grimaced.

"Oh man, don't tell me this is uncloseable too? If so, then come on, man. What am I even paying you for?"

"You don't, and this warp is closeable, but in another vein, it isn't. Even from a cursory feeling, there's a kind of splintering of reality here. If I heal this wound, the surrounding space will be weakened in the process. It will tear in a few hours once more. It could result in multiple tears, actually."

I sighed.

"So I have to plug it up, essentially?"

Helios peered at a gauntlet.

"That happens to be the case, though you likely intended to keep this, right? You have an irrepressible urge to stick your hands in jars of snakes after all."

I gazed at the endless dark within the rupture.

"It's how I'm immune to these snake's venom. But this time, no. I didn't intend on keeping this warp. I'm fine with my armor taking in ascendance or the eldritch. This stuff, though? And a continuous, long-term exposure at that?"

I pulled one of my hands through my hair.

"That...It seems aggressive."

Helios crossed his arms.

"You? Calling a course of action aggressive? That's a first."

I breathed in the dark air and breathed it out like fumes from a burning tire.

"Hey, even I have my limits."

Helios sighed.

"Oftentimes, those limits are set for the express purpose of breaking them. I'd say you treat rules and apprehension more akin to suggestions than actual boundaries."

I peered up, the only light coming from the stars of the portal.

"This happens to be a line I didn't want to cross."

Helios stepped away from the nickel-sized hole.

"Unfortunately, this isn't a time where you have a choice."

I liquified and drained myself out of the rupture. I put a piece of my armor into the void along with my wake. With a shaking grunt, I hauled it around. Unlike the other warps, this wasn't a dimension per se. Instead, I carried some enormous, unseen wound that rested under the surface of our dimension.

In a sense, this spot was the weakened space around the hole and the tear itself. Fortunately, Helios condensed it into a small section, and I kept it that way with some jury-rigging of my armor. It required my all to lug the heavy thing around since it had a lot of...Hm, friction is what I'll call it.

It dragged against the dimension around me, though it didn't injure our reality. Otherwise, I'd have to drag it somewhere out in the middle of space. That carried a host of its own problems, considering the dimensional energy could spread unchecked in the ether. That assumed some Old One wouldn't come down and stop me from closing this gap. That left absorbing the gunk as my only option, so I did.

Helios watched me master the moving of the space, and whenever I regained something akin to normal movement, he gave me a derisive smile.

"It seems as though I'm not needed, considering you're able to hobble around once more."

I did my best not to hobble to him, but I think I only made it worse.

"Look, man, I'm doing my best."

Helios laughed.

"It's as if you wear crutches."

I frowned.

"I don't see you moving three dimensions with you all the time."

Helios shrugged.

"It's not something I've chosen to bear. I could close one of those dimensions, and we could throw the other two into your pocket dimension if you so chose."

A rumble echoed from Baldowah's dimension. I winced.

"The last thing I want to do is give Baldowah express access to that space. I also have no clue what someone like Kryyah may do if they got a consistent access point to my pocket dimension."

Helios shrugged.

"Perhaps. Or perhaps you simply enjoy the struggle. We don't know what will occur from you soaking in the spewing forces of either of these tears."

I kept practicing moving around.

"It's not something I want to find out, honestly."

"Hm. I can't blame you for that. That space of yours is one of the most private places in the universe. Even the Old Ones seem to struggle to see its inner workings. It would be a shame to lose that home, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah, that, and I don't want that thing implanting something on me."

Helios gestured at the opening.

"You mentioned an entity called Kryyah. It should be able to return at any point. Given its abilities, it may attack us through the void."

I shook my head.

"Naw. I placed its opening in the same direction as the back of Baldowah's dimension. It's like a dimension stack of pancakes, and Kryaah can't break it since the Old One wants it to exist."

Helios leaned back.

"That...That's clever."

I smirked.

"I have my moments."

"Speaking of, I was wondering if you'd be willing to offer me some assistance."

I raised my brow.

"Oh yeah, how's the siege of the albony's planets going? Did you guys hold Elysium off?"

A dark cloud loomed over Helios, exhaustion pouring over him. He let out a long sigh.

"It's all but done, and Elysium has won."

Chapter 416: An Everchanging Life

Helios leaned back.

"That...That's clever."

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A dark cloud loomed over Helios, exhaustion pouring over him. He let out a long sigh.

"It's all but done, and Elysium has won."

Like stepping into a cold shower, Helio's words landed like a gut punch. I pushed through the sinking sensation.

"That's...Not good."

Helios tilted his head.

"Not good? You've seen what Elysium has done to races that utilized slavery in the past. We albony are no different, and it's a sad thing to watch my people perish. However, it isn't certain our kind shall be eliminated."

I already saw what he had to say coming. Helios turned a hand to me.

"It just so happens I know of someone who saves disparaged races as a hobby. If we dwell on your actions, you've all but established a wildlife preserve on your planet. I'm certain you have room for a few albony to rest on your worlds."

A bit of nervousness bloomed in my chest.

"I do, but that depends. How many are we talking about?"

"A few million."

I tapped my fingers against my forearm.

"Er, I can do that...Probably."

"Excellent. Now that we've settled on a small but manageable group of nomads, would you mind if we went through a little thought experiment?"

My stomach sank further.

"You're starting to sound like Florence."

Helios pressed his hands together.

"What if, in theory, there are a few hundred million albony in need of saving? Would that change your offer?"

I dragged my hand down my face.

"Hundreds of millions...That's more people than I know what to do with. I have no idea where you guys could settle down, let alone the logistics behind actually helping you all get on your feet."

Helios gestured around.

"Why not here? I've gathered the data on this lunar body, and it has a surface area larger than Africa. Over a billion people lived on that continent before Schema arrived, so nothing is stopping us from settling here on an even larger plane."

I gestured at everything on the moon. That is to say, nothing.

"You know, besides the lack of air, a magnetosphere, or any development of any kind. I've heard that puts a damper on the whole settlement thing."

Helios shook his head.

"The albony haven't terraformed a world to this magnitude, but I've spoken with Terra over the past few months. He and a few other educated skeptiles understand many of the logistics behind balancing an ecosystem."

I wasn't so sure the skeptiles would help the race that starved them. Helios raised a hand.

"With their assistance, especially their spirit magic, I believe we can manifest a perfectly vivid ecosystem here. As for the magnetosphere, you should be more than able to melt the core and create a geodynamo that will last billions of years here."

I pointed at myself.

"Me?"

Helios scoffed.

"Who else? You wield gravitation and temperature alike, and those components should allow you to create the magnetic fields needed for life. You may generate all the air we need as well, given your prodigious origin magic."

Helios rolled his hand.

"You might overproduce air and create a crushing atmosphere, so you'll need the calculations measured and handled for you. We albony are myriad, and we have many statisticians under our employ who can manage those factors. To be more precise, once the initial framework is established, we can maintain all systems easily."

Helios peered at the desolate landscape.

"Some of this planet will be devoted to bodies of water as well, but we have the technology to inhabit those spaces should we so choose. Even then, the oceans of Earth are suitable for such a purpose given humanity hasn't colonized those depths."

I furrowed my brow.

"You want the moon, huh? Is this a roundabout way of restarting the albony empire?"

Helios's eyes hardened.

"That is the opposite of what I want. I wish for the albony to carry your seal of protection, and that requires being a part of your guild."

I nodded.

"So this is a kind of cultural and species preservation project, then? You want me to guarantee that at least a portion of the albony won't be desecrated by Elysium. In exchange, my guild expands alongside the many skillsets and abilities of the albony."

"You've stated my aims clearly."

"What exactly do we get out of this?"

Helios scoffed.

"At this point, my people would be more than willing to offer the great and mighty Harbinger both tribute and plunder."

I leaned back.

"The last time I checked, the albony are used to other people working for them. Are you certain they'll be able to handle that kind of transition?"

Helios gazed at the stars.

"These are not the swollen, sedentary people you remember. Hardship has forged them into a different people. The nobles of estates have died while their manors burned to the ground. The survivors crawled along as a humbled people. Their goals are now singular

- to survive. In that regard, I believe that after a year of destitution and a near extinction of our species, we may walk forward without our past holding us down."

I frowned.

"What happened to wanting to handle your projects on your own?"

Helios fidgeted.

"We've lost nearly 80% of our race to Elysium's purges. Think of the immense waste of human capital and the unimaginable suffering. I present this tragedy as an opportunity to try and gain a friend's trust. Your trust."

I blinked before raising my hands.

"I'm sorry. I'm used to a certain rhythm in our conversations, and that's not what this is about. Look, no matter how you handle the situation, I consider you a friend. I will help you as much as I can."

Helios pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Agh. I'm...I'm sorry. I'm stretched thin as a frayed rope. My negotiating is beyond horrendous. I wanted to avoid relying on you again, but the situation has spiraled-"

I cut him off.

"Helios. You don't have to sit here and overexplain or apologize to me. I'm not Obolis. I'm not going to threaten your position or ask you to grovel. Tell me what you need, and if it can be done, then it will be done."

Helios blinked, his pale eyes gaining a new shade of life. Helios stepped towards me, his voice rising.

"Then allow me to elaborate. You've not seen the impact your golems have had. Offering a thousand to me allowed me to expand the number of albony I saved by well

over tenfold. These people have seen your golems fly from the horizon and scorch a pillaged planet's surface to ash. They've watched your metal titans rip Elysium's Hybrids to pieces."

Helios shook his fists.

"Those golems drank their blood, chewed their bones, and ate their entrails, all while our enemies screamed in agony. It was beautiful."

I frowned.

"I hope that's figurative."

"It isn't. We albony have seen the death of our history in a single year. I will relish in the pain of those who have done this to us."

I remembered negotiating with Obolis and how he tried pulling fast ones over me all the time. Honestly, I didn't want to bother with that kind of attitude once more. I sighed.

"Are you certain I can trust that the albony have changed?"

Helios raised a fist.

"You think I'd ask you to trust in the albony's goodwill and faith? You are no fool. I ask you to believe in their fear, their dread, and their hatred. The albony hold memories of a decimated homeworld flattened to nothing. I ask you to invest in the rage of a people who fought against monsters that killed us by the billion."

Helios shook his hands.

"You know that we couldn't hold funerals for the fallen? Elysium leaves no corpses behind. Our biomass is used as the origin of puppets. They turn us into stealthy, lithe figures. Our fur falls from cancer-ridden, tube-infested forms. We gurgle on the orange pus they fuel the Hybrids with. We are subsumed in an image of their making, and it is the tortured vision of the depraved."

My skin crawled at Helios's descriptions. Many events passed me over while I refined my skills, yet all of them spiraled into chaotic clusters. Helios frowned in disgust.

"The albony would willingly accept slavery, let alone harsh conditions. As long as you don't use them for flesh puppets, then there is little you could turn them away with."

I winced.

"Flesh puppets? Huh? Well, I can guarantee that's not happening, at least."

Helios's shoulders fell, and his breathing slowed. He took a moment to collect himself before smirking.

"I assumed as much. We'll offer your guild resources, wealth, and, most importantly, skills. You need people who understand galactic commerce, customs, and trade. We offer that in spades, and we also won't monopolize this planet or the dungeons that will spawn here."

I tapped my chin.

"We could actually negotiate with Schema to help prevent Earth from being overrun by rifts. We can have Schema spawn a portion of them on this planet. Besides that, after the culling on Earth, we have plenty of extra space and land. It isn't like I intended on monopolizing everything in the solar system either."

After a bit more thought, I shrugged.

"You know what? Sure, why not. I'll help the albony."

A silence passed over us. Helios peered down and took a few breaths. Helios shook his head.

If you stumble upon this narrative on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen from Royal Road. Please report it.

"It's a strange thing. Every day with you seems like a new tomorrow."

A wave of embarrassment spread over my face.

"I wouldn't go that far. I'm literally helping because it's convenient."

Helios sighed.

"Ah yes, it must be so convenient to harbor a species Elysium has aimed to repurpose. If you were to ask me to shoulder that burden, I'd know that it's not trivial. It's much to ask and more to promise."

He turned a hand to me.

"I remember when we first met. I still feel guilt about what I did to Althea, and that guilt grows as my debt to you increases by the day. From my mistake in judgment, I lost my position under Obolis. That has been a pivotal moment in my life. Hah. From the upheaval of old systems to the destruction of old world orders, it always seems as though every species that makes contact with you experiences a dramatic change in their bearing and being."

Helios peered up.

"Schema may have understood you better than we thought when he named you The Harbinger of Cataclysm. So far, it seems truer than I could've imagined."

He met my eye.

"In that sense, you ushered in the next change, one where the albony have been given another chance at survival. It's a humbling thing to rely on a single individual, but such is our fate."

A sad and weary smile lingered on his face.

"Perhaps there's good in it. Good luck with the next calamity you cause, and know that I am not Obolis. I will repay all that you've done."

I bristled at the compliments. I gnarled my hands.

"You make it sound as though you're leaving the guild."

Helios rolled his eyes.

"Less of a leaving and more of an immediate, enormous expansion in my operations within it. I'll just be spending more time handling the logistics of our kind. I'm assuming you'll allow it?"

I spread my hands.

"Eh, assuming I still get my courier to help sometimes. That, and you'll have to allow Shalahora to check on people's mental states. He can assess if Elysium's done any tampering."

Helios nodded, his face grim.

"You will have my assistance always, assuming you don't allow Elysium to pillage us further. And I would have asked for Shalahora's assistance even if you hadn't demanded it. He's proven unbelievably efficient and effective at uprooting Elysium's psionic subterfuge."

I waved a hand.

"Well then, you look busy. I can handle the situation from here."

Helios pointed to his side.

"It is no problem to shorten your trip."

I remembered how much I enjoyed traveling with Althea.

"I'd rather take it slow this time."

Helios's eyes turned grim.

"As you will it. I must return to battle."

Helios opened a portal. A wartorn city burned in the background. An army of millions of Hybrids marched on Olstatia, the capital of the albony's homeworld. Helios sighed.

"Wish me luck."

His warp closed, but I held a hand on the edge. I pulled reality apart before peering down at the incoming army. Helios turned to me.

"What are you-"

My voice was iron.

"Step aside."

Helios did so. I charged mana into my runes, and my body glowed bright. Miles upon miles of Hybrids gazed up at me, their beady eyes and twitching bodies eliciting my disgust. Mana rippled onto this other world in a plume it had never seen. In a wave of obsolescence, I snapped my fingers and unleashed an enormous number of singularities.

Enchantments tried defusing the gravitational ordnance. Magicians screamed below, remnants and many races working together to untangle the threads of mana. An army of untold size rallied to defend and protect themselves under generated shielding. Trained to a razor's edge, they responded as competently as any veteran could hope for.

And their resistance meant nothing.

A cloak of howling darkness consumed the army. The shields of Olstatia rippled as shockwaves bombarded the bulwark. By the thousand, the Hybrids evaporated into nothing, the singularities acting as harbingers of kinetic destruction. It took seconds for the sound to reach us, and it deafened our surroundings.

The clouds parted from the devastation, opening an enormous hole in the overcast sky. The ground groaned in agony as magma formed from friction. A pool of slag consumed all the remaining Hybrids, and what was left of their army turned into pulped silver. Notifications flooded my status as I turned to Helios.

"It's a little headstart. Good luck."

He gawked at me before I allowed the warp to close, leaving me alone on the moon. I fell into a solemn contemplation.

Helios had spent the last three months saving his people while I only honed my mind and abilities. It left me in awe as Helios prioritized helping other people over himself. It also embedded a feeling of shame. Helios's efforts saved millions, and I could do the same if I applied myself in the same way.

Despite those thoughts, I smiled. I gazed at the endless void above before clasping my hands. If I hadn't trained so hard, then I would never have been able to destroy an army in a split second. It was the price of progress, and I would keep paying until I obtained what I wanted.

Still, I needed a break from the imperial aspects of my empire. I hovered out of the unstable area and pulled Althea out of my pocket dimension once it was safe. She hovered out in her environmentally isolating suit, and she peered around as if sedated.

"Woah. That was weird."

I furrowed my brow.

"Tell me about it. But what did the stasis feel like?"

"It was...Hmm, I was somewhere without time, so it reminded me of staring at a painting. But, uh, I was the painting, I guess? Heh, that doesn't make any sense."

I shook my head.

"No, it does. It sounds like a dissociative state. You know, like an out-of-body experience or something. It's surprising since Torix said everything happened in an instant, and he wasn't aware while in there."

Althea peered at her hand, and it blended into a surrounding plane.

"Maybe it's because I'm used to traversing through places like this?"

"If that's the case, I met someone a lot like you recently. Its name was Kryyah."

As we traveled back, I told Althea about the strange entity and the dimensional rip. She didn't believe me at first, thinking I made it up. That disbelief faded into a cold, distant expression. As I finished my story, she hadn't said anything for a while. I watched her dance across the moon in silence for a while.

She stopped moving before slamming one of her cords into the moon. It sliced the stone like a sword cleaving through Swiss cheese. She turned to me.

"Why can't we catch a break? Why can't you catch a break?"

I frowned.

"I don't know."

She peered down before squeezing her hands into fists.

"I'm tired of watching you do this all alone. If you ask me, it's like Schema's trying to put everything on your back. I know you can handle whatever anyone throws at you, but...I hate watching your shoulders drop when everything gets to be so much."

I grinned.

"Oh, you'd be surprised by how much these shoulders can carry."

She sighed.

"I'll...I'll see if I can't help somehow."

I walked over, picking her up into a hug.

"You help just by existing. It's a passive buff that's more important than any of my trees."

She oofed out.

"Even Determinator?"

"Alright, maybe not, but all the rest for sure."

She and I laughed. She hopped up and down.

"Ok, but I want to do more. Something, I don't know, tangible?"

I set her down.

"Aren't you working on the education and orphan initiative?"

She took a breath.

"See, that's the problem. Does that really amount to much?"

I blinked.

"I find it incredible, personally."

She furrowed her brow.

"By you just saved the moon in a few minutes."

I raised a hand, feeling good about myself.

"And I helped the albony."

"You have to tell me everything that happened while I was out."

We walked and talked. I explained the story before she laughed.

"And you're wondering why I feel like I'm not doing enough?"

I shrugged.

"We shoulder what we can. It's not a game of comparison to anyone but ourselves."

She pointed at me.

"That's easy to say when you're number one."

"I wasn't always at the very top. I'd argue I'm still doing less than either Shalahora or Plazia."

Althea crossed her arms.

"You're right. I, I just feel small sometimes."

I remembered facing my father.

"I do too."

I reached out a hand. She grabbed it. We strolled for a while. I smiled at her.

"You're able to cleave through all obstacles like they aren't even there. That's your most defining system bonus - to be an absolute destroyer of anything. You're also insanely strong. You only need to handle your bottlenecks."

"What do you think they are? Is it like, my mentality or something?"

"I think your mind is in the right place. I think it's your physicality and the rebounds you get from hitting objects that stunts your destructive potential."

"Huh. I get the rebounds, but what do you mean by physicality?"

"The way I see it? You're trying to transform in a way that makes you beautiful. First off, you're always beautiful, but I think you're leaving a lot of potential on the table by trying to look a certain way. There's a lot of potential you might access if you're willing to think outside the box."

She frowned.

"Huh...I guess so. I don't like admitting it, but yeah, I'm not exactly embracing my abilities. I never have. I feel so disgusting whenever I'm transformed into something that doesn't look right."

She shivered.

"Ugh, I hate it so much."

I raised my brow.

"I know the feeling. I don't exactly feel like Mr. Sunshine either, but I do what I have to so that I can handle people like Kryyah when they show up."

She nudged my shoulder.

"OK, I'll take your advice if you take mine. I think, personally speaking, that you need to take your time and make sure you're growing in the right way."

I raised a brow. She waved her hands.

"You're, er, rushing, and considering your potential, there's no reason to. You've got this if you take your time and make sure that every step is the right one."

I stood taller. I rubbed my nose.

"Thank you for the vote of confidence."

"Heh, at this point anyone that doesn't have confidence in you is pretty ridiculous. For me, I'm worried you're going to run too fast and fall down, not lose the race because of speed...That is, you know, assuming we're racing. If a race makes any sense. Maybe we're racing Elysium?"

She peered away.

"Forget it."

I squeezed her to me.

"It makes perfect sense."

She coughed before I let her go. I raised my hands.

"Sorry."

She tapped her chest.

"I'm fine. Anyways, you talked about letting the albony settle on the moon, right? That's crazy, huh?"

I frowned.

"Yeah. Seeing Helios work so tirelessly for his people...It's made me reevaluate a few things."

She smiled.

"If you ask me, I think you've done things pretty well. Think about it. There's no way Helios could've done what he did without your golems. They're so strong because you are. You may not be the person leading the charge, but you're making sure other people can."

She shrugged.

"I don't know...I think that's pretty cool."

We kept talking, passing through the endless white craters before landing near our lunar encampment. Once there, we found loads of changes, even in the two days since we left. A few pools of water shined near the center of the crater, origin mages hard at work. They wielded my rings, the dimensional fabric generating the raw matter while they carved into the ground like sculptors.

After peeling out a portion of the ground, they insulated it with dark clay, the dirt thick like putty. The streaks of dark contrasted the white stone, probably more of an aesthetic choice than anything else. The streams carved into the ground like elegant moats and lined the metal platform where Schema's facilities resided.

My monolith glowed with quintessence at the center of it all, the dark metal ominous and foreboding. Kids trusted my barrier, many of them playing in the streams while a few parents watched from afar. I joined the parents, but I stood a fair distance away. Althea talked with the parents before walking over to the kids.

She knew most of them by name, and she helped them learn and play a few games, from racing each other to lifeguard games to red light green light. I was more than content just watching them. Of course, that's not all I did. I had fifty-plus minds, and leaving them all idle was essentially torture.

We ramped up the assimilation of energy, my body a machine of mana. After an hour, Althea waved the kids goodbye to their chagrin, and she talked to the parents. Once she stepped away, she waved at me.

"Hey. Why didn't you come over?"

I raised my hands.

"I'm a giant, metal monster. I'm not exactly something kids trust."

She frowned.

"They're not scared of you."

I frowned back.

"You know, I doubt that. Besides, this is why keeping your appearance as you have has its benefits. People trust you. They can be at ease when you're around. Me?"

My armor glowed.

"I'm like some gruesome protector at best and the guild's boogeyman at worst."

She tapped my chest.

"You know what? You're right. Someone is scared."

"What? You mean me? That's not it at all."

She waved her hands.

"I've seen soldiers do this. Buk-buk-buk."

I rolled my eyes.

"Phss, this is childish goading at best."

She moved her neck as if pecking.

"I'm Daniel, big strong metal man. Buk-buk-bugawk."

I raised my hands.

"Come on now. You know I'm not afraid."

Adding to the effect, she made feathers on her arms.

"Buk-buk. Buk-bugawk. Me not Hod. Me Daniel. Me scared."

I rolled my eyes.

"Alright, you want me to terrify the children? I'm game. Let's go."

I stepped past her, and she grabbed my arm. The feathers fell off of her.

"Hey, you got to at least try and look less intimidating."

She pushed my cheeks together.

"And try to smile. Your attitude is terrible."

I took a moment, making sure I was calm. I shrank myself down to Althea's height, only slightly taller. I dulled the spikes across my armor and made the glow of my armor's runes into a gentle, unthreatening origin mana. The bright sky blue was the least hostile look I could muster. I pulled my helmet off while walking over with Althea.

As I did, the kids went silent. I raised my brow to Althea before she pulled me forward. I looked to the parents for some help, and they had smiles on their faces - they were in league with the enemy. The kids grouped together, fear palpable in them. I lunged down to one knee.

"Hey, guys. Do you like the pools?"

They peered up at me. One of them murmured.

"You...Are you the Harbinger?"

Even kids called me that. I sighed.

"To some people, yeah. I usually prefer it when people call me Daniel, though. Especially friends."

The brave child peered up at me.

"My dad said you helped us escape Yawm. He was bad."

I nodded.

"Very bad. Do you guys want to see something cool?"

They looked at each other before their leader put their hands on their hips.

"Yes."

I raised a hand, and they lifted up off the ground. They floated in the ether, and each of them giggled at one another. After a few seconds, I saturated them in their own individual gravity wells. One of them landed in the water, and it pooled over them, smothering the child in liquid death.

It was a simple mistake. When weightless, water became a sticky, volatile thing. Water tension kept it pinned onto anyone or anything it came in contact with, and struggling immersed the individual further. Before the liquid ran up to the child's face, I put antigravity spheres over their faces.

The water stopped at their neck, and the child's panic ceased. They laughed before taking some water and putting it in their mouth. It took a few tries since the antigravity sphere kept shoving the water away, but persistence paid. Like getting two opposing magnets to touch, the child snapped their face into the water and got a mouth full.

They squirted it out, launching themselves around. The other kids followed suit, immersing themselves in water before propelling themselves with jets of the stuff. They laughed, each of them playing around with the others. Althea and I watched for a while before the bravest child flew over. To stop themselves, they grabbed my hair, jerking to a halt.

Panick popped over the child's face.

"Ah. I'm sorry. That must have hurt."

I scoffed.

"Trust me on this. You can't hurt me."

They put water in their mouth and squirted it on me. It was kind of gross, and my hair dropped against my face before Althea burst into laughter. I flicked the child with gravitation, and they swirled around at a gentle pace. They burst into childish giggling, enjoying the steady spiral sensation.

After a few seconds, I slowed them down. The other kids lined up, and I had them all twirling about like spinning water balloons. As they all played and pushed around, Althea leaned her head against me.

"See? There's nothing wrong with spending a while doing this."

I marveled at the absolute joy of the children.

"Yeah. It makes me feel like a kid again. There's a wonder they have for life that I lack...Or lost. I can't tell."

After a few more minutes of play, I pulled them out of their gravitation, eating the latent, leftover mana with Event Horizon. After setting the kids down, they let out cries of defiance, demanding I stay. I ruffled the hair on one of their heads.

"Sorry, guys. I have to go protect our people."

The child leader walked up and gave me a hug. The expression stunned me, but I still softened my armor in time so they didn't clank their face against hard steel. They looked up at me.

"My name's Quinn."

I smiled.

"It's good to meet you. Sorry, but you're parents are calling for you all."

Quinn raised a hand, holding out a pinky.

"Pinky promise you'll come back."

I grabbed their tiny, almost miniature, pinky in my hand. My finger was the size of their arm.

"I will, but make sure you study hard, train consistently, and listen to your parents. They know what you need to do."

Quinn ran off, laughing. They joined their friends, and they all waved me goodbye. I waved back before Althea pulled me up to the moon's central monolith. She took a breath.

"Are you ready to go save New York next?"

I rolled my shoulders.

"Oh yeah. I'm itching for a fight."

Mana emanated from me like a flame.

"Let's go see what a warlord on Earth can do."

Althea's eyes went distant.

"More than you might expect."

Chapter 417: An Alienating Ascension

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"More than you might expect."

I stepped up to the lunar warp drive, and Althea followed. A wave of ionizing mist and a few thousand credits spent later, we stepped onto the platform at Springfield. It bustled with activity, many people managing what evolved into a new regional economic center. Althea and I leaped into the air.

Once aerial, we gained a better view of the city, and Althea darted toward New York, not wanting to waste any time. In the corner of my eye, my status popped up with a message from Hod.

Hod, the Harbinger's Duality | Level: 14,000 | Class: Slayer | Guild: The Harbinger's Legion - I've unshackled a few of Hod's other memories, and they are...Hod like pie. Pie good, but Hod wonder if donut better. Hod wonder if donut pie exist. Hod might have good idea.

I couldn't help but agree with our resident birdman. Donut pies sounded like a stroke of brilliance that our world might not be ready for. That aside, messaging the details of Hod's findings looked difficult, so I changed direction. I sent another message to Althea explaining my detour and how I'd catch up.

I passed over the section of Mt. Verner dedicated to the eltari. Several groups had hatchlings that fed on various foraged goods from our surroundings, and the overhead mosaics sheened from the sunshine. I smiled at the obvious prosperity; their village expanded alongside their people.

I landed near the largest tent. I walked into the ritualist area within, finding elegant stone sculptures and fragments of the cipher littered about. Here, quite a few of the eltari elders helped channel a ritual where smoke drifted in the air alongside hissing gems of mana. I waltzed into the interior, glad I could change my size.

Once inside, the elders bowed to me, and I found Other Hod resting at the center of the room. Beside him, rare pieces of eldritch hummed, glowed, or twitched. Other Hod grabbed individual pieces and gulped them down before absorbing the chaotic energies within. As he did, the eldritch half of Hod expanded.

The rippling edges of his shadows bled further into his surroundings. His claws sharpened. His form took on a less corporeal form, and the umbral flames rose further

off his skin. After eating the last piece of eldritch, Other Hod stood. After rolling his shoulders, Other Hod turned to me. His hollow eyes were haunting.

"Harbinger. It's good to see you."

I smiled back.

"Same. How's life been?"

"It's been a joy, but let us talk after handling our social responsibilities."

Other Hod thanked the elders, and he bowed deeply. After finishing the gesture, he walked off. I thanked Shajk and Monaba and wished them well, though my talk felt hollow after Other Hod's near-spiritual gesture. Once outside, we walked through the mosaic roads of the eltari settlement. Other Hod's form left lingering shadows behind him as he spoke.

"I've been developing my eldritch persona instead of rejecting it as I have before. It comes with many detriments, but I also have gained much from the experience. Part of that is an understanding that the more my eldritch half grows, the more pieces of Hod that come out of his absorbed memories."

I nodded.

"I can keep an eye out for different rare pieces of eldritch to see if they can help you develop faster."

Other Hod fell into one of his own shadows and walked out from under a canopy. He stepped onto a cliffside, gazing at a wondrous view of the forest.

"I thank you for the gesture, but your kindness isn't the reason for my message. I wished to give you pieces of Hod's splintered memories alongside the development of his magic."

I walked up to him.

"Cool. Any relevant details?"

Other Hod cracked his neck by moving his head around.

"Many. The first is a more principled understanding of the magic. It is just as the elders said. Hod is able to view the future and garner aspects of it. As they are, the pieces are so esoteric and disparate that we can't weave anything meaningful from the strings of fate he's seen. That is, aside from a few important names."

I raised a brow.

"Like?"

Other Hod's head twitched.

"Polluterix. That is the name of the Old One that is viewing you."

A far-off gaze and rumble echoed in my mind. I shivered.

"Ah. Did they make Valgus's shackles?"

Other Hod nodded his head.

"And they aren't the source of Hod's mana. That is derived from an entirely different Old One."

I took a breath.

"They keep popping up like new diseases from rainforests."

Other Hod scoffed.

"A colorful analogy. Hod and I haven't ascertained Polluterix's goals, but the Old One seems to control balance, conversions, and sacrifice. Though not an active Old One like Baldowah, Polluterix still pulls strings from afar using far more subtle methods than the other mad gods."

I put a hand on Other Hod's shoulder.

"Thanks for getting this info. It gives us a name and a few pieces to work off of."

Other Hod nodded.

"The other piece I wished to share with you revolves around a new enemy and chapter in Earth's history."

I furrowed my brow.

"I'm guessing it's another member under the Old Ones? An avatar or something, maybe?"

Other Hod shook his head.

"The first is of Earth's expansion. It will become a colossal planet in time, and there is little we can do to stop it. Prepare for humanity to splinter farther apart as our disparate cities become colonies."

I frowned. I expected as much considering how the rifts operated, but this helped verify that assumption. Other Hod continued.

"This other being...She is difficult to parse as her protections exceed almost all the possible measures. Still, Hod's latent abilities are potent. They've garnered that she loves the Old Ones, yet they despise her. The last piece of information we've gained is that a turtle will unlock the secrets of the world to you."

I blinked.

"What?"

"A turtle will unlock the secrets of the world to you."

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

"Uhm...Is there any more than that? Like a name, a place, maybe a time?"

"No. That phrase is all we know."

I smiled.

"Esoteric indeed. Speaking of-"

I pulled out the fragmented pieces of Kryaah's shell from my dimensional storage. The amber armor glowed and oozed odd energies. Other Hod picked up a piece.

"This isn't like anything I've ever seen. It's eldritch in origin, yet it was derived from other latent energy sources outside of their corruption."

I shrugged.

"I had no clue what to do with it or what it really was. I figured it could be food for your eldritch side."

Other Hod marveled at one of the shards.

"And perhaps it may even feed Hod's abilities."

I turned to leave.

"Sorry for cutting the conversation short, but I have to go catch up with Althea. Thanks for letting me know all of this, and update me if anything else comes up."

Other Hod bowed to me.

"Thank you, and I shall."

His form dispersed, and Hod appeared. The bird man spread his arms.

"Hod arrive in style."

He waddled back and forth, his legs like stilts.

"Hod use secret technique: Hod sneak attack."

He twisted back and forth over to me like a man made of toothpicks. Once close, he hugged me.

"Hod miss Harbinger."

I hugged him back.

"I missed you too, buddy. Good job with all the training."

Hod let go before flexing non-existent muscles.

"Hod pretty cool. But Hod tired lots lately. Hod work under shadow man. Shadow man demanding, and Hod eat lots of gross things. Hod tired after eating them."

Hod tilted his head at me.

"And I feel different, at times."

I leaned back, Hod's speech pattern hitting me like a lightning bolt.

"My god."

Hod shook his head.

"Hod wonder what in Hod happened."

I furrowed my brow.

"I don't Hodding know, but it just about made me Hod myself."

Hod nodded in a solemn understanding.

"Hod get it. Hod Hodself sometimes too."

He yawned.

"Hod go sleep now."

I turned to leave before he put a hand on my shoulders. I peered at him with a raised brow. Hod met my eye.

"Hod wish best for Harbinger. Keep safe."

I smiled.

"You too, buddy."

I flew off, leaving the rustic village and its culturally rich people behind. I bolted through the clouds, trying to close the gap between Althea and me. I couldn't keep up yet since it took me a minute to get the multiple dimensions moving. As I struggled, I found two of Shalahora's shades guarding the entrance to Springfield. I noted that detail before passing far into the distance.

Althea glided over a cloud, one of her hands pressing against the fluffy, dense ball of mist. I hovered beside her, and she smiled at me.

"Finally caught up?"

"You know how talks with Hod go."

She shook her head.

"All over the place, if you're lucky."

I pointed behind us.

"What are those shadow soldiers doing? They looked like a few of Shalahora's shades."

Althea glided on the wind, circling around me with delicate wings.

"Shalahora can't be everywhere all at once, so he's sent his shades to act as, uh, kind of like mind police. They check the minds of people and make sure there's nothing too crazy going on. He can also check for implanted Hybrids or anything like that."

I winced.

"It's not too common, right?"

"It almost never happens. It's much more common farther South near the encampment Plazia cleared a while back. Shalahora's over there right now since he finished handling the skeptiles."

"He handled the millions there already?"

She smiled.

"Shalahora's good at what he does. He actually enjoys this kind of thing a lot."

The wind brushed against my face, cool and refreshing.

"I wonder why? I know being border patrol doesn't exactly appeal to me, at least."

"Something about unveiling the truth instead of spreading more lies, but who really knows? That guy is a real mystery."

If you come across this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen from Royal Road. Please report it.

"Hah, you're telling me."

We shot across the horizon, a sea of trees beneath us, all of them changing color for fall. I hardly noticed the passing of seasons up until recently, the temperature change unnoticeable and my life consumed with volatile situations. Having a moment to slow down, I found the trees beautiful and nostalgic. Althea watched as well.

We coasted along in a cozy quiet, each of us peering around. After crossing Lake Huron, we went over toward Niagara Falls. As expected, it was majestic yet tortured. Mirroring the Grand Canyon, spatial fog encompassed the middle of the majestic waterfalls, the plunge pool a pathway to another world.

The churning mist mixed into the spatial fog, and we dove in. The lighting altered into a sunny and vast ecosystem below. Each waterfall spread far farther apart than above, and underneath the crest of each cascade hid another world, each space disconnected by clouds of spatial mist. At the center of Niagara Falls, the depths sank for miles and miles, tunnels crisscrossing the vast natural reserve.

Other openings exposed caverns on the cliffsides. Even a cursory glance exposed several enormous dungeons that spread out for miles. They teemed with life, all kinds of eldritch flying into and out of the subterranean world. Other waterfalls fell from their ceiling, lighting the place with glowing pools of different colors.

It reminded me of the best parts of BloodHollow, and it contrasted the normal river and forest above. As I hovered over the water at the fall's center, several large shadows swam beneath me. A burning desire to uncover this place's secrets exploded in my chest, but I silenced the urge. Now wasn't the time. Not yet, at least.

I marked that location in my minimap, which wasn't so mini anymore with streaks of it crossing several states. Before heading out, Althea and I made one round trip near the waterfalls. Each of us put a hand into the current, cutting a swath through the water with our arms. It was a moment of magic and not Schema's kind, either.

We darted over to Buffalo, checking on the city for only a few minutes. I dropped off a cache of supplies, finding everything in order. Trying not to dally more, we flew over towards New York City. Even as we crossed the state, many changes in the ecosystems dotted the skyline. New kinds of fauna evolved and proliferated here.

While not overwhelming the native species, pockets of lavender-colored birches spread throughout the place, their leaves vibrant and neon. Elks with elegant, gorgeous horns hopped from tree branches, their feet otherworldly and light. Leaves covered them instead of fur. One of the elegant bucks landed on a tree branch, gazing at us with glowing eyes.

We met its gaze, and Althea waved. From the trunk of the tree the elk rested on, camouflaged wolves erupted, their fur like splinters. They bit into the buck before tearing it to pieces. Althea looked away.

"Blugh. I know it's nature, but it's always hard to watch."

I kept my gaze steady.

"It is."

I reached out a hand and pinched two fingers together. The elk's suffering ended as its brain collapsed in its skull. Althea winced, and we moved on. Having some time, I glanced at my status. I stockpiled a mountain of stats, and I gained plenty of tree points to distribute.

I got whirlwinded into helping everybody before having time to assess everything and dig into the minute details. Before checking the raw numbers, I put all of my extra points into the Schema's Champion tree and checked my system updates.

New Legendary skill unlocked! A Manifold Mind, Matter Conversion, and Temporal Compression combine into the legendary skill - Infinity.

Infinity | lvl 512 - Within the finite, there exist concepts that bind mortals. Time. Death. Eternity. These are mere ideas that sentients touch upon, but they may never grasp them fully. You've unraveled these truths as lies, and in unveiling the ineffable, you've become an entity without limit.

Infinity augments temporal manipulation, the number and volume of the user's psyches, and the conversion of matter into energy. This skill also enhances the user's assimilation of cipheric alterations, their efficiency, and the stability of the user's soul. Finally, Infinity allows for a grander scope of one's mental composition and augments the user's ability to suppress domains.

Current Effects:

51+ Endurance, +51 Willpower, +26 Perception, +26 Intelligence, and +13 Luck

+51.2% to Time manipulation, mental power, and conversion of energy types | +25.1% to cipheric augments, their stability, and the user's soul | +12.55% to mental remapping speed and domain suppression.

-20.24% to the mana cost of Infinity

1,061 skill points were rewarded from the fusion!

It was an excellent boon, the skill already leveled highly from my focused training. I moved on.

Schema's Champion Tier I unlocked!

There exist eras where centuries pass as seconds and where seconds pass as centuries. This is a time of the latter, not the former. Know that many pieces of a puzzle are coming together, and they expose a picture of desolation. It is an unending march of destruction led by the blind.

The need for one to rise above the rest has never been more needed. You must be the one to rise.

+1,000 to level cap

+ 1 access tier for Schema's Archives(Bronze)

+ 1 technology tier allowance(Bronze)

+ 1 economic tier(Bronze)

Sovereign Exclusive: +1 to hidden mana type allowance

Schema's Champion Tier II unlocked!

You must bear the burdens of those before you, with you, and after you. All will come to pass, yet you lie at the center of the conflict. Many are searching in the farthest reaches of the galaxy. They are attempting to find an entity that is like you. Something of your ilk.

I know of most, and that is why I know you are singular. Their jaws will come down with sharp teeth, and they shall aim to purge you of your gifts. You must break them. You must not submit. All is lost otherwise.

+2,000 to level cap

+ 2 access tier for Schema's Archives(Silver)

+ 2 technology tier allowance(Silver)

+ 2 economic tier(Silver)

Sovereign Exclusive: +2 to hidden mana type allowance

The most pressing part of the status updates were the not-so-subtle messages Schema sent alongside them. It must've been related to the current events happening with the AI, and it spurred my growing sense of urgency. Something was coming, and I would be ready. As for the benefits, they were incredible.

The level cap was obvious. More levels were always good, though not the most potent benefit at this point. On the other hand, the other bonuses required research to fully understand. I scratched my head at the hidden mana types, assuming it meant entropy or maybe even arcane mana. The fact it enabled other dimensional wakes would pay dividends later. In fact, the other benefits helped me uncover the other mana types.

That stemmed from the Schema's Archives bonus. It gave me access to some of the system's unaltered and unfiltered data. It was a part of Schema's system that kept information locked down. All data passed through a crippling filter from Schema, and that made most of the allowed knowledge useless.

With the vast majority of Schema's web curated and curtailed, research was like finding a murderer. You know, except the crime scene was burned and bleached. That's how sterile the AI left anything posted on its web. Having the raw data allowed me to come to my own conclusions without having every important detail warped or changed to fit Schema's narrative.

While it was a potent benefit over the long term, it paled in comparison to the other awards.

The technology allowances gave my guild the right to research and establish a few more forbidden technologies. Tier I gave us the right to establish long-distance grids, power lines, and communications outside of Schema's system. In other words, we could establish our own internet again and proliferate information across it. Even this alone was worth the entire 5,000 skill points from Schema.

In my mind, it was an absolute game-changer. For instance, even after half a decade of living in the system, people still didn't get the most out of Schema's upgrades. It wasn't people's fault either. Certain trees were hidden behind obscure unlock requirements,

and Schema suppressed the knowledge so that it could pick and choose who gets what and all under random, esoteric conditions.

The internet allowed for the free proliferation of that knowledge, enabling everyone to scrutinize and understand the system's details. That's not all. Info on mana, Schema's history, different eldritch, their weaknesses, alchemy, videos on fighting, sorcery, all of that and ten times more would disperse in a rapid, efficient fashion.

Ignorance would no longer cloud our species and our worlds. We would be able to pull ourselves out of this informational dark age and back into an era of enlightenment. This was huge for the long-term prospects of our guild. That, somehow, wasn't the only benefit either. Technology II gave us the right to construct our own warp drives, space shuttles, and advanced weaponry.

While nuclear weapons were still off the table, most everything else was free game. Railguns, graphene, and other tech that Schema hoarded could be uncovered by my guild without consequence. The warps would connect our worlds, even allowing us to create permanent bridges between them. Any goods produced in my empire wouldn't carry the same warping fee that other guilds suffered from.

We could augment our internet into something galactic in nature, assuming we had enough energy to sustain permanent portals. The logistics would be simpler with actual computers handling the rough job of mathematical computations. I hoped the rest of the Schema's Champion tree would unlock those technologies as well.

I might even gain the ability to warp around without needing a chauffeur. In a sense, the sky was the limit but not just on my own planet. I would gain a vast empire carrying many of the benefits our species once took for granted. As for the space shuttles, it wasn't quite as ground breaking as the other unlocks.

Normally, a shuttle required permits from Schema to build, and he tailored those vessels to be outright worse than his own. My guild no longer needed to abide by those stringent requirements. Did that mean we'd make shuttles out of dimensional fabric? Oh, most definitely. Despite that bonus, shuttle flight took forever and acted more as a means of enforcing a planet's security.

If a shuttle dropped a hunk of metal from above, it would be a kinetic bomb by the time it landed on the planet's surface. A ruling class could dominate by having its military

above the atmosphere this way. I had no need for that as I never intended to harvest economic benefits from my populace. I would be the benefit, not the other way around.

And the perfect example of that came from the economic bonuses. They limited tariffs, taxes, and the costs between businesses. Normally, Schema shaved a percentage of sales, personal income, and a business's profit. This tree cut those expenses down to near zero. In general, the boons of the Schema's Champion far exceeded anything else I'd ever obtained.

Oddly enough, it was a one-way trip to utter galactic dominance for my guild. This culminated from the nearly infinite energy derived from my dimensional fabric. Other guilds would've struggled to compete regardless, but that sealed the deal. The more I thought about it, the more that seemed to be Schema's point.

He wanted me at the top. The reason was obvious - I was going to fight whatever was making Schema's life a living hell. It bolstered my confidence to know the AI supported us, but it also mounted an ever-rising pressure. Regardless of the future, our guild just obtained quite a few advantages.

It was time to use them.

I sent a message to my guildmates, letting them know about these awards and what they entailed. I gave a few of my thoughts while outlining plans for different programs, from the permanent portals to re-establishing the Internet. At the same time, I explored my ability to make quests.

Within a few minutes, I got some understanding of it before making a few. It took only a few clicks, and I gave my followers active missions to explore these new benefits. After handling all of that, I checked out my cipheric augments.

[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.

+84,294 Constitution | +219,293 Endurance | +60,421 Perception | +124,194 Willpower
| +56,392 Luck | +63,109 Strength | +59,371 Dexterity | +68,990 Intelligence | +21,813
Charisma | +35,294 Awe

+100% to Effects of Legacies

+100% Internal Motivation Multiplier

+64% Dimension Size | +64% Dimensional Wake Density | +64% Dimensional Wake Extent | +27% Dimensional Weight

+20% Cipheric Augment Amounts - Skill: Infinity | +20% Cipheric Augment Speed - Skill: Infinity | +20% Domain Suppression - Skill: Infinity

+38,921 Trillion Ambient Mana]

The numbers dwarfed my previous checkup, and I raised a hand and squeezed a fist to check it out. I hadn't even noticed the increase in all of my stats, though that probably derived from my lack of a normal mental state. I never stopped my temporal compression or runic channeling, and that dramatically changed how I perceived reality.

By now, I had gained far more raw stats from my cipheric augments than I had from level-ups. Including all my trees, I got four attribute points per level up. At level 34k, that meant about 136,000 attributes. I had, er...about 800k from channeling mana into my runes. After factoring in my multipliers, I stood head and shoulders over anyone near my level in attributes.

If I combined that with all my dimension bonuses, then I reaped enormous rewards. The last bonus involved suppressing domains, whatever the hell that meant. Despite the palpable increases, I couldn't shake this feeling that I fell further behind by the second. Whether that was justified or not, I kept surging mana into my runes as I opened my status.

The Living Multiverse | Level 34,161 (Cap: 46,000) | Current Influence: The Rise of Eden | Class: Sovereign

Strength – 518,308 | Constitution – 526,834 | Endurance – 875,255

Dexterity – 348,316 | Willpower – 970,240 | Intelligence – 711,735

Charisma – 375,514 | Luck – 465,195 | Perception – 149,469 | Awe - 39,295

Health: 18.29 Billion/18.29 Billion | Health Regen: 3.042 Trillion/min or 52.014 Billion/sec

Stamina: Infinite+++++++ | Ambient Mana 38,921 Trillion

Mass: 16.33 Billion Pounds(7.42 Billion Kilos~)

Height: 53'02 |18.034 meters | Actual: 13'9 (Infinity/Distributed Matter)

Damage Res - 99.740% | Actual: 99.813% (Infinity) | Dimensional Res - 100%

Phys Dam Bonus – 434.43 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: 52) - 602.2 Billion mana/min siphoned into runes and armor

After a few moments of analysis, I shook my head in outright disgust. Several of my stats increased over twofold. Some, like perception, tripled. The even distribution of the stats surprised me since I expected endurance to rise more than the other attributes. It had increased by plenty, but the disparity between it and my other attributes lessened rather than grew.

In fact, my willpower exceeded my endurance now. It was an odd feeling, almost as if I had failed myself in a way.

Feelings of disillusion aside, these consistent, honestly absurd stat boosts balanced my abilities, and considering the breadth of my current demands, I appreciated the boon. The other numbers expanded in tandem, my health regen hitting the trillions per minute

landmark. I over doubled my ambient mana as well, giving me weight, density, and strength alike, thanks to my trees.

That said, a decent chunk of my ambient mana had still come from my fight with Valgus. His mana production over a few hours matched mine over a few months. I still had a long way to go, though even a few quick calculations exposed some strange inconsistencies in that theory.

Firstly, I should've assimilated ten times more mana into my ambient stores than I had. To be fair, I spread my mana investment across multiple rune sources, not just my ambient mana stores. Even accounting for that disparity, I had far more mana left over than was supposed to be the case.

It exposed some kind of bottleneck. If my guess was correct, some of my older runes lacked the ability to take in all the mana I channeled. That meant a general rewrite was in order, something that may take a few days. After taking the warlord of New York City down, I'd put that on the top of my priority list.

My last thoughts on my status revolved around my mass and strength. Each of them maintained a steady, if not rapid, rise. At this point, my strength matched the combined efforts of 4 billion, pre-system people. I'd soon overtake the physical limits of humanity before Schema's system arrived. It was an odd realization.

My weight was the same. I had about two pounds of mass for every human that lived before Schema slammed us. Considering my growth's exponential rise, it was only a matter of time before I exceeded humanity's general size and mass. Huh. Weird.

Either way, I sent messages and handled my status as Althea and I traveled. We did so in entirely different worlds. I hovered via a gravity well, essentially falling to my destination. On the other hand, Althea darted through the clouds, investigated settlements, and hopped between trees. She enjoyed traveling and traversal, having the time of her life by simply moving around.

I should've felt joy. Instead, I felt a touch of envy. On the moon, she and I could both let loose. Here, I could do the same as her, but it would be an artificial display. If I hopped from tree to tree, I wasn't actually hopping on anything. Trees couldn't hold me up, even when made of steel. Instead, I mimicked the grace of genuine movement instead of actually performing acrobatic maneuvers.

In fact, I kept my physical self isolated from the world at all times. A layer of heavy gravitation and carefully crafted telekinesis stopped me from destroying my surroundings. I'd gotten used to keeping myself afloat and holding those gravitational forces skin-tight, but seeing Althea enjoy gliding around left me feeling scorned.

It was as if I abandoned who I was while she never had to.

Even while those thoughts and emotions passed over me, I recognized they weren't fair feelings. I wouldn't act on them, but the feelings existed whether I liked it or not. However, I wasn't going to let my alienation stop me from finding joy in her. After all, just because I couldn't experience something anymore didn't mean I had to rob someone else of that delight.

While my thoughts meandered about, we entered into some kind of webbing. I pushed it aside.

"Ugh, what is this?"

Althea turned to me.

"What is what?"

I held up a strand of the webbing.

"This."

Althea furrowed her brow.

"This is what?"

I shook it.

"This is this. What do you mean what is this?"

She pointed at herself.

"Uhm, this is confused by you."

I furrowed my brow.

"What?"

Around us, a series of portals spawned from the ether. Ten humans jumped out of the warps, each of them armed with black swords and shields. Rifles clattered against their backs with pistols at their sides, and they painted an infinity symbol within a diamond onto their shields. The leader spoke, and a voice modulator changed their voice.

"Which one of you is disrupting the web?"

I held up a strand.

"That's what this is? A web?"

They pointed their rifles at me. The leader seethed.

"Set it down."

I smiled, my eyes alight as mana thrummed in my blood. It swelled off of me as I murmured.

"You don't want to do that."

A palpable fear radiated from the men before something muted the emotion. The leader scoffed before snapping his words.

"Says who?"

I raised a fist and the outlines of faces formed in the ascendant cloud of mana around me.

"Does it matter who I am? No. What matters is what I can do."

The air blurred around me, and mana swirled in a violent storm of potential. Despite the obvious difference in firepower, they kept their rifles raised. The leader snarled.

"Leave this place, or else."

I scoffed.

"Someone's psionically controlling you. It has to be the warlord of New York, right?"

They all gazed at one another confused. Once more, they regained composure, and the leader fired a rifle. I snatched the bullet out of the air, my time dilation giving me the chance to do so. The wind off my arm bent trees in the forest below, branches snapping and animals sent flying. As I held up the steel, I smiled.

"Ah, armor piercing. Smart. Still, not enough. Not nearly."

I dropped the bullet as my minds settled on the soldier.

"Can you hear me? If you can, then I'll give you a message."

The man kept his gaze on me, his eyes like iron while his body squirmed about. I smiled at him and simmered.

"The Harbinger has come."

Chapter 418: A Changed World

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The tallest soldier dashed forward and swung a sword at Althea. Not opting to block, she swiped her hand at the blade. She cut through the weapon, wrist, and upper arm of the individual. They screamed in agony before Althea kicked them away. She backflipped as another member stabbed where her back had been.

She finished her flip, one foot cutting at the enemy's sword arm and her other foot kicking them away. Her dazzling display of control and finesse differed ever so slightly from my own. Six of them stabbed me with their blades, and I gawked in amazement. Somehow, somehow, each of them managed to cut a few inches deep into my skin. I put my hands on my hips.

"You know, I never imagined you guys would be able to get through me. Like, not even a little bit. Steel usually shatters at this point."

If I was surprised, they were aghast. Each of the assailant's jaws gaped, and they peered at each other as if they were falling into a pit of lava. In a sense, they were. My armor reached out with tendrils, breaking their wrists and ankles. A cacophony of screams erupted, and their voices resonated into a vicious wailing.

The sound wave hit Althea, and she spit out a gush of blood. I silenced them with gravitation, their jaws clamping shut. Shattered teeth fell before their minds assaulted

ours. They found my psyche as a swarm, something ever-sustaining and always waiting. On the other hand, Althea's mind was never touched.

Her choker's psionic elements defended her like a loyal mastiff, its jaws sharp and its gaze menacing. To my surprise, the group used psionics mirroring Torix's level, which was far above anything I anticipated. However, they lacked Torix's finesse and attention to detail. After tearing through them, I found the cause.

In each of their minds, some kind of aetherial creature resided. It attached to their psyches, augmenting them to an absurd extent. They all connected with each other and into a telepathic line, similar to what Elysium did with Lehesion. Before I inspected further, one of them swung a sword at my eye.

I reached out a fist and flicked. They blocked with their shield, and it absorbed the blow. Using some strange resonance, the shield swallowed all of the force I put into my flick with ease. I raised my brow before actually striking the shield with my fist. I put in enough force to destroy a mountain, but the dark plate swallowed the kinetic impact again.

The warrior smiled at me before a series of cracks covered his shield's surface. It shattered in my direction, shards crumbling against me, and the enemy's sword reached my face. My helmet flowed over my head and bit into his wrist. I made my helmet spit out the blood since, you know, I wasn't a cannibal.

Well, the times in Springfield could count if you're picky, but those were zombies. They weren't human anymore, and when I met these people's eyes, I found fear, despair, and curiosity alike. They were human. No doubt about that. One of them let out a scream.

"You...What in the hell are you? What's happening?"

I leaned back.

"You don't know me, yet you leap from nothing and swing your swords at my throat."

Althea kicked another person's legs. Their bones broke before she snapped the arms of the last assailant. She frowned as blood erupted from the wounds, bones sticking out of the skin.

"I really, really didn't want to have to use this much force, but you guys went for the kill asap. I'm not about to just beat you up when you tried to cleave my head off."

I raised a hand, seizing the scene in gravity wells.

"Well, I mean, I could've just done this."

Althea shrugged.

"It happened fast. We had to react."

I mulled over my options for a few seconds. I could've stopped this from devolving into a brawl. Still, knowing their intent to kill gave me important information. This warlord wanted our blood, and that contextualized how we'd meet. Those thoughts swirled in my mind as I set us down on a hill. A few health potions later, we restored these people to a reasonable state of health, though I locked their arms in gravity wells.

Taking a moment, I inspected one of them.

Joey Samuels | Lvl 5,000 | Guild: The Force of Iron - John Samuels is a 34-year-old man who lost his family during the culling of Earth. He survived the initial tutorial with ease, but he killed two other members during the wolf encounter. Once outside of those confines, John's mean streak continued.

He survived by petty extortion of local townsfolk on the outskirts of Mt. Kisco, New York. After several years of monetizing the populace and basic mercenary work, he found a flier for Marcella Meyer. He joined the outskirts of her organization, enjoying a newfound sense of purpose.

After donating a portion of his earnings to the townsfolk he once terrorized, John remains determined to redeem himself for his past and regain a purpose in his life.

To you, he is not a threat.

Equipment: Eonothic Sabor of Desolation | Level Cap: This equipment was forged using rare eldritch found across several dungeons within New York. While normally a usable blade, an Old One has gifted this blade, dramatically augmenting its abilities.

Guild Position: Fodder

Status Screen: Level: 5,000 (Cap 5,000) | Current Influence: Eonoth's Splinters | Class: None

Strength – 8,012 | Constitution – 6,019 | Endurance – 301 | Dexterity – 2,136 | Willpower – 100 | Intelligence – 100 | Charisma – 17 | Luck – 8 | Perception – 890 |

Health: 10,021/16,390 | Health Regen: 201/min | Stamina: 2,103/16,390

Damage Resistance - 95% | Phys Dam Bonus – 43,021% | Damage Bonus – 65%

While reading, I learned something new. I could view other people's status screens directly. At the same time, this person joined The Force of Iron, Schema's basic guild. Despite that, he worked for Meyer. Most likely, the warlord was an upper-ranked commander in the Force of Iron who pulled the strings from the back.

Althea put a hand on her hip.

"These are Marcella's goons, apparently."

I sat down cross-legged.

"Goons, huh? And Who's Marcella?"

Althea nodded her head.

"We think she's the avatar based on our intel."

That threw my theory of a commanding officer in the garbage. Joey, the grunt, furrowed his brow at us.

"I'm not a goon. I'm a warrior. A-and what the hell is an avatar?"

I waved a hand.

"Answer me first. Why did you attack us?"

John narrowed his eyes.

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

I inspected his mind, finding only him there. The aetherial entity abandoned him like a coward. Taking a second, I checked everyone else. Many of their desires, memories, and knowledge evaporated into thin air. If I guessed right, those parasites bailed after understanding how dire the situation was. When they left, they took all incriminating knowledge with them.

Ugh. Another shady organization. I furrowed my brow, gazing at a normal man with cold sweat dripping from his brow. I didn't want to tear this person's mind to pieces. I sighed.

"Listen, Joey, think of the situation this way. We could continue down this road where you say nothing. You will all die from torture, and we'll run into Marcella thinking she attacked us without any reason and with blows aimed at killing us. I know this will come as a surprise, but that's not exactly a great first impression."

I side-eyed him, and at the same time, I disintegrated a patch of forest with Event Horizon. I made sure he saw it, and nothing remained of the life I expunged. It was as if someone scorched the air and salted the soil as the organics floated away as a cloud of haunting ash.

I murmured my words.

The genuine version of this novel can be found on another site. Support the author by reading it there.

"We can both cause a lot more damage than we're letting on. Do you want us to assume the worst, or would you rather we walk in understanding why you guys have done this? I think it's better if you extinguish some fires before your superiors end up burning in them."

Joey wrestled with his thoughts before turning to his comrades. A pile of moaning, bleeding, and broken people sprawled out against a tree. He sighed.

"Y-You ran into our detection system. One of you started breaking it, so they sent us to stop whatever it was. We're...We're border control."

I raised my brow.

"Oh, really? So that's what all this is?"

I picked up a dark blade, its surface smooth and shiny. Althea ran a finger down the side of the blade. Her finger bled as she held it up.

"Ok, guys, we run a guild too. Swinging your swords at our throats isn't what we usually consider border control. That's, well, murder."

Joey blinked, distress pouring over his face. I grabbed one of the invisible strands hovering above me.

"Do you know what this stuff is?"

John gulped.

"Dude, I can't even see what you're talking about."

I narrowed my eyes.

"Huh. You sure?"

Another bead of cold sweat dripped down John's back.

"Look, man, I have no clue. I just work here."

I checked the surface of his mind, finding no signs of lying. I shrugged.

"Fair enough. Can you give us any info on New York City or Marcella?"

John frowned.

"I've never seen her or the city. Not since the culling. I-it's hard to get in these days. They have a guard standing outside that's impossible to kill. It's called the Seer. It can see right through a person. A-and it kills people all the time for no reason."

Althea turned a hand to him.

"If I'm getting this right, you received a distress call, jumped in, and then realized you were in over your heads?"

John peered away.

"None of us expected a dame you like you to hit like a truck."

Althea frowned.

"Dame? What does that mean?"

I scratched my cheek.

"It's a term for a woman. It's not an insult. Well, most of the time."

She pointed at John.

"Count yourself lucky that the big guy's clearing things up for you."

John flushed, unable to keep looking at Althea. I rolled my eyes before standing up.

"We're heading out. If you can find the time, message your superiors that we're not trying to invade you guys or anything. I'd rather we work together, especially considering how well-run this organization seems to be. For real, that warping was impressive."

John scoffed.

"You should know that Marcella won't play nice with other guilds. She eats them up."

I drooped my lips down and held one hand up. I waved it with menace.

"I'll make her an offer she can't refuse."

Althea laughed.

"Why'd you say that in a funny voice?"

My eyes widened.

"I mean, it has to be said that way. It was from this awesome movie called The Godfather."

John gawked.

"Wait a second...You're human?"

I turned my arm to him.

"Of course. What did you think I was?"

John blinked.

"I...I didn't know. Some weird Sentinel eldritch thing, maybe?"

I waved my hand.

"Close enough. Anyways, we're heading out. Take this."

I squeezed a hand, creating a small piece of crystallized quintessence before carving basic cipheric runes onto its surface. I tossed it to John.

"This will channel enough gravitation to move you all for a few miles. It will only release in a steady fashion, so trying to weaponize it will just get you blown up. Find a settlement and get some help. Also, don't look at the runes too closely, or you'll be kicked out of Schema's system."

John grabbed it out of the air, but he missed. I hovered it over to him, and he oggled the glowing shard with wonder. He gulped.

"Is...Is this an artifact? Did you make this out of thin air? A-and how did you know we couldn't warp back?"

I answered in order.

"Eh, kind of. Yes. None of you used portals while fighting us, so I assumed you were sent here by someone else. Anyways, we're headed out. Good luck."

I pulled the swords into my hand and shattered them.

"You shouldn't swing your swords so quickly. It pays to play nice sometimes. You can avoid a few broken ankles that way."

John stared at me in confusion.

"Swung our swords? You're the ones that started attacking us."

I rummaged through the outer surface of his mind. He believed what he said. I pinched the bridge of my nose.

"Just...Stay safe out there. Also, you might want to leave Marcella's guild. I don't think she's being honest with any of you."

John's eyes glazed over.

"Marcella never lies."

Althea scratched her cheek.

"This is so weird. They're acting insane."

I peered at her.

"Tell me about it. I haven't been gaslit like this since I talked to my dad."

As the guards struggled to understand what we said, we flew off, leaving a few supplies for the poor team sent to intercept us. Part of that donation came from our guilt at wounding them. It was easy to forget how fragile most people were, and we both overreacted.

Still, those swords omened a sinister origin alongside the psionic control of Marcella. As we scattered into the air, the translucent strands grew in size and density, becoming an absolute chore to deal with. Althea ran through them, unable to see or feel their effects. They clumped on me like ants on a bird with broken wings.

Taking a moment, I pushed the invisible strands with my dimensional wake. They bent out of the way, unable to pass through my dimension. I raised my brow.

"These aren't normal parts of some web."

Althea sighed.

"The strand thing again?"

I snapped.

"Yes, the strand thing. They're real, and I think they're a spatial web. Someone's casting the magic on a massive scale here."

Althea reached out a hand.

"Am I touching them?"

"Yes."

"Huh. They might be why the team attacked us so quickly."

"I think it's how they found us but not why they showed that kind of murderous hostility. It seemed...Planned. If anything, it was as if they thought something was coming. If you ask me, they're more volatile than they're letting on. Hell, they're crazier than even Schema's statuses are telling us, too."

Althea frowned.

"You don't trust Schema's statuses anymore?"

"It's hard to trust anything these days. Besides, Schema's not exactly reliable right now. Things are looking kind of dicey."

"I guess, but he usually does the best he can...Uh, most of the time."

I sighed.

"You know what? You're right. I'll cut him as much slack as he cuts me."

Althea hopped into the air.

"Pshhh, so plenty?"

She flew off. I flew after her.

"Eh, we'll have to agree to disagree on that."

We flew through clouds and marveled at the skyline. The urbanization of everything intensified, even the periphery of the Big Apple being enormous. After passing a dozen smaller towns and cities, New York City crept into view. It manifested as an enormous wall of dense, spatial fog. The gray cloud spiraled, streaks of lightning bursting on its outskirts, and tornadoes spun out in the distance.

I floated under Althea.

"Suitably apocalyptic, huh?"

She hopped off my chest.

"That's why we called you in, among other reasons. You'll see."

Eldritch hopped out of the Atlantic Ocean, devouring the lightning strikes. The waters plumed upward in large waves, plopping up and down as if some force pulled from above and below. Raiders and scavengers roamed the city tops nearby, hunting for weakened parties to exploit. They fought pieces of Marcella's guild, and with the organization's weaponry, she decimated any resistance rising against her.

Despite these harsh surroundings, a line of people walked in and out of the city's only remaining entrance - the George Washington Bridge. It turned out that it could fit a lot

more people if no one drove a lumbering car, and everyone who entered and left passed the gaze of an enormous, mobile statue.

The Seer.

It was composed out of the Statue of Liberty, but it looked nothing like it aside from the color of oxidized copper. It bulked into a behemoth, much stockier and genderless. No dress and mantle covered it, and the plating layered like scales, the shoulder pauldrons jutting out with curved spikes. It peered around with dark slits for eyes, its head reminding me of a medieval knight's visor.

It reminded me of a brutal, armored Sentinel, but far larger and more ominous. Despite the physical heft, the apex feature wasn't physical. Across its entire body, sigils glowed with seafoam-colored mana. Even from more than a mile off, it oozed out enough energy to feel it.

Oddly enough, it wasn't a mana type I'd ever felt or seen.

Althea frowned.

"There it is. The Seer. That's why we sent you, big guy."

I waved my hand through the proliferating miasma.

"It has an enormous amount of mana, huh?"

She nodded, shivering a bit.

"I can feel it. Ugh, I hate it when mana leeches in."

I remembered times when my mana infected her. I scratched the back of my head.

"Yeah. Sorry about the times I let my own mana get out of control."

Her eyes went distant.

"I appreciate the apology, but you don't need to feel guilty. You did your best, and, uh, that's all we can ask for, right?"

She gave me a forced smile, the expression almost authentic but ever so slightly strained. In it held a deep pain. I vowed to never let my mana touch her again. She turned to the statue.

"Anyways, do you think you can take that thing?"

I turned to it.

"No idea. Give me a second."

I inspected it.

The Statue of Liberty - A historical relic of a bygone era, this statue once symbolized freedom and liberty in an old empire known as the United States of America. Initially conceived to fight nations for their oil, this country elected celebrities and enjoyed apple pie and baseball. By the time of this apocalypse, the nation itself had long ago shed the roots of its origin, and it had become an AI state built around McDonald's.

I furrowed my brow.

"It's telling me that thing is still the Statue of Liberty. It's also giving a pretty absurd breakdown of America. I'm not a genius, but this seems a bit...Off?"

She gestured at it.

"Right? My status kept telling me the same thing. You mentioned the ambushers' statuses being fake, but they're at least kind of accurate. This one isn't even close."

She lowered her hand.

"That's another reason we called you in. We didn't want to fight something like that without knowing how dangerous it actually was."

I flew under a cloud.

"Good call. This lets us know that something is messing with Schema's status updates. The same thing happened with that Joey guy and the others."

"You think they're hiding something?"

"Not them, but whatever psionic entities were in their minds. They ran the moment the situation looked dire."

"Oh, so that's why they acted so weird."

Interrupting our talk, someone fired a projectile at us, their group operating a makeshift cannon. I slapped the projectile away, a cloud of dust and fragments erupting from my palm. Althea grew a lance from her arm and slung it through the cannon, and her spear erupted with a miniature grenade of gravitation.

The cannon exploded in every direction, the operators jumping away for safety. Althea rolled her eyes.

"A friendly bunch."

I squished a metal fragment in my hand like putty.

"Tell me about it."

We ignored the other encampments before landing at the beginning of the entrance line of the bridge. As we did, murmurs ran through the crowd like wildfire, everyone whispering.

"The Harbinger."

"He's finally come."

"The monster is going to destroy Marcella's guild. I told you it wouldn't stand for anyone else seizing power. It wants it all."

Practicing our ability to ignore poorly hidden murmuring, we waited in the line like all the others, not wanting to ruffle any more feathers than we were. It looked like it would take hours before we arrived, but the statue inspected everyone at a breakneck speed. People walked by it, and its face remained impassive.

Despite that, its gaze was a palpable thing. As we encroached, the density of its mana strengthened until it tinted the air. The aquamarine mana soaked into my armor, the sensation different and almost alien compared to normal mana types. Once we closed in, the Seer raised its arm.

A spear of its mana expanded over its hand. It hurled the spear at us. No, near us. The spear impaled a group of three people. After striking their chests, a light flashed. Nothing about them changed, and they looked around. A few seconds of eerie silence passed before all the members shrieked. They put their hands over their chests before collapsing.

As if nothing happened, everyone passed by, keeping their distance. We stepped up and found them dead. Althea leaned over, putting a hand over their throats. She tapped their chest and smelled over them. She sighed.

"I can't tell how they died, but they're gone. It's...Eerie."

I peered at the colossal protector, and it gazed back at me. For a moment, its eyes drenched the air near it with mana, and people backed away. After a few seconds, it tilted its head. It pointed at me, so I looked around.

From the bodies, three Hybrids erupted out of the people's chests. As they did, Althea jumped over them while spinning. Thin wires extended off her body, slicing the Hybrids apart. They fell down as piles of chunks, and Althea tossed acid bombs at the corpses. I sealed the holes in the bridge with concrete before a tense quiet crossed over us.

Althea scratched the back of her head.

"How did it know? I couldn't even tell."

I frowned.

"Me neither. It's like it could see right through them."

We walked to the checkpoint, the Seer's stare piercing. As we walked past the behemoth, its body moved. Like a grinding stone, its joints milled against its body. It wasn't metal but a dense rock. It stepped up to me, the body of the beast three times my size. It peered down, and it sounded like an old, ancient mountain finally given a voice.

"The Harbinger. We've waited for you."

Chapter 419: The Mad Gods

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I raised a brow as it lunged to one knee. The crowd gaped at us, their jaws slack and eyes wide. I peered back and forth.

"Huh...Er, why?"

The Seer peered up.

"My maker wished to thank you for what you've done."

"And who would that be, exactly?"

It stood up, reaching into two crevices of its armor. It pulled out two spatial slicers from fallen Sentinels. It waved them around before my eyes narrowed. I frowned.

"If we're going to fight, let's not do it on the bridge, alright?"

It nodded.

"To battle was never my intention."

It sliced beside us. A portal opened to the ether, and it stepped inside. Unlike most portals, this one didn't expose anything aside from raw space. Despite its starry origin, it lacked the siphoning a portal to space usually had. The Seer waited for me on the other side before spreading its arms.

"Are you not coming?"

I gawked.

"Hell no. I'm not going to walk into someone else's portal that I don't know."

It shook its head before telepathically linking to me. Its mind was ancient yet new. It held innumerable secrets and archaic knowledge, but no thoughts, connections, or principles stemmed from them. The odd dissonance left me wondering how it came to be. It murmured in its mind.

"Etorhma wishes to speak with you. You may enter of your own will, or my maker will find other means of getting you there. You know this. Why fight it?"

Its mana erupted in all directions.

"Unless it is necessary. I am prepared."

Althea leaped away, and I soaked in the incoming mana, trying to feel its effects. It crossed through me as a surreal sensation, like having a daydream. Visions flashed in my mind, all of it a jumbled mess. Peering behind me, Althea grabbed the sides of her head, struggling with the energy's toxicity.

A roaring panic bloomed in my chest. I covered Althea in Event Horizon, draining the excess mana, and she quit shaking. A second later, she threw up, her hands trembling before she wiped her mouth.

"I'm...I'm ok."

A dark hatred formed in my chest. I turned to the Seer, and I seethed.

"You dragged her into this."

It tilted its head.

"You evoked me. The consequences of which are yours alone to bear. She is merely caught in the crossfire."

I wanted to crush it into a thin paste, but Althea couldn't even tolerate being near it, let alone living through a battle beside the thing. All the people nearby would die as well. In fact, several had. Citizens looking for a better life went mad as the strange mana overwhelmed their minds.

They leaped from the bridge, smashed their faces into the pavement, and ate their own flesh. If the Seer and I fought, this kind of fallout would kill thousands and probably Althea, too. Showing my restraint, I walked towards her. The Seer pointed his spear at Althea, and an orb of the strange mana encapsulated her entire body.

She writhed inside, her mind a mess. I froze in place before I simmered my words.

"You will stop, or you will be stopped."

It laughed.

"I will if you simply walk inside, Harbinger."

My hands shook from frustration before I stepped through the portal, and the Seer clicked its fingers. I held my hand in the spatial rend, and it closed against my fingers like the jaws of some eldritch. As with those monsters, the portal stopped against my skin, unable to pierce it. I squeezed the portal, holding it firm as I tugged it along. The Seer crossed its arms.

"What is the reason for grabbing the spatial rend?"

I dragged it behind me.

"It's for insurance in case you decide leaving me here is a good idea."

The Seer stepped through a vast view of the galaxy, books floating in the distance.

"We mean no harm, and we intend to return you promptly. However, if it soothes you to keep that, then do so."

I tugged the rip, having no intention of playing along. I eroded the mana surrounding Althea with Event Horizon as we spoke, my wake crossing two planes of existence. I nodded at the Seer, my voice and gaze like ice.

"Of course."

We stepped through a vast eternity, all directions aimless and soaked with nebulas. The sheer magnificence and color left me humbled, but my defiance sparked in tandem. By now, the Old Ones had exhausted my goodwill. I was weary with their tampering, poking, and prodding.

They tried killing me on L-7 using Valgus as a surrogate. They created Yawm, who destroyed my hometown and threatened my world. They invaded my home now using portals and an overflow of avatars. They even tried killing Althea. If not for Event Horizon, the mana inside her body would've shattered her mind.

And even if it carried consequences, I would retaliate using all I had.

In the distance, one of the Old Ones loomed. It chose the form of a splintered mountain conjoined by flesh, its colors unmanifested and blurred. Fragments of shattered planets hovered within its orbits, and the many tendrils played with the shards. The being, planetary in scale, shifted an unseen eye over me, its sight pressing as a guillotine on a soft neck.

It was Etorhma. Its voice erupted.

"It's good to see you again."

I smiled, the expression lifeless as a corpse's eyes.

"Yeah. For sure...What do you want?"

Its body blurred reality around its chosen vessel.

"You're wise to fear us. To wish nothing of us. All of us. You are...Unique in that way. Others see potential. You see a grim demise. Perhaps...A scarred immortality. It's a wise thing to fear. We know of that unique torment, and in ways you cannot imagine."

I raised a brow.

"Have you been working on your speaking skills? You're more coherent than before."

It laughed.

"My speaking has elevated no more than yours has. I...I am the one who walked into your plane the earliest, if we may even conceive of such. The temporal flow in your world is...Elusive. Fleeting. Like dancing in a memory. One that wanes."

I furrowed my brow.

"Are we done here?"

"No. You've seen the signs of something coming, haven't you?"

I nodded. Etorhma's colossal frame shivered.

"It's not my presence that is tampering there. My aims diverge in other directions. If all is to pass as this entity wants, then there will be nothing left. That will not do. I've yet to taste impermanence. Limitation. Weakness."

I rolled my shoulders.

"What is this entity you're hinting at? Can I get a name?"

"We...We cannot say."

My eyes widened.

"Something that can silence an Old One? How?"

"One of my brethren...They have made a promise. We may not disclose anything without evoking their wrath. This...It causes us to fumble more than we have. More than we do. It is a crippling blow."

I could sense Althea trembling in my wake. I frowned.

"Crippling? You can't cripple something that was never functional."

The Seer crossed its arms.

"And what do you mean by that, human?"

A sardonic smile crossed over my lips at the compliment.

"Everything the Old Ones have done has amounted to nothing. In the end, it's chaos without any cause. How can that be crippled?"

Etorhma's voice rose.

"You've changed in more ways than one. Your voice is grating, as are your words. It's interesting, yet it must be muted."

The vibrations of its voice passed over me. I raised my brow.

"I find you equally annoying. Probably more so, but I'm not concerned about your preferences. What do you want me to kill this time?"

Etorhma rippled its solid body like a liquid for a moment.

"The entity I cannot speak of. It must be stopped."

Althea vomited outside once more. I dragged a hand down my face.

"That's oddly unspecific, even for you guys. And let's be honest, that's saying something."

The narrative has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the infringement.

Etorhma simmered.

"You have told us that you speak in action. Find this entity using that methodology, not one of mere conversation and words. Noise as you've called it."

I frowned.

"Then what? You'll reward me?"

"You wouldn't wish for it, so I won't."

My gaze sharpened.

"Then answer a few questions. That's a worthy trade, right?"

"After the task is done."

"Let's put in some goodwill both ways, eh? What are you?"

"A being that transcends space and time."

"Yeah. Sure. What can kill you?"

"We may be silenced, but even then, it is not a true death. It is the thought of something similar. In the end, our perpetuity is established absolutely...But we may undo ourselves conceptually."

These answers were as cryptic as ever, but I cut through the fluff and found its core. The Old Ones thought they could only die on a conceptual level. While not a true death, it was a start. I sighed.

"Your Seer. It has a different kind of mana than anything I've ever seen. What is it called in my language?"

"Prescience. That is all I will answer before you've handled my side of this...Bargain."

Schema told us of three main mana types, but I already found several more. Arcane mana and entropy stood out, and Hod's mana type also differed. Prescience must be the same. The Seer walked up to me, its steps rippling the space around it.

"Then it's time to tread back. Open the portal."

Althea stood up outside, but she still trembled. I shook my head.

"I'm not letting you near Althea."

Etorhma connected its mind to mine. Once again, I marveled at the utter disparity between it and anything else I'd ever gazed at. It left the enormity of Shalahora's mind as a single grain of sand in a desert. A dessert world. No, a galaxy of sand and nothing else.

However, I could tell that Etorhma's mind wasn't as vast and endless as Eonoth's. It pressed onto me from all sides, but I held firm. Etorhma cranked the pressure until my wake pressed down.

"Remember, little thing...You are small to us. Fragile. Nothing. We speak out of interest. Not...Humility. Not for a lack of anything. We have it. The means. We lack your weakness. We need your frailty to engage with your minutia."

Its voice reverberated through me.

"That's all you are. A form of impotence. Do us well, and remember my words."

Etorhma crushed further. My wake pressed onto the surface of my skin, and it reminded me of being confronted by uncomfortable truths and violence. The seizing in my chest. The immediate adrenaline rush. I couldn't move as the presence of Etorhma wrapped around me as if I were stuck in a cave. In that overwhelming pressure, I glared at the Old One.

"Are we done here?"

Etorhma suppressed me further, and my body began to ripple. I liquified, and my soul splintered. My body gushed out like a splattered tomato, but I maintained control of the rifts I held within me. I didn't want them left uncovered, even as my memories blurred. The pressure mounted to a fever pitch, and I compressed into a smaller, denser being. Etorhma murmured.

"A pity. Another prospect broken by my impatience."

Etorhma released me. I snapped back to my normal form, returning from being squeezed down. Without missing a beat, I frowned.

"See you later, Etorhma. It's been about as much fun as it always is."

It laughed. I tilted my head before it spoke with hunger.

"You're far easier to speak with than the others. It is...Refreshing. Others are ash. You are the wood that burns into it. I...I may extend an offer...If you would hear it...Will you?"

It was an endless being offering a contract of enormous power and scale. I could skip all hurdles and become one of the most powerful beings in existence. This was my chance to answer the call for greatness. The call of eternity. Taking full advantage, I spoke with confidence, reciting my words with care.

"Hell no, you egomaniacal narcissist. You're just a desperate conman with a chip on your shoulder."

Even as the words left my mouth, I understood how dangerous it was to say them. I existed in Etorhma's realm, surrounded by its essence. It could rip me apart, and it could kill everyone I loved. However, that was only a theory. If Etorhma could destroy anyone and anything, then it would've killed Yawm on its own.

Even more so, Etorhma wouldn't have asked me for help here, either. It would've destroyed this other person they couldn't even speak the name of. From what I gathered, that was their greatest weakness - precision. They had nuclear bombs in each hand, yet they wanted to perform surgery. That meant they had to use proxies.

I would be fighting hundreds of those proxies on Earth already. What more could the Old Ones send my way? They could try to destroy me as Eonoth had, but that wasn't certain. The only time Eonoth broke their covenant was when I scrambled Lehesion's mind. That was to protect his avatar, and in this case, I wouldn't be killing the Avatar. I'd be a nuisance.

The Seer stepped up, and it leaned over with an ominous aura.

"You bite at heels, a microbe amongst men."

I blinked.

"That's right. But at least I'm biting. You're the one licking their feet like a dog."

Its mana effused outward, thick as plasma. I scooped a portion of it up in my pocket dimension, but I avoided cutting the actual Seer. I'd seen what the Old Ones would do to protect their chosen ones under the right circumstances, and I didn't want to push my luck any further. The stat was only so high, after all.

Etorhma radiated across the vast cosmos around us.

"Enough. Escort it out, Seer."

The Seer pointed at my palm.

"Open it."

A wild idea popped into my head, and I chose to follow the impulse, consequences be damned. I turned to Etorhma.

"I've always wondered, but where is this, exactly?"

Etorhma scoffed.

"I've answered what you're deserving enough to know. In time, I may illuminate more about this place. For now, you must satiate yourself with your own musing."

I smiled, the expression as tight as a piano wire.

"Ah, well, I have a theory about this place. Want to hear about it?"

Etorhma rumbled.

"Perhaps."

I gestured to the area.

"I think this is a carefully curated space where you Old Ones can manifest with some measure of stability. Why? Because the other Old Ones will tear you apart unless you act with some reservation, and these spaces are a big part of how you do that. The thing is, without these domains, your influence probably drops off a cliff since your accord prevents you from destroying our universe."

Etorhma's presence shivered.

"Assumptions. Nothing more than meaningless conjecture."

I could feel Etorhma's hesitation. My smile deepened into a malevolent grin.

"Ah, but that's the problem, isn't it? You can take time to build these places up, and if someone were to tear them down, then you'd be in a pretty poor spot, right?"

Etorhma laughed.

"You cannot harm this place."

I nodded.

"Maybe not, but Baldowah could, couldn't he?"

A silence permeated. It loomed, growing into a kind of oppression. I shifted my body around the portal to Baldowah's dimension. With the opening resting on my palm, I raised my hand high.

"I actually have a way to put your dimensions on a collision course with his. I wonder if that insane war junkie would enjoy fighting for control of your domain? You know, get a little taste of finality and consequence."

Etorhma murmured in an immense whisper.

"If you do this, you will be my enemy."

I narrowed my eyes.

"I've been your enemy since you destroyed my hometown with your little avatar. Now, I want you to remember this - you can smash me all you want, but you can't touch Althea without consequences. That goes even for you, Etorhma."

I opened my palm, and a haunting laugh echoed from a domain of blood and destruction. Ascendant mana oozed out of the opening as blood drenched out into the domain of Etorhma. It clashed against the energy of Etorhma's domain, but Baldowah reached out in a growing wave of crimson.

Blood dripped from the pages of books. The stars in the distance reddened as they turned into bloodshot eyes. More sanguine fluid leaked from them, the tears flowing into a growing red sea. It expanded in the horizon, a puddle that swallowed stars by the second. The Seer snarled.

"Close that gap, smuggler."

I closed my palm.

"I need answers."

The Seer dashed towards me, its body a blur of light and stone. I reached out with my hand, gravitation permeating every ounce of my being. The Seer collided against me, weighing far more than any mountain. It carried a continent's force in its impact, and it created a kinetic ripple that dispersed across Etorhma's domain.

And yet, I remained motionless.

I grabbed its neck, the body of the Seer flinging forward like a trashbag caught on a branch in the wind. I crushed down as the Seer grasped at my hands. I dug my fingers into its neck. It murmured.

"Then your little woman will die."

I scoffed.

"I've cleansed the mana from her, and she's already hidden away. You're lucky she chose not to retaliate. Otherwise, you'd already be dead."

Etorhma rumbled.

"You wish to learn why you cannot harm our chosen avatars once more? I would've imagined Eonoth's beating would've left you humbled."

I cracked the stone skin as my fingertips embedded into it. I laughed.

"It's so ironic, isn't it? You all talk about how you want to experience this dimension and the resulting consequences of living here. You want impermanence. Death. Limitations. And yet, the moment you even get a taste of what that really means, you snarl like spoiled children."

My armor dug under the skin of the Seer. Its internal structure was a seafoam-colored magma, and my armor feasted on the energy. Event Horizon sapped its life away as my armor smiled. I stated my words.

"You can't stand to have a toy broken, let alone experience true loss. Instead, you parade around in some pathetic attempt to feel what we feel. The reality is, you won't ever truly experience our lives because each of you, deep down, is afraid. You all lack the courage to live with your life on the line. Even the smallest worm isn't that weak-willed."

The Seer gurgled out as its seafoam blood flowed down in cascades from its stone skin. It growled at me.

"Says a man who's lived less than a century. What do you know of loss?"

I pulled it closer. I remembered Althea collapsing as I snarled.

"I lost my hometown to you all. I lost my humanity to survive in BloodHollow. I even lost the sweet memories of a mother and a life I never lived."

I turned to Etorhma as I lifted one hand.

"And now you get to feel a taste of what that's like"

Etorhma roared.

"Enough."

The Old One's presence cascaded over us, tearing reality. My skin split as countless fissures spread over me. In my hands, the Seer's legs collapsed while Etorhma's pressure destroyed portions of it. The Seer let out a scream. Etorhma raised its voice.

"I...I am sorry. He is too close to you. It is difficult to isolate when you are both so...Diminutive."

I let out a gurgling laugh.

"That's right, isn't it? What you're experiencing is what we call a choice. On the one hand, you can smash me into oblivion. However, you lack the precision to keep your

avatar alive at the same time. That, Etorhma, is a limitation. Tell me, how does that make you feel?"

Etorhma let out a low rumble.

"If you believe that will save you, then you have sorely misjudged my limitations."

Another coursing wave of energy rippled out. My bones shattered. My organs ruptured. Blood oozed out of my body by the gallon, but I stood unmoving. The Seer writhed in my grasp, its body turning into a glowing, crunchy porridge. I spit my blood from my mouth.

"And that's supposed to make me afraid?"

Below the Seer, its blood seeped into an open portal - my pocket dimension. Etorhma rumbled.

"Fine. Do as you must, but know that we are no longer on amicable terms."

I turned to Etorhma and seethed.

"We never were. I want you and the other Old Ones off my home planet."

It laughed.

"Then you will never have what you wish. And you will know the caliber of mistake you've made here today in time. I will guarantee it."

A pit of dread pooled in my stomach. At the same time, a rage roared over my fear. I glowered at the Seer, its body twitching in my arms. It was dying. My words boiled.

"For old time's sake with Etorhma, I'll let you be this time. Know that if you ever so much as graze a hair on Althea's head again, I'll break you until the pieces no longer fit back together."

I released the Seer. It hung on strands of my armor like a limp puppet on strings. I scoffed.

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that."

I swung my hand, and the Seer's body ripped as several strands tore it apart. I opened my palm, and Baldowah's laugh resonated across space and time. Oceans of blood and bones poured out in a condensed stream. Baldowah's laugh kept growing in volume as it echoed across this domain. Etorhma, the mad god, snarled.

"You still defy me."

Baldowah spoke, its voice full of joy.

"Ah, this is a bountiful harvest you have given me, Harbinger. I will award you further. Now, tell me, my brother. Will you fight?"

Etorhma scoffed.

"I don't care to live in an endless war."

Baldowah's presence expanded across Etorhma's domain. As galaxies faded in the distance, Baldowah's voice carried the smell of iron and the taste of steel. It waged war in its voice alone, and it fed on carnage.

"Ah, then you shall be dragged into one. Is it not beautiful to experience a battle? An experience of consequence and finality? Only one of us shall remain. Will you let me rob you of all you've made?"

Etorhma roared.

"No."

A weeping, eerie joy lingered in Baldowah's words.

"Then we fight until we die. An enchanting day, isn't it?"

A clash of concepts erupted as the books and pages opened. Blood streamed out of the stars and eroded the nebulae. Blood dried into dry scabs that faded into ash. Ash then reformed into pages. As the conflict neared me, I ripped open the portal before stepping back onto the George Washington Bridge.

I faced Etorhma's struggle as Baldowah's presence leached into its domain, causing cracks to form over reality. I spoke into the portal.

"It was good talking to you both, and there's a taste of the struggle you wanted so dearly. Enjoy it, will you?"

I grabbed the edges of the portal I carried. I let the portal shrink to a tiny, minuscule point. Keeping a tiny slither of my dimensional fabric within, I walked up to where Althea had been, making sure I moved the portal around as I did. She returned to our plane, having recovered from the mana exposure without any permanent damage, thanks to Event Horizon.

Still, a pile of sour vomit and salty tears steamed beside her. A few people nearby lost their minds in the meantime, unable to move or think. Before they lost themselves in someone else's energy, I drained their mana dry with Event Horizon. They fell unconscious, and I caught them in gravity before their heads clapped concrete.

Within a few minutes, they came to. Althea let out a sigh.

"Gah. And right after, I talked about how much I hated mana poisoning, this happens. That sucked."

A snarling rage bit in my chest, but I smiled at her as I offered her a hand.

"It did, and yeah, I hate mana poisoning too."

She grabbed two of my fingers.

"Like you've ever experienced it. You're the guy that oozes that stuff out."

"Well, early on, I did feel its effects...But yeah, it's been a long time. Anyways, you ready to see New York City?"

She spat to her side before wiping her mouth.

"Sure, but where's the Seer?"

"Oh, it's still trying to get back."

Behind us, between the bridges, another spatial rip formed in the air. The Seer peered out of its portal, its stolen spatial spears glowing. It glared at me. Althea murmured.

"What's got it so mad?"

I grabbed the portal I wouldn't let close. I jerked it back and forth above my head.

"This."

Like Plazia warned, maintaining a moving portal demanded a lot of the spears. They kept shining brighter before electrical sparks erupted from their surfaces. In flashes of light, each spear ruptured from overloading. As they did, I placed a powerful gravity well inside the Seer. The shards of each spear funneled into the behemoth as it howled out. The portal closed, amputating both its arms.

I smiled.

"And that."

Chapter 420: The Shattered Spires

Althea murmured.

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"And that."

The Seer's arms melted into a dense ectoplasm. Seconds later, another warp opened. Unlike the surgical opening of a Sentinel's spear, this vast rip in spacetime exposed a cataclysmic battle. Etorhma's form gushed blood from every piece of flesh, and an ocean of rich, dense mana formed below it. Etorhma's eclipse formed, a hole in the galaxies surrounding the ocean.

The eclipse echoed out a hollowed laugh.

"To transport a mere avar, you risk an entire world?"

Etorhma rumbled.

"It is of no consequence to me."

Baldowah laughed as one of Etorhma's planetary shards exploded.

"Oh, but that is where you're very wrong. This is no longer a place of meaningless learning and futile knowledge. It is a place of carnage. A land of relentless death and fervent rebirth."

The Seer stepped through the vast spatial rip, and it closed seconds after. The citizens of the city panicked as troops from Marcella stormed out. The Seer growled at me.

"I'll tear you apart."

I reached out a hand, forming singularities over its body. At the same time, I jerked several hundred people away from its colossal body. The Seer planted in a place with some kind of antimagic, destroying my singularities in tandem. Rethinking my plan, I grabbed Althea and propelled us toward the city. The Seer raised a hand, forming a of its unique mana, and it hurled a bolt of it at us. I blocked the javelin with my personal storage.

My pocket dimension gobbled up the attack before I generated another gravity well near it. Unlike before, it left no impact on the Seer. However, the shards of its spears gouged out of its body. They fell into a cluster near me that I scooped up inside my pocket dimension. It dashed towards us before we darted into the spatial fog surrounding New York City.

In the distance, the Seer roared at us, but it wouldn't leave its bridge. Something pinned it there. Likely, Etorhma.

Althea frowned.

"What was that?"

My face wrinkled.

"For the first time, I got back at the Old Ones."

Althea peered at the colossal stone titan.

"Huh. Was it worth it?"

Even as a seed of doubt nested into my chest, I smiled down at her.

"Yeah. It was."

She smiled back.

"Good."

We rushed back over towards the bridge several minutes later. Even as I walked, I wondered whether I handled the situation in the right way. Probably not. Enraging an Old One could only lead to more problems further down the line. Still, this wasn't some zero-sum game, either. After all, I gained favor from Baldowah in the process.

I winced. Was that even a good thing? Hell no. I blinked, wondering if Baldowah hating me would be a bad thing. I genuinely had no idea. Baldowah's idea of an award would probably be a near-death battle. In fact, what would Etorhma's idea of consequences even be? I remembered my previous award, and I shivered. I never wanted another entity siphoning knowledge into my head again.

That was one of the largest issues with the Old Ones - they didn't seem to understand the context behind what we considered good or bad. They operated on esoteric, random whims, and one person's award could be another's torment. Etorhma may come after those close to me, yet it may not. Did Etorhma even understand what a friend or close one was? I couldn't say for certain.

The more I thought about it, the less sure I was. Still, setting the Old One up was reckless, and I'd need to let everyone know I angered the entity. I did so using the messaging system. Keeping small, I let Althea cover me in a cloak while she stealthed around. She materialized far from the Seer, and we walked around the thousands of people walking in and out of the Big Apple.

It was easy to escape notice since they gawked at where the cataclysmic rift in reality had formed minutes ago. Most of them had no clue who we were either, but whispers radiated through the crowd from explorers of distant lands. They spoke of the Harbinger and his inevitable arrival. In the privacy of their minds, a few of the residents here even prayed for someone to free them.

From whom or what? I didn't know because they didn't either. It was an esoteric feeling, not something concrete. To me, that made no sense whatsoever. It was like something suppressed their ability to recognize why they felt what they did. In their bones, they experienced the sensation still, so everyone here endured a persistent, low-level cognitive dissonance.

In that dichotomy, they lived one way while believing something else entirely.

The dystopian city sent a chill up my spine. Despite this internal suppression, a feeling of defiance resonated within many of them. They wanted out. Based on what I'd seen here, I'd probably be giving them an escape, but I couldn't be too sure until I inspected how well-run everything was.

I wasn't a mindless conquerer, after all. I took charge when the situation called for it, but ruling people as Marcella did wasn't my style. As Althea and I crossed the rest of the George Washington Bridge, we funneled through a tunnel made of thick spatial fog. It was the same mist covering New York City from the outside. After passing the entire length of the expanse, light from the metropolis leaked onto the bridge through a small gateway. It was more of a tunnel at this point.

We crossed that gateway, breaching into the dungeon, and a different kind of city dawned on us. In the sky, the sun shined from above with two moons dancing around one another. The skyscrapers floated in the air, each one resting on a different island suspended by torn gravitation.

Below, fragmented streets connected the entire expanse in a vertical, 3-D archipelago. Over the whole expanse, an immaterial, blurry tree shaded everything. Its bark was like an icy windshield on a cold day, and the tree blurred light that passed through its branches, bending the harsh rays into a pleasant warmth. The colossal, energized structure wrapped around the entire metropolis for many miles.

Grazing it with my Dimensional wake revealed its composition - it was the same fog that isolated this space from the outer world. However, someone condensed that mist down into a thicker material. Even more impressive, the tree reached into innumerable strands across an enormous area. These tendrils thinned until the strands exited the city.

I shook my head at the enormous display of mana and competence.

"So that's where the invisible webbing is coming from."

Althea let out a gasp.

"It's...It's like staring at a Spatial Fortress again. I can't believe someone's casting that magic."

I nodded.

"Or something."

Below the mass surveillance of the guardian tree, different factions commanded the many high-rises, establishing their dominance over their respective islands. They flaunted their many flags or insignias over their conquered spoils, but every icon carried the infinity symbol hidden upon it. Though rulers of their territories, they still acted subservient to Marcella.

These factions guarded the skyscrapers for a few reasons. They wanted status, real estate, and the pre-Schema goods still within the buildings, sure, but the real prizes were the dungeons inside. Each panel of glass exposed a different view into another world. Many dungeons exposed idyllic circumstances.

With few monsters but many valuables ripe for the taking, the skyscrapers held enormous potential. To get at those resources, people from all walks of life lined up and paid tolls to enter the skyscrapers' hidden depths. People ran into them with optimism and energy. They drugged out with treasure and scars alike, either weary smiles on their faces or grimaces of harrowing loss.

The factions took portions of their loot, leaving most of the harvest for the adventurer. That initial generosity was skin deep. Fights broke out over the best pieces, the scavengers trying to escape while hiding their hidden gains. If the scavengers happened to get away from the protecting faction, Marcella's guards sprung into action.

They warped in from all directions, having an ironclad grip over the entire area. Their swords cleaved people apart before they took all they had escaped with. If anything, the factions reminded me of tax collectors, but the actual boss was Marcella Meyor. She ruled by an iron fist.

Hopefully, she wouldn't mind having her rule taken by one.

Considering the scale of her webbing magic, I could see why people succumbed to her rule and abilities. After all, if she wished for it, she could have anyone killed from anywhere. Despite all of the discord and chaos, the enormous, sprawling city showed promise. People worked and toiled here with a fervor I'd never seen in small towns.

That energy reminded me of my visits to Chicago pre-system. The residents carried a fire in them, and they wouldn't let someone get in the way of them making it. Case and point, their levels exceeded the average I'd seen by nearly threefold. Most of the New Yorkers sat around level 3,000-4,000. It wasn't matching mine or anything, but it did match my guild's average warrior.

It was an incredible feat considering these people lacked the organized support my people had. To be fair, we fought wars while these people raided dungeons. One was more difficult than the other, but I digress.

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Even a cursory glance at tall-ish buildings exposed well over a dozen dungeons apiece. The largest buildings held hundreds of rifts, the loot limitless. It was the lifeblood of the city, and everything revolved around them. Althea gawked with me, each of us stunned at the sheer levels of activity.

It made our guild's efforts seem small. Althea squinted at one of the towering high-rises.

"It's more than I expected."

I nodded.

"Same here. I'm like an ant."

"A fifty-foot tall one."

I rolled my eyes.

"Ok, but still. There's a lot here."

We walked across the makeshift streets on the city's fractured floor. Whenever the buildings rose up above into floating islands, they took lumps of earth with them. This left a cratered expanse below. Tunnels darted across it like an opened ant bed, and people found a thousand winding paths between popular destinations.

Here, the average person lived. Shops, restaurants, and attractions dotted the tunnels by the dozen, and people advertised with gusto. They didn't use the term New York City either. Althea read a sign.

"The Shattered Spires cafe?"

I gazed up in awe.

"So they call it the Shattered Spires now? Hm...Fitting."

While we walked, we got stares and whispers the entire time. While a city as large as this had plenty of strange people, we found a way to stand out. I was twice as tall as most, and Althea was a head taller than most as well. I was of dark metal and Althea held an ethereal, intangible beauty. Guys openly gawked at her, some people's jaws agape. I couldn't blame them, though I wanted to.

We stopped by one restaurant, and I ordered something for Althea. It was a cheesecake slice with a jam made from a fruit I'd never seen, alongside some coffee. While we found some seating, more onlookers gawked. Whenever I sat down, some people winced, peering away and expecting my chair to shatter.

I shrank and suspended myself, looking the part of a metal behemoth but of the appropriate size for this establishment. Even then, people peered my way, all of them on edge. I leaned over to Althea.

"We're getting more stares than normal."

She frowned.

"It's your dimension thingy. I can feel it too, but I'm used to it."

"Is it painful or something?"

"No, but it's... It would be like sitting beside an Overseer. Er, so you know the Overseer's not going to hurt you, but it's... You know... Scary. For you, it's much worse. While you think you're feeling something with the Overseer, you actually do feel something with you."

I frowned.

"So I'm like a monster then?"

She peered back and forth.

"Uhm, I didn't mean it like-"

I raised my arms like claws.

"Rargh."

She let out a sigh of relief before feigning terror.

"Ah, the monster's come to kill me."

She ate a piece of the cheesecake and talked with her mouth full.

"Whatever shall I do?"

She took another bite.

"Wow. This is so good."

I watched a cloud drift into a skyscraper.

"It is. I'm glad to see the situation here isn't abysmal."

She peered at the enormous spatial tree expanding over everything.

"That thing does put me on edge and a lot more than your aura does."

I scoffed.

"Me too. Let's go see what that's all about."

Althea picked her food up and dumped it off her plate. She put her other hand below it as if holding an invisible plate. I made a marble slab in her palm, and the food landed in pristine condition. Standing up, Althea slung her emptied plate across the dining area. Her dish slid onto those piled high for cleaning, and not a sound was made when it landed.

After doing the same to her silverware, Althea got some applause from onlookers. She bowed before we stepped away, having paid in credits earlier. We spent a while walking toward Marcella's lair, following the branches of her immense tree and its tethers. The closer we got to it, the more warped and spatially rendered the areas became. Unlike the moon, humanity cultivated these oddities in the only way New Yorkers would.

For capitilism, baby.

Spaces with faster time acted as shops that advertised their services to help procrastinators. Areas with slower time had signs about how short the wait could be for the next big thing, given someone pays a price. Lesser gravitation had jumping parks and higher gravity held gyms for those trying to build muscle.

It left a smile on my face seeing how deftly people adapted to the harsh circumstances. My optimism faded at around the three G's of gravity mark. A no man's land formed here, one where few people tread. Trails cut through these harsh conditions, and people avoided the severe alterations entirely. I cut us through the spaces, not wanting to shove us into the tiny walkways. Once again, people stared.

I frowned.

"I thought they'd be busier here."

Althea sighed.

"We might as well get used to it. Come on. Let's have some fun."

I raised a brow. Using her choker's magic, Althea leaped around in elegant circles. A gravitational dancer, she wielded the force with a deft hand, balancing it and herself through acrobatic displays. I followed suit, throwing myself around and trying to keep up. As I did, I experienced the way she moved, and it left me stunned.

She jerked and pulled herself around as if made of cloth, every piece of her body bending to whatever force coursed over her. Through her. Around her. She was a sharpened blade that bent and snapped at anything nearby and light sheened off her glossy hair. I followed in her stead, a dull hunk of metal struggling to emulate her grace.

She smiled at me while upside down.

"You learn fast."

I flipped through the air.

"Well, I have a good teacher."

We danced and somersaulted through the spatial distortions, my wake leaving us protected. After passing a dozen floating islands, the air of the Shattered Spires thickened. An opening appeared in the city with no skyscrapers in sight. I flipped under Althea before she hopped on my back. I peered down at the patch of green.

"So...That's Central Park."

Althea jumped up.

"It's, uh...Not quite what I've read up on."

"Huh. Me neither."

A colossal rupture in the earth cut through the remains of Central Park, and it held monsters and men alike. Against walls of black stone, insectoids scrambled along the rift's outer surface, each bug the size of a large truck. Bipedal and humanoid, their broad shoulders held arms that ended in serrated claws. Their elbows ended with familiar black, chitinous blades.

I nodded.

"That's where the swords came from."

One of the insects sliced sideways, its arm rupturing spacetime. The insect hopped through its own portal seconds after. I blinked while Althea pointed.

"And there's the portals."

These insects skittered about, each of them driven by an intense sense of purpose. Their hurried movements yielded the strange coordination of a hive. I couldn't discern what they jerked around for, but their colony impressed me in other ways outside of transportation.

The species had an overwhelmingly vast network of dungeons below, the breadth rivaling the endless expanse of the Grand Canyon. The pit of the dungeon descended for miles below, an endless abyss that capped itself with a pit of gray fog. From the center of the bottomless expanse, an enormous droplet rushed upwards past it all. That dimensional dollop glided upward before colliding with the sky.

A huge plume of gray, dimensional mist expanded out of the falling droplet. A spatial ripple coursed over everyone; no one was affected but me. I staggered as space wobbled around me from all sides. It was Deja Vu from the time when Eonoth saved Lehesion from a Spatial Fortress but far less overwhelming.

Althea grabbed my arm, helping stop me from falling. The ground under her feet cracked.

"You ok?"

I pulled myself upright.

"Yeah...That's happened one other time."

"When?"

"The gala that Obolis threw for Giess's glassing. It was whenever the Spatial Fortress exploded."

Althea frowned.

"You became a puddle, right? So, uhm, are you ok?"

I looked up at the dispersing cloud.

"I am. This was nothing compared to that."

She watched the fog siphon into the tree.

"That's what's keeping this situation the way it is. It looks like we're getting a lot of answers here, huh?"

I looked up at the tree's roots.

"Yeah, but we've got even more questions now."

Above, some of the dimensional dollop diffused into the surrounding sky, keeping the Shattered Spires encapsulated within a rift. Althea turned to me, and a portion of her faded into another plane. She smiled.

"How about I get us some more answers?"

I squeezed my hands to fists.

"Sounds good, but we should probably try diplomacy first...But we have to find the guild's headquarters. Where to start? Hmmm."

Althea raised a brow.

"It's in that big building over there where the tree's sprouting out."

I crossed my arms.

"Oh really? What makes you so sure?"

She drew a sideways eight with her hand.

"The giant infinity symbol over it."

I frowned.

"Well...I thought it was advertising."

She tapped the side of my head, and it rang out like a bell full of water.

"You can be so dense."

I gestured at the tree.

"It just seems too obvious, doesn't it?"

Althea laughed while I smiled. We darted through the Shattered Spires, each of us jumping from island to island like the residents. In the distance, a flow of those people coordinated like bees in a hive. A man in orange armor misplaced a foot before stumbling off a rock. He fell fifty feet and landed hard on the stone below.

He raised a thumbs-up, his voice cracking.

"I'm...I'm good."

It was a perfect transportation system.

We passed the enormous split in the earth, finding people exploring different dungeons near the surface. Closer to the depths, the insectoids ruled the roost, and nothing approached them. I analyzed one of them.

Malformed Eldritch | Lvl 9,000~ | Status: Unknown | - This malformed eldritch isn't a consistent creature, lacking the uniformity of other monsters found in dungeons. Originally an insectoid variant, this bipedal, intelligent species has many adaptations to survive within a larger body than most insects.

Those adjustments gave way to strange mutations. Organs within its body produce constant streams of primordial mana, and they ooze outward in every direction. This allows groups of these malformed eldritch to construct different realities given enough of them.

They also wield the primordial mana within blades across their bodies, allowing them to manipulate different forces of nature with strange precision. Combine their general physical abilities alongside their spatial prowess, and they are a devastating foe for most.

It would be recommended to eliminate this variant immediately.

I furrowed my brow.

"They seem dangerous."

Althea tilted her head at them.

"And weird. Portals aren't something eldritch usually throw around like that."

I pulled my wake over the space, and it carried a strange weight to it.

"That and spatial magic as well. Hell, I think they're manipulating time, too."

Althea sighed.

"It looks like we have another dungeon to clear on our to-do list."

After passing the rest of the gap, we reached the source of the colossal tree. I looked up at it.

"The Empire State Building...Schema has a thing for landmarks."

Althea jumped from one island to another.

"I remember talking to Torix about that. He said it was because Schema knew the resident species would search out those places. It was predictable too. It makes the worst rifts less likely to go unseen or something like that."

I marveled at the immense trunk of the surveillance tree.

"That's...A good idea, actually. I guess Schema does get it right from time to time."

We reached the beginning of a line of people waiting to go into the massive building. By now, we stared down at the rest of the city, well above the tops of most buildings. The thin air aside, the view was incredible. I turned to Althea.

"How did you guys figure out that Marcella was an avatar anyway?"

Althea tapped her chin with a single finger.

"We guessed. According to the rumors, she's unbeatable for a bunch of reasons, but the big sell was that she had a blue aura."

I gazed at the enormous skyscraper. It radiated with a subtle, primordial mana.

"What made it different from someone using normal mana?"

Althea put her hands on her hips.

"Hers could be moved and manipulated a lot, kind of like Lehesion. She was also considered immortal and couldn't be killed either."

"Immortality, huh? It could just be rumors."

She pointed at the building, the infinity insignia, and the hundreds of cappers protecting it.

"Those don't look like rumors to me."

I remembered the truth behind Yawm, Lehesion, and Valgus.

"Well, looks can be deceiving. Sometimes, at least."

We waited in line, and even when standing twenty feet tall, the Empire State Building towered over us with ease. The monolithic structure reminded me of humanity's prosperous past, and so did the people pacing out of it.

When walking in, these people were beaten down, scarred, and lost. Life put them in its jaws, chewed them to a mush, and spit them out. When walking out, they stood with confidence, their postures tall and formidable. In fact, they were over a head taller, reminding me of my legacy and my ring's effects.

A subtle aura permeated them, and whenever I grazed their minds, they locked themselves away from me. None of their eyes darted from my gaze, and their stares carried a weight to them. Unlike the normal citizens here, they held an awareness of who and what we were, not simply ogling like star-struck fans.

This created an unspoken tension, one where they squeezed their brandished blades tight when passing me. I frowned.

"She's doing something to their minds, implanting them like Elysium does."

Althea shivered.

"Ugh. I hate these kinds of enemies. Why can't we fight a big brute or something?"

Remembering Valgus, I shrugged.

"It can be more difficult than you'd think."

An hour later, we reached the outskirts of the monument. The guards stood in an intimidating formation, around a hundred guarding the entrance alone. They waved us over. Once close, Althea walked into the primordial aura. I could not.

It waved around me, pushing me away with more than enough force to hurl me backward. But I wasn't only my own weight. I held the momentum of several anchoring dimensions, and they carried me through the sheer blowback. The primordial aura stretched for a moment while I reached out a hand. One of the guards yelled.

"Hey, what are you doing there? Stop that."

I lowered my arm, taking a step backward. As I did, the primordial ether bent and bowed like an old home's floor giving way. It pried open, cracking in a cataclysmic splintering of mana, and shards fell away from where I stood. The rupture spread across the building's entrance until it faded to nothing, only a memory of something that was.

At least it lingered across the rest of the building. As the cracks spread, that reprieve faded as quickly as the rest of the building's protection. As it crumbled into nothing, I coughed into a hand.

"So...That was more fragile than I thought. My bad, guys."