

New World 421

Chapter 421: A Defier

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."

The guards brandished swords and shields at me, many of them panicking. I raised my hands.

"If it makes it better, I don't know what just happened."

Rumors spread far behind me.

"The Harbinger has come."

"He's shattered her realm just by walking. A monster."

"Marcella's time has come."

I shook my head at their antagonizing murmurs. If anything, I aimed to lower tensions, not build them up. I wasn't the only one thinking. The guards used telepathic signaling before a tall redhead walked out of the Empire State Building. She stood twelve feet in height, her hair a striking crimson. She wore the black chitin of the insects, but she

carried a subdued demeanor. She reminded me of a beaten wolf in a cage, her eyes fierce yet empty.

She turned a palm to me.

"Marcella would like to see you, Harbinger."

It was a strange introduction. I scratched the back of my head.

"Sorry about tearing down the aura. I still don't understand why it shattered like that."

The woman narrowed her eyes.

"Are you really the Legion's leader?"

Althea gestured to me.

"He is, and in the flesh."

A look of disgust crossed the redhead's face.

"I expected more. Why didn't you send a messenger? Are you so idle that you can afford to spend days doing something this trivial?"

I frowned.

"Initiating contact with one of the largest factions on Earth is trivial?"

The redhead frowned back at me.

"When it's done without warning or welcome, yes."

I leaned back, confusion spreading over my face.

"Then how was I supposed to handle this, exactly? A reservation or something?"

The redhead blinked, her eyes glazing over. She stood for a moment before I turned to Althea. She and I exchanged a glance of concern before the redhead mouthed.

"It's far too casual."

I stepped up, the guards turning their swords to me. I tilted my head as my primordial wake surged.

"I usually reserve a more casual demeanor for friends. I see you never wanted that kind of relationship. Consider my attitude from here on to be reciprocal. As for why I came here unannounced and without an army, it's because I like to see things in person. Plus-"

I put a fingertip against a brandished sword, and I pushed down. The blade shattered and without moving the person's hand.

"I get to see things as they are rather than when they're prepared for my coming. So far, I've seen the Shattered Spires, and while improvements can be made, it's not unsalvageable. If it had been, I would've come with an army of metal, and I would tear this place down to its foundation."

I swirled the shards of the sword above a hand.

"But I don't see the need for war. That's why I want to talk to Marcella and see what her goals and aims are. In that, we may align. If not, well, we can find a compromise of some kind, surely."

The redhead took a step back.

"Why are you speaking so differently? And are you always this excessive?"

A bit of primordial mana oozed in my runes. I smiled.

"When you've lived the life I have, honesty is excessive. Now, come on, let's go see Marcella. I don't have all day here."

She chewed on her words.

"Hm...This way."

Twelve guards followed us as we stepped closer to the giant spire's entrance. In elegant writing, a sign covered most of its entrance.

The Infinity Plaza.

I raised a brow.

"Renamed, huh?"

The red-haired individual nodded.

"Marcella has a way with words. Plus, the new name makes more sense than the old one. You'll see inside."

I liquified and flowed under the short glass doorways leading inside, and the guards looked on in horror. Althea disappeared, walking onto a different plane. The red-haired woman frowned.

"Is she dismissed?"

"No. She's insurance."

We stepped through unaltered walkways, the ceilings confining and short compared to the oversized buildings at Springfield. However, the grand architecture still oozed wealth and luxury, the polished stone and 1920s grandeur maintained through Schema's

apocalypse. Many of the cappers walked in and out of different rooms, these spaces assigned for guild maintenance.

They carried written records and files on people and guildmates, having an efficient administrative system. A few hallways further down, the building opened up into more of what I expected from a post-Schema-landmark. A vast courtyard reached from the bottom floor to the top, a false sky shining down from the top of the atrium.

The entire skyscraper expanded on the inside. Embedded along every wall, thousands of doorways sheened with different colors and makeups. Each set of doors led to a different world, and spiral staircases at the four corners led to each floor. On each floor, walkways offered easy access to those entrances.

Stylish stone signs named the portals. A quick gaze gave me an idea of what they looked for. Palladium Dimension. Mana Crystal Zone #4. Fresh Water Source #2. The raw pragmatism reminded me of something I'd do, though the people working in these areas looked far worse off than I'd ever allow.

The laborers wore simple garbs for mining, all of them either very old or very young. Guards protected them as they paced in and out of spaces, harvesting huge reserves of resources gathered in storage dungeons below. Many workers transported the goods to guildsmen who processed and sold the resources to other people visiting for trade.

This was the heart of the Shattered Spire's industry, though the method of employment seemed dubious at best. Marcella conquered the area and used something akin to the indentured servitude program from the looks of it. To be as fair as I could be, many people didn't want to live a life of survival and fighting eldritch. This was an alternative, albeit a poor one.

Still, I'd be shutting this down.

We stepped through the surge of people before the redhead walked up one of the many spiral staircases. She turned.

"We don't have the spare electricity to run an elevator. It's going to be a long walk."

I walked up into the air.

"It doesn't have to be. Come on."

She stepped over before I pulled us up the many floors and the thousands of doorways via a gravity panel. By the time we reached the top, no laborers and only a few guards managed the building. Most of the tower was left unexplored and unmanaged. Near the top of the spire, we reached the building's end. Althea phased into existence and turned to the redhead.

"We never made introductions. I'm Althea. What's your name?"

The redhead side-eyed Althea.

"Hm. Rebecca."

Althea reached out a hand.

"Good to meet you."

Rebecca grabbed Althea's hand.

"Likewise."

For some reason, Rebecca treated Althea like she came from an entirely different faction. In fact, their entire exchange seemed more organic in general. Even a cursory psionic glance told me that the same psionic tampering infected the second in command of Marcella's organization. I'd be ripping that out as well.

We reached the zenith of the Infinity Plaza. Here, the top floors gave way to reconstructed penthouse suites, and they oozed the same luxury as the initial entrance. As we stepped past the gilded marble and encrusted granite, Rebecca smirked at us.

"Impressive, isn't it?"

I squeezed a hand into a fist before turning my palm upward. As I opened my hand, a slab of marble sheened. I gestured to everything around us.

"This hall was made with the sweat and tears of the old world. I respect the history, but magic makes this simple to replicate. Honestly, expensive materials aren't impressive anymore. Ever since the systemization, seamless enchantment and striking design skills are what really make or break the aesthetic of a location."

Rebecca took a breath before squeezing her hands into fists.

"You're just as Marcella described."

I blinked.

"Huh. And how is that?"

She turned away.

"A monster."

I scoffed.

"What the hell? I just talked about architecture, not some medieval method of torturing people."

Rebecca leaned up to me. She blinked.

"Is that a historical reference? Are you...You're a human?"

I spread my hands.

"Duh."

Althea leaned over to me.

"It's not as obvious as you think."

I waved her off.

"Pshh, people have looked different since the system arrived. At this point, it's not my problem anymore. People need to get over it."

Rebecca walked up to a portal entrance. Maintaining it, nearly a hundred red cores powered a permanent entryway outside. The palpable demonstration of wealth earned an eyebrow raise from me. I had to hand it to her; Marcella knew how to make money at least.

Rebecca stood at attention.

"Marcella will see you inside."

I telepathically linked to Althea.

"Ok, am I the only one who thinks everyone is acting really weird?"

Althea laughed in her head.

"I'm feeling it, too. This feels like an episode of The Twilight Zone or a surrealist painting."

I tilted my head at her.

"Wow, you watched that show?"

"I watched it with Kessiah. She and I like sci-fi shows because they're either insanely good or insanely bad. Either way, we're entertained."

I spread my hands.

"That's so cool. I kinda feel left out."

Althea smirked.

"That's because you are. It's our girls' night."

I peered down, a bit deflated.

"Dah."

Althea pushed my shoulder.

"Oh, come on, we have date nigh-"

Rebecca coughed into her hand.

"Ahem, I'm right here. It's rude to telepathize in front of others."

I scoffed.

"Your mind is like a Picasso painting. You have no room to talk to us about how we handle our psionics."

Rebecca bit her lower lip, a bit of blood leaking from the side of her mouth. Once again, she did something weird as hell. At this point, I was about done with the entire trip. I just wanted to finish a quick talk before setting up some quick reforms through this territory. Well, that and get rid of the Old One's presence. It was already pervasive, considering how absurd people acted already.

Peering through the red-core-powered portal, a view sprawled out from the semi-translucent peak of the surveillance tree. It towered over the Shattered Spires, clouds wafting into the branches below. I turned to Althea.

"Wish me luck."

Althea phased out of reality.

"Will do."

I stepped through the portal, and the wind howled above the city that never sleeps. The many spires looked like glowing needles of stone. Around me, the branches of the spatial tree shaped into a minimalist space, one lacking the abundance demonstrated seconds ago. Marcella sat on a workbench, her hair a deep, dark blue.

She wore luxurious, fitted furs, and Primordial mana oozed off her frame. The plasma wafted upwards in dollops, thicker than water or blood. She turned to me. Her expression carried menace, but her gaze held depth. With a hand enriched with energy, she sharpened a strange blade resting on her thighs.

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The glint of the blade flowed like water, and she stared at me with eyes like steel. She spoke in a booming, matronly voice.

"So...You're the Harbinger I've heard so much about?"

She leaned against her sword.

"Did you rip my barrier apart for fun, or was it to send a message?"

I sat in front of her using gravitation.

"No. I tore it down by moving within your territory. It was an accident. Nothing more."

She smiled, her teeth white. In general, she was gorgeous, though there was nothing soft about her beauty. It was a hard, dangerous allure, like a sword of diamond or a well-made rifle.

"You tore down a portion of my security net. I don't take kindly to anyone trespassing, let alone ripping out my border."

She waved her hand over her blade, sparks flying.

"When that happens, it's a matter of how quickly the intruder's execution comes. I must say, you escaped my initial guard corps. Good for you."

Everything about this meeting felt artificial, and I didn't want to make it any longer than it had to be. I frowned.

"What's your goal here?"

"To rule and establish order."

I took a breath.

"Ok, aside from that?"

She leaned forward.

"What else is there to say? I wanted it, so I took it. What other reason do I need?"

I pinched the brow of my nose.

"Really? No grand philosophies or monologues about the nature of power?"

"None. I don't need them."

I scoffed.

"Even if it's a simple approach, I have to say it's refreshing. You remind me of Valgus."

She raised a brow.

"And who is that?"

"Another avatar of an Old One. Like you."

Her eyes turned to slits.

"Hm. So you know about them. That saves me some time explaining my situation."

I leaned against one of my arms.

"I've talked with several Old Ones on numerous occasions. They're not what they pretend to be, though their facades aren't exactly the most convincing. Honestly, I'm surprised you fell for their offer, considering how transparently malevolent they can be."

Her gaze rested on me, her eyes like a hawk.

"I accepted a good offer. It's just business."

I leaned forward, my hands steepled.

"Marcella. The Old Ones will lie and say they're offering you something of value. In reality, they are taking away everything."

A fierce smile traced her lips.

"You must think that you're somehow enlightening to everyone around you, but you're simply domineering and self-righteous. I'm well aware of the Old Ones' influence and how detrimental it can be. I chose this despite those inherent risks."

I crossed my arms, her cutting words falling on deaf ears.

"Yet you followed through with the deal they wanted while knowing you'd lose your mind and soul in the process? That's...Not smart to put it lightly."

She crossed one leg over the other.

"Here's the thing, Harbinger. We all have our path. How did you get power? Was that path simple? Straight forward? Easy? No need to answer. I found the truth through my own research. From even a few rumors, it's easy to tell your walk has been bloody and winding. Mine was no different, and you're in no position to judge me for what I've done."

I leaned back.

"Maybe. Maybe not. Time will tell."

She squeezed her hands to fists.

"I've researched your guild. It's an impressive operation. Do you know how mine is run?"

I remembered the laborers and economized spires.

"I know some of how it operates, though no details. It seems efficient at resource extraction, though it doesn't offer a good life to the people under your rule. I'm here to change that."

She frowned.

"It's far better than everyone starving or being eaten by monsters, so before you go judging me, judge the world we live in."

I frowned.

"You know, I've heard that excuse more times than once. You'd think tyrants would at least flavor their excuses differently, but you all seemed to have walked into the same seasoning shop at some point."

She turned her face to the side, but her eyes bore down on me.

"I can imagine why you would think that given those golems and rings of yours. I've seen them. I've faced several of your rogue agents. They're difficult to deal with."

I frowned.

"Every organization has criminals."

She nodded.

"Hm. But most of them are petty thieves, not juggernauts with bodies of steel and mana like they're machines. You give out power like it's candy to children. You must think there's no harm in giving children swords, but I can assure you that's not the case."

She stabbed her blade into the tree, and she seethed her words.

"Your careless attitude has killed plenty of people. Entire communities are slaughtered because you aren't willing to take the time to do your due diligence. Your golem vigilantes are the same."

I raised my brow.

"Golem vigilantes? Now that's surprising."

A shadow loomed over her eyes.

"They are monsters when they're unleashed."

Even if the conversation carried a lot of venom, I was glad I got at least some useful information from it. I turned a hand to her.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I'll address it the moment I get back to the guild."

Marcella tilted her head at me.

"Why don't you go clean up your own damn mess before trying to clean up mine?"

I furrowed my brow.

"Ok, so it's weird I even have to explain this, but sure, why not? I can't be everywhere at once. I'll handle the situation here and then there. And besides, do none of your agents go rogue?"

She leaned back.

"They can't."

"Is that from the psionic entities you implanted in them?"

She raised her brow.

"Somewhat. My guildmates are forged for years before being given something so dangerous. Why? I don't give weapons of mass destruction to anyone without a failsafe. It's a part of a broader societal problem - people are divergent in Schema's system. Unsystemized individuals cannot kill one that has reached level 200. One properly leveled individual can kill an army of the untrained and underleveled."

She slit her blade across the ethereal ground.

"What used to be inequality from wealth is now more physical. Palpable. Perhaps even undeniable. From what I've researched, you've taken a hands-off approach to that problem. Either that or you're wholly unaware. You must've focused on yourself. Good for you, but that comes with consequences."

Mana surged in my runes.

"Like being strong."

She pointed the blade at me.

"Or having someone else clean up your messes."

I took a moment to think. I nodded, my demeanor relaxed.

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I'll review our enrollment practices. I may need to have a few contingencies or failsafes put in place to prevent the abuse of power."

She scoffed.

"Uh-huh. That's great. I'll congratulate you when it's done...Now, what are you here for?"

I turned a hand to her.

"I'm here to establish diplomatic contact, improve your people's living standards, and get rid of the Old One's presence over this area."

She leaned against her knees, her stare like daggers.

"Ah yes, you get to decide what resources we use, right? They have to be what you offer me, not something I've found and forged on my own?"

I sighed.

"Marcella, I hate to break it to you, but you haven't forged a damn thing. You've constructed a slave labor system of psionic control propped up by borrowed power. You are a puppet, point blank. If you were thinking straight and not already halfway eroded by the Old One's influence, you'd realize that."

I spread my hands.

"They have plans for Earth in general, and the less they engage with our planet, the better. That's why-"

She seethed.

"You get to make the rules on what should be allowed and what shouldn't?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

"Obviously, this is a negotiation. There's no point in meaningless antagonism."

I had to admit, I did just throw some serious flack her way. Either way, Marcella furrowed her brow and said,

"So it's a negotiation where you walk into my home without announcement and demand my attention? Where you shatter a defensive barrier on accident?"

I tilted my head at her.

"You mentioned doing your research. You already know I'm not a diplomat. I'm a warrior, one that's led my guild to conquer other worlds. Including this one."

I gestured to the Spires.

"All of this is on my planet. It's why-"

She raised a hand.

"The Shattered Spires rest within an alternate dimension, one that I maintain. It's why the Earth hasn't become a fringe world despite these dungeons or the strength of the eldritch here."

My eyes widened.

"How in the hell are you maintaining a space this large?"

She narrowed her eyes.

"I have my secrets. Just like you."

I shrugged.

"Oh, come on. You borrowed the Old One's power. Speaking of which, what was the deal they offered you?"

She frowned.

"Why would I tell you anything?"

I gestured to the city below.

"It's simple. I don't actually care if you keep this. Hell, you could have a lot more territory than this if you'd like. My goals are to keep Earth from becoming a desolate wasteland and to elevate humanity-"

"Into something like you?"

A spark of anger burned in my chest. Marcella rapidly burned through my goodwill. I steepled my fingertips.

"I'm being as polite as I can, but I don't know how much longer I can keep up this farce. If you and your guildmates keep treating me like this, then I'll have Torix or Plazia-Ruhl negotiate for me. One is a hivemind, and the other a lich, so you can pick your poison. Regardless, they're not as amicable as I am."

She tapped her sword, and a few seconds passed.

"Understood."

"Good. I'm not asking for subservience. I want cooperation between our guilds. Trade, immigration, and sovereignty can be maintained and encouraged. I can give your people access to my rings in exchange for the vorpal blades you own or whatever psionic poison you have them drinking. However-

I pressed my fingertips together.

"I need your information on the Old Ones and for you to get them out of here. That's not a point I'm willing to budge on. You should also know that I'm not here out of weakness. I can siege this place with relative ease. That's why I don't have to negotiate anything. I can take anything I want, but I'm choosing not to."

I leaned back.

"The reason I don't is because I'm not some bloodthirsty conquerer. Also, I'd like to offer some logistical help if you need it.

"Such as?"

I pointed downstairs.

"For example, you're not going to be struggling to power an elevator with my help."

She smiled.

"Rebecca gave you that excuse then? It's a lie. I don't want people to have such easy access to me while I work. If they want to see me, then they walk. If they're unwilling to walk, then they're unworthy of my attention."

I hid how ingenious I thought that was while taking a note of that in my head.

"I see. What would you want for your knowledge of the Old Ones and separating yourself from them?"

She tilted her head.

"That woman you walked in with. I want an artifact like what she has around her neck, though I'd prefer if mine didn't look like a collar for some dog."

I glared at her, and my voice was iron.

"Never talk poorly about Althea again."

Marcella frowned.

"You have a lot of demands on my behavior, don't you?"

I shook my head while rolling my eyes.

"You're trying to dig under my skin, yet you get upset when you succeed? You talk about the dynamics of power, but you can't even take accountability for what you say and how you say it? Are you a child?"

I stared her down.

"You talk about my rogue agents while I watch thousands disappear in your dungeons without a word of remorse. You don't even let people have their minds. A less merciful

man would've killed you without a trial. You're lucky I extended a hand, and it wasn't someone else from my guild."

Marcella stared at her blade.

"Lucky? We'll see about that. As for my dungeons, anyone going inside chose to walk to their deaths."

My eyes narrowed.

"What the fuck are you talking about? These are people's lives on the line, and you're acting like this is all some game. It doesn't make you sound clever. It makes you sound out-of-touch and unstable."

She sneered.

"You're a walking metal blob that flows like water when it wants to, yet you call me out of touch?"

I squeezed my hands together, the metal bending on my hands.

"All you do is reflect my statements without answering anything. This is the last time I try to level with your bullshit. The reality is simple - you're taking advantage of people. You're pretending these dungeons are hordes of wealth rather than the death traps they really are."

She smiled.

"It's efficient."

Several of my knuckles cracked. It sounded like a whale cresting the ocean.

"For your guild. No one else."

"And why should I worry about fools who don't even understand what a dungeon is?"

"The same reason you tell me to worry about my rogue agents invading your territories - the good of humanity. The good of people as a whole."

She took a breath.

"Ooh, it looks like we have a saint here then. You see, we're different. I'm not in such a lofty position where I can afford to ignore my own benefit."

I gestured at everything around us.

"Lies. Look where you live. Look at what you own. You're choosing to see scarcity where there is none."

Her face contorted into a grimace. She leaned forward to me.

"You know, you remind me of something from a lifetime ago. Care to hear about it?"

I pressed my fingertips against my temple.

"Actually, no. I have shit to do."

She frowned.

"This is my attempt to level with you."

I mulled over her words. After a while, I took a breath.

"Alright. I'll bite. What's the story?"

She crossed her arms.

"It starts with me and my sister. We were orphans."

At this point, I struggled to care, but I gave her a solemn nod regardless.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"My sister and I grew up in the Bronx. The orphanage we lived in was a homey place. The man who ran it gave us home-cooked meals, and he made sure to celebrate every holiday and birthday. No kid lacked a gift or his attention. He knew all of our middle names, our favorite foods, colors, even our dreams."

She let out a breath.

"He cared. He really did."

Darkness crept onto her. She put her blade over her shoulders.

"It's a shame when he began using my sister."

I leaned back, stunned by the sudden heavy shift in topics. She continued.

"She was twelve. I was eight. I remember how he would skulk into our room, and my sister would cry. Whimpers, really. She would always lay the bed's covers so that they covered the underside of our bed. She even folded our clothes in plastic tubs there, too. It was a fort for me to hide in."

The raw sincerity contrasted her previous caricature of a person. It left me feeling awkward as she squeezed the handle of her blade until blood dripped from her hand. She murmured.

"But I heard everything. He had a way of making our world seem so small. He made us believe that if we defied him, we'd be left for dead. As the years went by, I watched my sister's will to live die. She hated herself. I remember having nightmares about the day it would happen to me."

She pulled her sword to her side.

"It came to pass. He finished with her, and he walked into my room. His breathing was heavy, and he reeked of sweat and shame. I remember when he peeked under the bed. He knew exactly where I was, but that's where he made his first mistake."

There were no tears in her eyes, and her voice did not waver.

"He knew where I was, but he didn't know who I was. When he lifted those covers and showed me his smile, I stabbed his face with a screwdriver. He screamed and raged. He went to grab me. He threw the bed aside and ran to me."

Her breathing sped up. Her heart rate rose.

"That was his second mistake. I took a knife I hid under my pillow and stabbed him in the hand that reached for me. When he stumbled back, his head hit our vanity, and he fell over."

She grimaced.

"He groaned on the ground, but he tried moving. I took out the crushed makeup I hid under the bed and threw it over him. He coughed in the cloud. He barked in pain. I remember how little that must've hurt compared to what he did to my sister."

Marcella raised a hand, her nails like claws.

"I took back as much of that pain as I could. I walked over to him. I got on top of him like he wanted...And I took the hammer I hid in the vanity shelf, and I smashed his skull into a nice, deep red mush. It was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

A quiet passed over us. I blinked, taken aback by her story and how real it felt.

"I'm...I'm sorry."

She shook her head in disgust.

"I will never need your pity. You. You remind me of my sister. She always told me that she was hiding me from that man. She told me she was my shield. No. She was his punching bag. She showed me what it was to sit there and be beaten. She showed me what it was to let someone be over her."

Marcella pointed her blade at me, and her eyes could murder.

"No one. No man, woman, or child will ever put me under them again. Not you. Not Schema. Not god or the Old Ones or whatever else is out there...Never again."

Again. It was a strange wording, almost as if she struggled with a bit of disassociation during the event. I took a breath before giving her story an appropriate silence. After a moment, I met her eyes, giving the conversation one last chance.

"You don't want to hand me power because of what happened. That makes sense, but the thing is, your deal with the Old Ones...I've seen it time and time again. It never fails to leave the mortal corrupted. They end up less than human, something torn apart for the purposes of some entity that can't even understand us. To them, we are toys that are meant to be broken."

I turned a palm to her.

"When you deal with them, they will not do so as equals. You will be used, whether you like it or not."

She grimaced.

"But you won't use me or my guild or the city that's mine? That's rich, coming from some gigantic, metal monster that eats things through its skin. As far as I can tell, you're no different. You're going to take over the entire Earth at this rate with those golems of yours. What's your plan after that?"

I raised a brow.

"I'm going to stop the Old Ones, Elysium, and Schema from destroying my home. No matter what you think about me, I hold Earth close. It's the only planet I can hold onto that reminds me I'm still human, and I'm not going to let other forces take that away from me."

She scoffed.

"Is that why you've brought so many species here? The dragons, the birds, and even the reptiles. We've had reports of walking cats even. That woman you brought is certainly not human, either. You even associate with the remnants, and their kind is an evil one."

From how she said that, her research fell off once I created a barrier at Mt. Verner. Shalahora's psionic screening must've eliminated the research altogether. Marcella crossed her arms.

"It looks like you're chopping up Earth and giving it away, not keeping it uncorrupted, as you seem to say."

I narrowed my eyes.

"Do you see other species as corruption?"

She scoffed.

"You're something else. For someone who seems hell-bent on looking and acting like a monster, you sure do enjoy being called human. Tell me, did you let all these aliens settle down here so that you could look more human? Because it isn't working."

I leaned back, disconnecting emotionally from the conversation entirely.

"Talk to the people under my care. Ask them. And these people I've given a home are as human as anyone I've ever met. They're more human than you are, actually."

She rolled her eyes.

"You think their goodwill lasts? Schema's system is established around persistent indentured servitude. It makes my system of leveling people up in exchange for years of labor look like sainthood. These people you're bringing in have participated in that, and they're not changing their ways just because you're nice."

I grabbed one of my wrists, my hands raised.

"Yeah, that's about enough. I don't have to tolerate this."

"Tolerate what?"

I stood.

"Talking to you."

She laughed.

"You think you have the option to do anything else?"

I rolled my shoulders.

"You're as sharp as a brick and self-aware as a celebrity. You have no clue how to compromise because of your history. I get it. It sucks that you had to survive that horrific abuse, but you're not the center of the world, Marcella. That's why I'm not going to let you make your trauma into everyone else's problem."

She frowned.

"You'll stop me?"

I made my hand into a fist.

"I happen to know when to use force."

She nodded.

"I do as well. And I want to keep that option in my back pocket, so I'm not giving away my secrets, my domain, or anything else, for that matter."

I tilted my head.

"Yeah, I figured as much. Even though I'm not asking you to do anything aside from letting me get rid of the Old Ones and change a few practices. That was it, but apparently, that's too much for the great and mighty Marcella Meyor."

Her aura saturated the area around her.

"You're not going to let me continue the labor exchanges?"

I laughed.

"I'm not letting you continue anything. This conversation is over."

She pointed her blade at me again.

"Then pry my empire from my cold, dead hands."

I raised a hand, and gravitation collapsed over her. She moved through it with ease. She sneered.

"You think I haven't been planning this encounter for a long time? Do you think I'm some helpless damsel who's unable to find a weakness in the big scary Harbinger? Why else do you think I told you that sob story from my past."

I shrugged.

"I figured it was something like this. Why else would you dump all that history on me like we know each other?"

She raised a hand.

"I knew you'd know if I was lying, so I told the truth. It actually happened, but I'd never say something like that without a purpose...In this case, it bought me some time."

I hastened the pace of my temporal flow.

"Not enough, I assure you."

She snapped her fingers, and the area around me blurred. A lifelike illusion around me faded into mist, and I stood on a desolate rock in the void of space. Stars glinted far in the distance, and our mana offered the only light on this isolated rock. Marcella remained. She frowned at me.

"I know exactly who you are. I've known about you for years. I thought Yawm would kill you, and I came up with plans for what happens after. When you survived, I had to rethink some things. Since then, I've developed a hundred plans and contingencies while knowing your weaknesses."

She put her blade to my throat.

"You want to walk up to my home and steal everything I've earned?"

Her face warped with anger and defiance.

"You'll find my claws dig deep. It's hard to take what I have, and you're not the first to find that out. You won't be the last."

She began fading.

"Good luck finding Earth again. Any other planet, really."

I smiled, and the fading stopped. She looked me up and down. She murmured.

"Something's wrong. Why isn't the portal closing?"

Behind me, I wielded my wake to drag the warp back. I grabbed it in my hand.

"If you think a trick this simple will get rid of me, well-"

I grabbed the warp in my hands and split it open.

"Let's just say you'll need a lot more than that."

Chapter 422: A Chase Across Cosmos

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Marcella hunched over, glaring at me while turning her blade in her palm. She darted toward me, but I ignored her. I stepped through the portal, ensuring I kept a grip on its outer edge. On the other side, I gawked in all directions like someone trying to remember a dream from the night before.

I wasn't back at the Infinity Plaza. Instead, I explored a new world. Gravitation exceeded Earth's over twofold. Six moons hovered in an orange sky, and planetary rings embellished the horizon. No tall plants rose from the dense ground. Only compact shrubs fought toward the clouds.

Other animals floundered about, but they all mirrored one another.

They lacked bones, all of them mushy, rolling balls. It was like some world of slimes, and in front of it all, Marcella peered at me. She smiled.

"You shouldn't have underestimated me, but I knew you would. You've grown arrogant since you came back from that other planet. Giess, I believe it was called."

She raised a brow.

"You have it in your head that you've exceeded what other humans are capable of. That you're somehow special. I'm more than glad to remind you that you're not."

I raised a hand, and a panel of gravity generated with such strength that the ground around us liquified and then solidified under enormous pressure. Once more, Marcella paced through the overwhelming mana with ease. I scoffed.

"Another illusion? Do you intend to run forever?"

She narrowed her eyes.

"You really are as simple-minded as I expected."

I glanced around, not finding any obvious portals or exits out of here.

"It really depends on who you ask. From your perspective, probably."

Marcella tapped one of her fingertips with her blade, drawing blood. She watched the red droplet drip down.

"Can you rip open Dungeons as easily as you tear open portals?"

Realization sparked over me.

"This is a dungeon? How in the hell am I even here?"

She scoffed.

"I've already closed this dungeon's opening before we even started our conversation in the void."

I looked at the portal in my hand.

"Er, you mean this?"

She sighed.

"No. That's a portal inside this dungeon. Earlier, you walked through more than one portal."

My gaze sharpened. Many minds came into action.

"You layered the portals?"

She tilted her head at me.

"That's right. After you stepped in, I moved one portal away from the others before destroying it. You're holding the last portal, not any of the others."

I blinked.

"Is...Is that how portal dynamics operate?"

She shook her head.

"No. Normally, it's impossible, but-" She held up a hand and surged her blue aura. "I have a way of breaking what's normally possible."

I held up the spatial tear in my hand.

"You didn't do that. An Old One did. Also, you knew about my ability to hold open portals?"

She shrugged.

"It's not a secret. You've been seen by many of your soldiers doing that for years now, and that myth surrounding you isn't the most difficult to parse."

I spread my hands.

"Why are you telling me all this?"

Marcella narrowed her eyes, each of them like knives.

"Because I enjoy defeating a strong opponent, especially when it's easy. It's a unique feeling. I'm sure you've felt it before."

I rolled my hands.

"Defeated? Even if I'm stuck here, I have a guild out there. They're going to tear you apart."

Marcella tilted her head.

"I have contingencies in place for them as well. The most difficult members to defeat will be Shalahora and Plazia-Ruhl, but I find their loyalties dubious at best. Without you as the guildleader, Plazia will likely defect. Shalahora would as well."

Marcella adjusted her furs.

"Torix and Althea will be the truly difficult members to kill, especially that lich. Still, I have plans and confidence to handle that problem when it arises."

I sighed.

"You know, you're a competent and skilled leader with ambition and drive."

She gave me a tight smile.

"Should I thank you?"

My eyes set on her.

"Wait until after I've dismantled your borrowed power."

She raised a hand, primordial mana oozing from her palm.

"Is your armor not the result of some eldritch tampering? Isn't that just as borrowed as my aura?"

My skin rippled like a liquid.

"I was given a shell, and I turned it into something far more. By now, my power cannot be taken from me, but yours can. After I get rid of that aura, you'll be able to realize your own potential instead of someone else's."

She waved me goodbye.

"Good luck with that on your way out of here."

She walked away, fading to mist. I peered around while my mind raced. I held several rifts with me, including the cracked space from Earth. There could be some connection point between one of my carried rifts and Earth, but I had no idea how to traverse subspaces like that. I might end up lost in a space between dimensions if I tampered with a magical field I didn't fully understand.

Scrapping that idea, I brainstormed alternative solutions. Marcella lured me into a dungeon of the Infinity Plaza, leaving me stranded. The question was, how was I stranded? If this were a normal dungeon, I'd just go and grab the core before leaving. For her to keep me locked in here, she needed to take the dungeon core. That would close the dungeon's entrance and lock me into this subspace.

Another core would form after about a decade, but that was plenty of time for her to develop other countermeasures against me. In fact, this was exactly how I stopped one of Yawm's followers so long ago. Being stranded in a dungeon had actually been a fear of mine for a long time, and it had finally come to pass.

That being said, I already contemplated a variety of solutions. The first was also the most simple - if someone took the dungeon core out, then I would simply put one back in. I pulled out one of my many blue cores from L-7, and it radiated with the strange, resonating violence unique to that planet's dungeon hearts.

I held it up and closed my eyes. After a few seconds of heavy, oppressive silence, the core's resonance dispersed, and the blinding radiance faded. It settled down, becoming a normal blue core. As it did, I let out a gasp of relief. I hypothesized this was the cause for L-7's unique cores, but I never got around to verifying my assumptions.

It turned out I was right. Schema routed a large part of the dungeon heart's energy into sustaining the dungeon itself. Since L-7 lacked Schema's tampering, the blue cores held far more power. However, that didn't explain why blue cores dropped from primevals or why they formed in the first place.

As I wondered about those oddities, hexagonal panels covered patches of space like the giant scales of an ethereal dragon. As they faded, they left a winding staircase leading to a set of doorways. I gazed at the entrance before I took a breath. This was a fight, and I needed to be ready. Even if Marcella couldn't kill me, she could pull more tricks like this, and I couldn't guarantee I'd crawl out of them.

The doors opened, leading outside. Spatial mist drifted in from a stony outcrop leading to a sheer cliffside. I stepped out before spreading my hands. The omnipresent fog funneled away, revealing multiple tunnels leading to different areas. With my wake, I kept the dimensional fog at bay, finding myself in the depths of Central Park's great chasm.

If I had to guess, Marcella put yet another portal in front of the dungeon's opening. I grew weary of the fight already, but I bent down to jump out of this pit. As I did, an insect leaped from outside the mist. I felt its weight, its body manipulating mass to extraordinary extents. It stabbed its long mouthpiece against my eye, and its leg shattered against my pupil.

I reached out my hand, the bug scrambling for escape. My armor pierced into its body with tendrils, and it desiccated in my palm as my skin stole its life away. Its agony ended in seconds. Marcella spoke from the mist.

"You expect me to believe and put my faith in something like you? Ridiculous. How can you expect humanity to trust you when you're as much a monster as any eldritch anyone's ever seen?"

I rolled my eyes.

"Potential doesn't decide reality. That's why I'm capable of horrific acts, but that doesn't mean I will actually commit them."

Marcella's voice carried malice.

"You expect humanity to trust that kind of flimsy logic?"

I scoffed.

"Humanity already does, and as for you, it doesn't matter if you trust me or not. I will do what must be done. In this case, I will rehabilitate your slave labor camp and turn it into something halfway decent."

She murmured.

"In the end, it boils down to power, doesn't it? What you say goes since you're able to make it so?"

I smiled.

"I offered a deal. You refused to entertain it or so much as compromise. I'd actually argue I was pretty patient considering how you spoke and my position in the negotiation."

"And what position is that?"

"One where I don't have to listen to a damn thing you have to say."

She laughed, the expression joyless.

"There it is. The tyrant comes out."

I raised a brow.

"Do you ever feel like you're projecting?"

"That's rich coming from a leader who enslaved the gialgathens."

My expression sharpened.

"How so?"

"They have a contracted hundred years of servitude under your guild."

I mulled over my thoughts for a moment.

"That's only for Krog and Chrona, and that was in exchange for saving their entire species from extinction."

"Those are the precise deals I make. Hypocrite."

A moment passed before I nodded.

"Hm. That's...Fair. Your judgment of me, that is. You're delusional about your approach, though. You're psionically implanting the people here and using them as converted soldiers. There's nothing free about that."

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Her words echoed.

"You're a pot calling the kettle black, but enough arguing. Tell me this: how did you escape that dungeon? We tested other blue cores and portal specialists. They couldn't escape before we opened the doors for them."

I rolled my fingers in my hands.

"Hm...Let's just say I have a few secrets of my own."

Her glare deepened.

"I can see that."

I furrowed my brow.

"You know, the way you talk sometimes...It makes you sound so lonely."

She grimaced before disintegrating. Her words floated out of the ether.

"That is what it means to lead. You must be lonely. Otherwise, you'll be nothing more than a common soldier."

I frowned.

"There's nothing wrong with being a soldier. They are the ones that fight and die in wars."

"That thought process is why you came knocking on my door unannounced and demanding my attention without notice. You walked into my domain and acted as if a single conversation would handle our differences. It's simplistic, and it paints your guild in a poor light if the leader acts so naive at all times."

I winced.

"Act naive? You know, you put a lot of stock into presentation rather than action. That makes sense, considering you're an illusionist. You'd want a gimmick to matter more than the real thing, even when it doesn't."

She seethed.

"You'll find my power is as real as anything you can see."

I took a breath before I threw myself upward. As I did, a sea of insects fell from the fog above. As a single unit, they wielded powers over the fabric of reality. Their mass crashed into me, and they splintered against my body. They struggled against the mass of my dimensions before I settled against the cavern floor.

A quake erupted on the ground as I landed, and a ripple traversed across spacetime. The cracking impact disturbed the entire subspace. The insect swarm stabbed into my body with their blades, able to fold reality in their strikes. They cut my skin, and I bled. They chewed at my body, and I tore. As a hive, they relished in their new prey.

Yet, their cries of elation devolved into howls of terror as the shards they gnawed from crawled out of them. They bit into my fabric-laden body, tearing their teeth. As a mass of liquid, I molded my body into hardened spines that ruptured the monsters from within. As they ballooned, I heated my body until I shined.

I turned myself into a physical torture, an excruciation to behold or be near. They shaped reality against me, but I was a reality against them. I neglected to wield singularities or the worst of my weapons in an attempt to keep my friendly fire to a minimum. If people walked on the surface, I didn't know if those effects would kill them.

Instead, I took my time, smashing one insect after the other. Hundreds. Thousands. Tens of thousands died at the swipe of my palms. Like bugs running into a windshield, they died swiftly. I took life with an ease their colony never imagined possible, all while I ignored the gnashing of their teeth and the raking of their claws.

Hours passed, and the corpses mounted. They grew, becoming a field of death. I walked atop the piling bodies, carving a path of utter destruction. Closer to the top of the cave, I stood atop the pile. A wave of nostalgia passed over me. This all reminded me of BloodHollow.

Amongst the blood, I found comfort. Surrounded by death, I remembered where I was forged. Behind me, a sea of black blood drained off the cliffside to the bottom of this dungeon. Mountains of corpses smothered the walls. The sour smell of freshly opened entrails oozed from this place, the warmth of their bodies seeping into the stone.

The steam from their opened shells floated upward, intermingling with the spatial fog. I walked out of the pit, my body soaking in the gore that landed on my skin. After cracking my neck, I peered around. One last insect jumped at me, and I wrenched its skull from its body in a practiced motion. I dropped the body and walked forward.

A wall of spatial fog kept the hive from expanding into the city. Walking through the mist, I held the insect's skull in my hand. As I traveled out of the haze, I found a crowded street, one that crowded near me. My large, looming form cast a shadow over many of them. They let out whispers as the evergrowing crowd evolved into a horde.

"The Harbinger."

"Marcella couldn't stop him."

"He's come."

I walked up to a manifestation of Marcella. She bit her cheek.

"You're an annoying enemy."

I smashed the skull in my hand, blood erupting in every direction. Marcella flinched. I glared at her.

"Surely your research told you that much?"

She sighed.

"Maybe, but I still have a few surefire ways of getting rid of you."

I peered around.

"And they can be used in your territory? Anything that can hurt me will wipe everyone here."

She took a breath.

"That's just it."

Marcella pulled a detonator from her hand.

"I'm not someone who gives away something I've earned. I'd rather smash it all to pieces and watch it burn than see it stolen."

A quick gravity well verified she wasn't really there. She was projecting a hologram to me. Either way, my stomach sank.

"No...You wouldn't."

An unhinged smile crept over her face.

"I would. There are thirteen nuclear bombs spread throughout Central Park. I'm sure you could run and maybe even live, but everyone here will die if you do."

I gazed at the crowd, and I wondered if this, too, was an illusion. A telepathic checkup dispelled all doubt. These people held normal thoughts and aspirations. I shook my hands in desperation.

"Are you insane? This isn't even me taking your territory. I'm asking for you to stop colluding with an enemy. Our enemy."

She furrowed her brow.

"It's only your cross that you've chosen to bear. I need my connection to Eonoth to achieve what I want, and you're getting in my way."

I peered at tens of thousands of people. Flashes from the bombings on Giess passed over my eyes.

"Alright, you win. I'll leave, and I won't come back."

She scoffed.

"If I were you, I wouldn't. I'd disable the bombs before killing me. I'm far too much of a threat to be left in power if I'm willing to do something like this. That's why I'm sorry, but I can't let that happen."

Her thumb pressed pressed the detonator. Without anytime to react, I crushed my dimension far smaller than my physical self. Portions of my body slackened, and the runes across my skin ceased glowing. All around me, several flashes erupted in all

directions. Their light consumed the world, my slowed time not affecting how quickly the flashes passed over everything around me.

They carried intense, searing heat that set the forest and grass ablaze for miles in all directions. The wave of radiation scorched concrete, ignited cars, and evaporated the blood in nearby people's bodies. They exploded as paint combusted on streetlights. Glass amplified the radiance, beaming the burning rays with even greater intensity into nearby buildings.

Out of desperation, I shoved every bit of my attention and mana into creating singularities at the epicenters of the thirteen detonations. In far less than a second, thirty singularities erupted within the epicenter of the explosions, siphoning enormous amounts of the erupting forces into a dark void.

From the kinetic energy to even the outpouring of radiation, nothing escaped the singularities' event horizons. At the same time, my body melted as mana exploded through me in a heated burst. I overextended my elemental furnaces, ramping their production to their absolute extents.

They burned into mush, and even with some of the nuclear detonations devoured, portions of their explosions escaped the singularities. My attempt to protect the city wasn't enough. All would still die. To lessen the remaining energies, I generated tiny, isolated gravitational panels that diverted the kinetic force of each bomb upward.

The volumes of mana burned through the rest of my active elemental furnaces, and my body smelted down to slag. The gravitational panels siphoned portions of the erupting nuclear and singularity forces upward, along with huge bursts of air and debris. As my entire body glowed a bright, blinding blue, Marcella's eyes opened wide in slow motion.

My speed and energy output overwhelmed her imagination. I turned into a glowing molten body, like a star. Even the byproduct of my mana production caused the pavement beneath me to melt. In the end, my efforts did little. The shockwave from the nuclear bombs passed over me.

Though fragmented in certain places, they carried utter devastation in their wake. Their pulses cut through my body like blades made of absolute kinetic energy. My singularities left the explosions in a fractured state. The outward forces mirrored Swiss cheese, some of each blast eaten.

My actions never mattered. The remaining forces overlapped, leaving nothing remaining. All crumbled into a powder as a shockwave enveloped the Shattered Spires. Every skyscraper fell to the kinetic rupture as if a comet collided in the city's center. The collapse took seconds, and I disintegrated alongside the town.

As the last pieces of the buildings collapsed in the distance, the enormity of the genocide left me stunned. A paralyzing dread coursed through me. Regret, shame, and anguish bloomed in my chest. I mentally shivered as everything turned to ash around me. As if reliving my worst nightmares, all perished while only I remained.

In that absolute destruction, I become nothing, but I returned from the ether before finding buildings collapsed in the distance. My expression was as hollow as an insect caught in a spider's web. My hands quivered in shock, and I blinked as I struggled to comprehend what just happened.

Marcella did the same. She remained unharmed, and she gawked at me, her expression holding the same dread as mine. I seethed at her through a clenched jaw.

"Was it worth it? To kill so many for nothing?"

Her hands trembled before I set my gaze on her. I howled.

"Say something."

She pointed at me.

"H-How did you survive? You...You disappeared?"

Around me, I gazed at the destruction.

"That's what you care about? Not the city you destroyed? Not the people you killed?"

I howled my last words. I pointed at her and shouted.

"I'm steel surrounded by glass. If you knew anything about me, you would already know I cannot die to physical forces. Despite that, you were willing to kill hundreds of thousands. Maybe millions."

Marcella crushed the detonator in her hand.

"The times your body dropped, and you came back from the air...It wasn't teleportation or an illusion? You...You really came back from nothing?"

I shook my hands at her.

"I don't know anything about illusion magic. Gah, you are one of the most confidently stupid people I've ever met. And the destruction you sowed. This is...Huh."

I peered at the devastation around me. I found no more bodies. In the distance, certain details didn't line up. The clouds never parted from the immense explosions. After several miles, the city was unharmed. After a few more seconds of inspection, a palpable wave of relief passed over me.

My head dropped back like someone slit my throat. I let out a gasp and shook my head.

"Hah. You faked this, too, huh? Thank god. Thank Schema. Hell, thank the Old Ones."

She gulped, her trump cards running thin. I sighed.

"How did you fake the crowd's minds?"

All around me, her illusion began fading. An enormous, subterranean world came into view. Above me, the spatial mist separated this alternate space from the Shattered Spires. Beside me, a set of circular doorways stood beside a devastated cavern. The doorway defied physics. By all accounts, it should've been left as a smoldering ember, yet it withstood nuclear hellfire.

When facing the insects earlier, I had been inside a dungeon. This was a dungeon within a dungeon.

Around me, huge portions of the cavern collapsed from the detonated bombs. Everything glowed with the warmth of radiation and heat, and the dust clouds hadn't settled. A horde of insects twitched, all of them either killed or covered in flash burns. Outside of the cracking, burnt stone, the bugs let out their sounds of anguish.

Buzzing in the distance, they echoed their agony alongside their sizzling flesh. The sounds blended into a cicada-like drone, and a few rolled around in despair while letting out gurgles of pain. Before anything else, I expanded Event Horizon over them. Their suffering ended. By now, Marcella had earned a pound and a half of malice.

I glared down at her.

"So you set up a fake crowd under the Shattered Spires. If I had to guess, those entities you planted in people's heads...They pretended to be people? That's got to be a power from the Old One. And this place is a dungeon within another dungeon?"

Marcella blinked, and her hands stopped shaking. She calmed her breathing before she mouthed.

"You survived nuclear explosions. You're not human."

I smacked my forehead.

"Ugh, and you call me a simpleton. What gave it away? The fact I'm fifty feet tall or that I'm made of metal?"

Marcella stood before she chewed her lip. She seethed.

"I see you tried to save the people. How noble of you."

I raised my brow.

"And you put other people here to hold me down so that I wouldn't get outside the blast radius of nukes. You played on my empathy. Smart, though a bit ruthless for my taste. Honestly, this entire plan of yours is pretty convoluted, but it was effective."

I held up a hand.

"You had many portals layered together to disguise that single one I walked through. You then layered the portals so that I would walk from one preconstructed illusion to the next. Clever. Very clever. I can see how you stopped that mindless Seer and turned it into a bodyguard for your territory."

All around me, the last of the dying insects evaporated from Event Horizon. It stripped them of their lives and bodies alike, yet it was a mercy as the destroyed corpses coalesced into my body. I breathed out the mana like red smoke.

"But I'm not mindless. Quite the opposite, actually."

Marcella nodded.

"It would seem so."

I stood over her.

"Is this why you goaded me so much from the beginning? You distracted me so that I wouldn't have time to question your illusions. Another ploy."

Her lips quivered. I cupped my chin.

"Is this another scheme within a scheme, or are you out of tricks?"

She chewed her lip.

"So then you're immortal? Eonoth never mentioned that part in your dossier."

I burst into laughter.

"That's because I'm not."

Marcella shook her head.

"They told me you'd die if I played my cards right. I can't help but feel lied to."

I furrowed my brow.

"What? The Old Ones lied? Woah. I would never have guessed that."

Marcella rolled her fingers in her hand.

"Who are you to say I don't have extra bombs planted at different spots around New York? Maybe even Mt. Verner?"

I scoffed.

"We run checkups on nearby terrain to ensure no one sets up traps like that near my capital. Plazia's been running that operation for a while now. Aside from that, you wouldn't detonate the bombs in New York while knowing they wouldn't even slow me down. Being that insane was a bluff."

She snarled.

"You don't know me."

I nodded.

"You're right. But if you were willing to blow up New York, you wouldn't have set up this elaborate trap in the first place. In fact, this whole ruse wasn't just to trick me. It was to save the Shattered Spires if we did have a battle."

I smiled at her.

"Even though you pretend to be made of ice, it looks like you don't want to become a mass murdering, genocidal maniac. And you know what? You did destroy fifty of my elemental furnaces in the meantime, so this wasn't all meaningless. For me, that's a pretty hefty loss."

Her left eye twitched.

"Elemental Furnace?"

I frowned.

"They convert matter into energy. It's a lot like nuclear fission, actually."

She took a moment, calming herself down. After taking a deep breath, she stared at me, defiance spreading back on her face.

"Then they're how you're able to make so much mana. We'll see how many you have left."

My armor grinned, a jagged smile of metal meeting her gaze.

"They're supplementary. I produce the mana I wield on my own."

She grimaced, flashing her teeth.

"Then what? You can survive nukes, and you have limitless energy? How in the hell does that make any sense?"

I floated off the ground, stones swirling around me.

"It doesn't, but neither do your illusions. Also, don't forget that despite not knowing what I was capable of, you've chosen an all-or-nothing war against me. It's your fault now that the outcome has become certain."

Rage sparked over her face.

"Nothing is certain in this life. Nothing."

She snarled her last word. I met her eye, and I couldn't help but respect her fury. She needed to be stopped, but that didn't mean every word out of her mouth was poison. I nodded.

"That's true, but enough of this. Let's see how you handle a real fight, shall we?"

I bolted out of the dungeon, unleashing a physical calamity onto the cave and ripping past the pooling mist. Insects flattened themselves against the edge of the cavern. They kept away out of fear, having learned what facing me meant. Either that or they mistook me as the source of the nuclear explosions.

Either way, it didn't matter the reason; they didn't get in my way as I crossed out of the cavern. I stopped my ascent, finding the walls of the spatial fog covering Central Park. The wind from my flight plumed out of the cave, billowing the mist in the distance. Finally able to orient myself, I found where I was using my minimap.

I bolted forward toward the Infinity Plaza, and I pierced the spatial fog encompassing the dungeon. Gray clouds enveloped my vision, and my skin prickled before I pierced the vale. Seconds later, I crossed several floating skyscrapers before smashing into the pavement in front of The Infinity Plaza.

When I arrived, a shockwave erupted, shattering the nearby glass on a few floating spires. People cried out as falling shards of glass fell. I raised a hand and suspended the fragments in a gravitational panel. The translucent pieces flickered about like sharpened snow. I siphoned them all together, creating a pile of broken glass that I melted. A second later, I flash-froze the pile.

I set it down, a giant sphere of cloudy glass resting in front of the old Empire State Building. Around me, people gawked in awe, terror, and annoyance. I inspected the

minds here, finding them more individualized. Even their surface memories carried depth to them, something Marcella's psionic entities hadn't had.

I would've uncovered the lie in a few seconds, but Marcella hadn't given me any time to consider that possibility. She rushed me so that I made mistakes. Dwelling on those blunders, I walked forward, passing the lines of people. They made way for me as I found the entrance of the Infinity Plaza unguarded.

I flowed into the entrance and through its winding hallways. After rushing past the emptied office space, I reconstituted at the center of the Infinity Plaza's dungeon hall. An army of soldiers waited for me. They amassed an armada of weaponry, from repurposed cannons to artillery carrying crystallized mana bombs.

Many of them wore my rings or gear, likely having traded a wealth of supplies for my equipment. Their odd swords glinted in the subdued torchlight, and portals swirled behind each group of soldiers. They were open for a rapid escape. It looked like they wanted to wage a war of attrition by using guerilla tactics.

Marcella stood three floors up, her aura smothering the entire expanse. Like Lehesion's aura, Marcella's prevented my magic from piercing its veil. I still wondered how the aura did that. She held her strange blade in her hand, and unlike our previous exchanges, there was no fear or indecision in her eyes.

This was the true Marcella, and she glared like a resolved warrior. She frowned.

"We'll fight until we die, monster."

Before I could reply, the Seer crashed through the Infinity Plaza's entrance. The avatar of Etorhma brushed off bits of rock before forming a spear of his strange mana. He pointed the weapon at me.

"You walk into the lion's den willingly, Harbinger."

I glowed, the stone melting beneath me as mana stormed into my palms. The aura of Marcella shivered as my wake pressed against the force. I won the war waged under the surface, and a tint of red overcame all present. My armor smiled, and my runes shimmered. Several soldiers fell to their knees as I brandished a fist.

"I've been looking forward to a real fight."

A plume of mana from my body poisoned the air.

"Now let's have one."

Chapter 423: A Broken Facade

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"I've been looking forward to a real fight."

A plume of mana from my body poisoned the air.

"Now, let's have one."

A cascade of enchanted bullets, runically empowered ordnance, and bombs exploded onto me. Hellfire rained down as lead and steel disintegrated against my skin. I raised my hands, and heat built onto their weapons. The metal melted as soldiers howled in pain, and I siphoned the molten steel away from their grasp.

The bottom walkways of the Infinity Plaza melted in tandem. The magma and slag pooled at the center of the room, and Marcella's walkway guards fell, their footing removed. Many landed on the ground with hard thuds as the orange hue of the forming orb shined on them. Beneath me, the mana bombs disintegrated as Event Horizon stole their energy like a terrifying realization stealing one's sense of calm.

That aura exposed a fundamental difference in ability. It robbed them of everything. Soldiers lost all magical empowerment, from the runes on their armor to the magic buffs they used to augment one another. They couldn't cast magic as their thoughts blurred into ones of rage and hunger. Soldiers turned on one another, each of them going mad.

The stone walkways' magma fused with the swirling mass of glowing metal above my head. I solidified the circle above me, and the igneous rock carried spirals of quenched steel. It clapped into the ground, crushing the elegant granite panels. Their wealth became crags of Earth reaching to the sky.

More mana manifested into my frame, and my body glowed a bright red. Behind me, the Seer raised its arm, a denser aura overcoming it. The entity threw a spear at my chest. A hole in my torso widened around the attack, and the energy lance dispersed into the ground behind me. I pulled a fist back, and the Seer crossed its arms to block. As I fired my hand, I turned my entire body with the blow.

A telekinetic panel formed over my fist, and it slammed the kinetic impact into the green aura over the Seer's stomach. As with Lehesion, the force of my blow pierced its aura. Stone cracked. Its back exploded. A sound erupted, and a shockwave bolted the soldiers against the walls or into their fallback portals.

My hand jerked back, as the Seer fell to its knees, unable to hold itself upright. A massive hole appeared in its torso. Behind the behemoth, the entire side of the building ripped apart. Pillars of reinforced concrete turned to powder. Steel girders sheared. The entrance expanded into a gaping breach.

The Shattered Spires appeared in full view as the collateral damage of our battle expanded. Portions of the Infinity Plaza lodged into skyscrapers kilometers in the distance. Any remaining windows still exploded as shrapnel pierced entire skyscrapers. Crags of steel pierced deep into the ground far below us, and the spatial mist in the distance swallowed the rest of the attack's blow.

It billowed, a colossal ripple gap in the mist forming. It dwarfed the size of the buildings, the sheer size of the movement omeneing a cataclysm. Before the Seer understood the extent of its damage, I swiped my hand to the side, and another telekinetic impact slammed the Seer's face.

A kinetic ripple ushered forth through the room. Soldiers nearby flung through the air, and they collided against the walls. As if moving in a hastened temporal flow, the Seer

smashed into the ground before tumbling further into one of the walls. It crushed the stone before flinging far out of the building.

In the distance, it launched through one floating spire. Then another. It kept tumbling before colliding with the ground far below. Another shockwave fell over us. The Seer flopped several times before finding a wall of dirt. Another shockwave erupted, sending citizens flying below. Two seconds later, the final cataclysmic boom shattered through the building as its impact rippled past us.

As I turned to the other soldiers, I clanked my fists together.

"Come on. Let's fight."

The room froze in place. I had stolen their fire and fury, so I let out a sigh. Imbued with confidence, I paced up to Marcella. She turned to her soldiers, and her voice echoed telepathically.

"What in the hell are you all doing? Everyone. Fight. Fire at him. Do something."

I walked over, taking steps in the air with gravitation. As I did, a few soldiers fell to their knees. Others whispered of the Harbinger. Even more couldn't understand what was happening. Marcella's lips trembled before she condensed her aura over herself.

I pulled my wake over it, but I couldn't quite strip it away. Even if I did, the Old One over her might beat me to a pulp as Eonoth had or worse. Marcella pulled out a detonator from her fur coat, and her eyes carried insanity.

"I prepared these beforehand."

I kept walking. The soldiers gawked in terror, their fear radiating like a cloud. Marcella's second in command, Rebecca stood to her side. Rebecca reached out to her guildmaster.

"Y-you said the ones below Central Park were all you had."

Marcella gawked in disgust.

"Am I beholden to you? No."

Marcella's eyes narrowed at me.

"I never imagined I'd have to do this. Any of this, but here we are."

She gulped.

"Gah. To fight a monster, you have to become one-"

A slapping sound interrupted Marcella's rant. Warmth coursed over Marcella's arm like someone cut on a warm faucet from her wrist. She felt nothing aside from that warmth, the sensation almost welcoming if not for its oddness. Marcella furrowed her brow. The guildleader turned to her hand, finding a nub where it had been.

Althea's face pulled out of the ether, and she smiled.

"Not bad for a collared dog, huh?"

I bolted over and swiped the detonator into my pocket dimension. My moving body propelled enough wind to send a few soldiers flying. Marcella reached out a hand, her strange blade elongating. Althea moved far faster, slicing Marcella's remaining hand off. The blade fell down into my pocket dimension before Marcella roared, and red veins expanded over her eyes.

Marcella bit at her enemy, but Althea bent her body back. Marcella fell forward, and Althea caught her in a guillotine neck choke. As Marcella scrambled to escape, Althea held her in place with ease. Althea sighed.

"She's done. Let's get this over with."

Marcella let out tears of frustration. She growled like an animal, defiant to the end. It was pitiful, and Althea's eyes softened.

"Hey. It's going to be ok. We're not so bad once you get to know us. You...But yeah, you're pretty awful."

Althea opened her dimensional storage while pulling out a vial. Marcella's pupils dilated at the sight, fear overtaking her. Marcella's second in command, Rebecca, tried charging at us, but I held her in place with gravitation. Marcella screamed as Althea tried injecting whatever was within the vial.

The needle snapped on Marcella's aura before Althea sighed. Our sniper made a needle rise out of her fingertip before wincing.

"Ugh, I didn't want to do this. It's not exactly sanitary, but-"

She replaced the needle on the vial with her bone. With a practiced ease, Althea stabbed Marcella's neck and injected the contents. Marcella passed out in seconds. Watching in horror, Rebecca looked at her sedated ruler. Something overtook Rebecca, her body writhing from within. Rebecca scrambled out of my gravitational restraints and leaped towards Althea. Our sniper kicked off the wall, jumping away. Rebecca smashed the wall where Althea had been before bending down. Rebecca warped space, propelling herself to us. As she did, I reached out a hand, and I caught her neck.

Many of her bones cracked from running into my palm, and her neck broke from her body flinging forward. I suspended her in place so healing happened instead of hanging. An eerie quiet passed over us before she regained control of her limbs. Rebecca grabbed my hand and kicked her feet while assaulting my mind.

Hundreds of the psionic presences pooled within. All of the others escaped here. It turned out that Rebecca was their origin. Those entities tore several of my psyches apart while I observed the strange use of psionics. Though they lacked a voice, they experienced emotion, and panic bloomed through the horde as they continued their onslaught.

I shook my head.

"It's like drops of water on a desert. Not enough. Not nearly."

Althea flipped over my shoulders. She injected another sedative into Rebecca. In my hand, Rebecca's head flopped to the side while the psyches silenced. I turned to those around us.

"It's done. Take me to her base of operations."

In seconds, we dismantled the power structure supporting the entire operation. The soldiers gawked at one another, each of them confused. I spread Event Horizon over them, wielding its oppressive qualities in my voice.

"I said it's done."

Several soldiers fell to their knees. As the tension of war faded, the less volatile soldiers let out gasps of relief. Most peered around in confusion as if waking up from a dream. The highest-ranked members showed the most dismay, and they reminded me of escaped elderly patients suffering from dementia.

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

The lower rung members picked up the slack and got to work cleaning everything up. As they walked by, I glanced at Marcella. I just noticed, but Marcella dwarfed Althea. The guild leader was a seventeen-foot-tall titan. Even her title omened her prowess.

Marcella Meyer, the Goddess of War | Lvl 20,000 | Class: Warlord | Guild: The Defiers

For a moment, I wondered if she went through the lottery. Warlord was a ruler class, and she owned a large guild from the looks of it. Marcella also stopped Elysium agents using the Seer. Speaking of, the behemoth floated back up from the hole I made in my first attack. Its body oozed the seafoam magma, but more importantly, it carried a newfound fear in each of its steps.

Cracks covered its entire body as if Etorhma had plastered the monster back together. The Seer continued healing these fissures by passing its palms over each crevice. Its mana welded the shards into slabs, but it was far from a complete reconstruction. The Seer lost much of its powdered self, the remnants lying around across the city.

As it gazed at me, I glared at it. This being would remember facing me with its scars.

After cleaning up the rest of the mess here, the lower rung of Marcella's guild walked near me. They drew sticks of different lengths before one of them lost. That poor sap walked up to me, and he looked like the fiercest janitor to ever walk the Earth. Furthermore, and far more importantly, he groomed an elegant, manly mustache.

It was incredible.

"H-hello, sir. I, er, we...We know where Marcella stayed. W-we don't actually know if it's where she keeps her valuables," the mustachioed man said.

I smiled.

"She can keep her belongings. The only thing I'm looking for is a few elemental furnaces to make up for my losses and signs of someone we don't want here. After I clean that cancer out, I'll have a guild representative or two come here. They'll organize trade so that you guys can get properly equipped for these dungeons."

I looked up at the many doorways.

"I'd like to reduce casualties to zero moving forward. We'll also help create better housing and offer humanitarian aid across the city. Assuming none of you mind?"

With expectations shattered, his eyes lit up.

"Oh, no, sir. We'd like that quite a lot, actually."

"Good. What's the name?"

"Mcsmitty."

I furrowed my brow.

"I know another Mcsmitty, but you tend to look the part. They were a...A space lawyer or something. Anyways, let's go handle business."

A short chat about the building informed me of all I needed to know. As was the case when I walked in, the lower levels were developed, the middle floors were in development, and the upper floors were either untouched or the most curated. At those peaks, Mr. Mustache and I walked into Marcella's personal chambers.

It was precisely what I'd seen in her illusion, the details uncanny in their resemblance. The tree expanded over all of the Shattered Spires, and the red core portal had been real. I took note of that in particular, wanting something like that for my guild. After inspecting everything, we found nothing out of the ordinary outside of the location and building materials.

Heading downstairs, we had Torix swing by after a few hours. He cast sleeping magic on Marcella and Rebecca before using his many summons to further explore the compound. As we expected, an enormous reserve of rich resources rested on the bottom floors of the Infinity Plaza.

The middle of the tower contained rare loot and red-tiered dungeons. However, the upper floors held the primary loot for us. The blue cores, whether Schemafied or not, were always useful, and this dense cluster held several hundred blue-tiered dungeons. I made yet another mental note to swing by here and collect these blue cores whenever I could. It could also be great training for the guild elite.

After having looted the place of a few useful supplies, we skulked out to Central Park. The dungeon mirrored the illusion I saw, and as expected, it held riches galore. Like The Infinity Plaza, many rifts littered the cavernous expanse. The insects carried valuable swords, shields, and mass-producible armor.

It simply wasn't as quality as the materials I made and used. However, I didn't have to make them, and that was an enormous boon in itself. Just as well, these pieces could be a tiered reward below my own specialized equipment. We could work that into the incentive structure of my guild, which I'd be reviewing after settling the issues here.

Walking down the tunnels, the remaining portions of the hive congregated around an underground tunnel far beneath the city. In this cavern, Torix, Althea, and I trekked. I kept my size minimal, smaller than Torix or even Althea. They crawled and squeezed through the tunnels, Torix's head often clashing with the stone overhead.

Torix grabbed his head after a particularly nasty head bash.

"Bah. This cavern is entirely too small for normal creatures."

I flowed around a curve in the stone.

"It does take some getting used to."

Torix bent down before his cape ripped a boulder off the wall. It clattered down before Torix stepped on it.

"Disciple, is there, perhaps, a gap within your corpulent schedule where I may get a new body? One with powers more akin to your own?"

I tilted my head.

"Hmm. It's going to be a little while. Either way, if you think that body is clunky, you'll need a ton of gravitational augments and shifting telekinesis to use a body like what I have now. It's hundreds of times heavier."

Torix gestured to me.

"Perhaps using a smaller frame would be wise, then?"

I counted on my finger.

"It would still take gravity wells galore, and they have to be tight against the skin, too. Honestly, I keep them within my body and isolated. They're kind of like a set of gravitational joints that lets me move normally at this point."

Althea murmured.

"Could you, uh, really hurt someone with those if they weren't, er, isolated?"

I nodded, my face grim.

"Oh, absolutely. If the gravity well isn't contained, any normal person who got near me would end up getting pulled against my body. It would start with a small slice of their skin that tugged the rest of them against me. Then, their body would be blended against the surface of my skin. It would be like a thin layer of kinetic shearing."

Althea gawked in horror.

"That was a pretty specific example you just came up with. Has it, you know, happened before?"

My eyes darkened.

"Not with a person, but it did happen with a squirrel once."

Torix murmured.

"I bet that drove you nuts."

Althea and I looked at him. Torix spread his arms.

"Oh, come now. You use terrible puns all the time. I see nothing wrong with my statement."

I furrowed my brow.

"I don't think that's a pun."

Althea shook her head.

"The master has spoken. For shame, Torix. For shame."

Torix threw his hands up, and they crushed some stone above him.

"Oh, now you're simply gatekeeping to prevent me from joining the ranks of pun joksters. Who is truly shameful in the end?"

Althea scoffed.

"Why would you want to join that group anyway?"

Torix steepled his fingers together.

"There is a unique joy in the anguish of those that have heard a particularly potent pun, and I must say, I rather relish the thought of that power writhing in my hands. I always assumed that's why my disciple makes those horrifically awful jokes from time to time."

I shook my head.

"I genuinely enjoy them, as awful as that sounds."

Torix's head clanked against the tunnel once more.

"Enough on puns. What of this unwieldy size?"

I shrugged.

"Nothing I can do about it."

Torix gestured at me.

"Perhaps you could go on a diet then? I've heard you humans are obsessed with losing what is considered excess weight."

I frowned.

"I think that's an old-world problem these days. Honestly, I haven't seen anyone with a gut in a while."

Althea raised her brow.

"You haven't been out much then. People are starting to get enough food for that kind of thing."

I led us into the depths of the dungeon.

"Gah, you don't know how happy I am to hear that. It's a good problem to have."

We turned a curve in the tunnel, and beneath us, an enormous plume of spatial mist gushed like a geyser out of the ground. Its silence unnerved us, and I reached a hand out over it. The mist lacked any substantial feel. Above it, dense clusters of the surveillance tree's roots reached out of the ceiling. They soaked in the spatial vapor like a liquid.

I scratched the back of my head.

"And there's the tree's origin."

Torix marveled at the geyser.

"What is this then?"

He reached out a hand before Althea stopped him.

"Hey. Let's let Daniel handle this part."

Torix pulled back.

"A mere statement would've sufficed."

Althea reddened.

"Oh...Uhm, sorry."

I stepped up to the spouting mist.

"Cya later, guys."

They waved me off. Althea gave a weak smile.

"Be safe."

I pointed back.

"You too."

I created panels of gravitation over the geyser so it didn't blow over when I hopped in. Then, I hopped in. After passing what seemed like an endless steam sauna, my feet met solid ground. Cracks radiated through the ground around me as I collided against the stone. Despite my impact, the tunnel stayed strong. Peering around, I found the source of the cavern's strength.

Beams of chitin supported the tunnel. As I walked through a pressurized chamber of sorts, something kept fumigating the fog like an enormous hose. I wandered into an opening, and a being let out groans of pain. I winced at the sound before finding the source of the agony - an eldritch queen.

I walked up to the creature that reminded me of a queen fire ant. The main body shimmered red alongside its glossy chitin. Its abdomen became what looked like a swollen larva where eggs burst out. Literally, its abdomen kept exploding. Each explosion carried another howl of torment from the eldritch. It should've died from the grievous wounds, yet some eternal source of vitality kept the damn thing alive.

Eldritch Malformation | lvl 18,000~ | Status: Unknown - This creature is a deformed abomination exposed to otherworldly forces, and its body has become a conduit for those strange energies. This persistent corruption has elevated the power and abilities of this queen's hatchlings.

It does so by warping its composition. It then is able to imbibe the same turpitude into its spawn. In the end, its body has been repurposed into a gluttonous, engorged factory to produce its now altered brood. The creature's transition has left it in a state of purgatory and pain.

It should be killed immediately.

Yikes. A leftover part of its abdomen lay in the way of a portal. This spatial rip belched an enormous amount of dark, primordial mana into the beast. The eldritch queen absorbed that energy and regenerated its swollen, bulbous belly, turning the skin on it into a dark blue hue. This part of its body leaked the spatial fluid and drained it into a pit.

That same pit drained down to a tunnel falling deeper underground. Once at a certain elevation, it evaporated with tremendous force, forming the geyser that spewed the spatial mist all over the place. The swollen abdomen rumbled before splitting apart once more. The queen let out a bundle of eggs while letting out roars of anguish.

I gagged before raising a hand. I vaporized its head in a singularity, my disgust overwhelming any other plans for the poor creature. A quake resonated from the Earth, but I prevented any collapse with gravitation. Stepping up to the odd portal, I walked into yet another world. This time, I created a ring over both sides of the portal using my dimensional fabric.

I wasn't about to get jerked around from portal to portal again.

Once more, I walked through the veil. As I did, a strange world surrounded me. All was suffused with a thick, primordial ooze. The mana floated up in dolloping drops to the sky, forming a rippling sea above. There, amongst the clouds, the stars shined within the water. It reflected like a mirror, and it held a disarming quiet, something that imbued a peace and calm within me.

The sensation carried so much weight and force that it created urgency. It was like the terror that came from an encroaching death, like hypothermia or an overdose. As

numbness sedated my senses, my mind frantically fought for its life. I grappled against the sedation as brutal cosmic winds bristled against my face.

It came from a strange source; further out, a blue star beamed down with enough radiation to devastate Earth in seconds. The star scorched this plane, the ground howling for peace in a low rumble. Something dimmed the star's rays so that I could still see it, but the entity hadn't fixed the heat or radiation.

This place would kill any normal person who entered it. The planet's sun seared my skin and left me constantly regenerating, yet the star never overwhelmed my sight. I let out a laugh. It was like the celestial body would rather be seen than survived. As I breathed in, the scent of acrid chemicals assaulted my nose and burned my nostrils.

Baldowah's world had been one that smelled of sweat, blood, and battle. This place reminded me of a chemistry lab where a scientist forgot to close his vials. It was so thick that I could taste the air, and the flavor was like lake water mixed with bleach, as if nature and science duked it out in my mouth. As they battled, I was the only loser.

The only pleasant part of this place came from a low, resonant rumbling. It, like the lake above, imbued a sense of calm. It didn't lull like a lullaby. It calmed like rain on a tin roof. Destroying that impression, a quaking erupted from the ground. It kept building in resonance and volume before forming a familiar voice loud enough to liquefy bone.

"Harbinger. You're finally here. I've been waiting, if that's what you beings call it."

Eonoth left me stunned at his environment's hostility, but I endured the beating.

"Agh. Eonoth. You've got to work on your reception. This place is hell on Earth."

"Is it truly that intolerable?"

I raised a melting hand.

"Yes. Now, what are you doing here?"

Eonoth laughed, its voice excruciating to hear or experience.

"To watch the show."

Chapter 424: A War Waged

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"Yes. Now, what are you doing here?"

Eonoth laughed, its voice excruciating to hear or experience.

"To watch the show."

I put my hands on my hips.

"A show? What kind?"

Eonoth's voice was a roar through the cosmos. It quaked all from the swirling stars to the fabric of atoms.

"The happenings of your planet. They interest me, as you have and do."

I sighed, expecting another esoteric, pointless conversation where an Old One revealed nothing.

"So what's happening? Are you just interested in the road conditions this time of year?"

"If they were being used, then perhaps. What I'm entranced by is the instability. It's growing as forces encroach. I watch in anticipation for what is to come."

I narrowed my eyes.

"You...You're speaking far more clearly, kind of like Etorhma."

"As are you."

"I got more than one of me to help with talking. How did you improve your diction?"

"Through an equivariant exchange. An individual traded their language in order to gain an inkling of my influence. I allowed it as it enabled me to speak with your kind and understand languages as a whole. I had never experienced such novelty across all of my times alive, you see."

"Old Ones don't speak to each other?"

"We are isolated beings, not creatures of serendipity as you are. This allows us to encompass far more than you may imagine, yet your imagination enables creation and novelty. That is part of why we are so curious about your kind. It is another part of why you are anomalous to us in your weakness as we are anomalous to you in our strength."

Then Rebecca or Marcella traded their ability to speak as a part of their contract with Eonoth. I raised a melting hand.

"How are Marcella or Rebecca able to talk then?"

"They traded a language, not their ability to speak. They knew of other languages, and Schema converted their words accordingly. It is no loss to them."

Ah, that made perfect sense. In essence, they stole from an Old One. From what I'd heard, no one else accomplished that feat and walked away unscathed. Then again, neither had Marcella or Rebecca. I gazed at the star, my retinas a total mess.

"You mentioned anticipating some instability. Is that why you and all the other Old Ones are dogpiling Earth with portals and avatars?"

"It is. A horror is coming. It craves your planet's dimensional instability. You carry a shard of it with you. You cease its spread, but there are others, some unseen while others are undeniable."

I blinked, tears of metal streaming from my eyes.

"So...The Earth's underlying fabric of reality...How unstable are we talking?"

"Unstable? It's shattering apart at this moment. It had no stability."

I looked at the ground, glowing droplets all around me.

"And is that why Schema's struggling to hold the Earth together?"

"Yes and no. Something is vastly accelerating that decay. It presses like a mountain splattering a corpse."

I waved my hands in frustration.

"Is that why everyone keeps warning me about something? That thing is trying to destroy Earth?"

"Far more than a mere planet, but yours is a piece of its puzzle. A pivotal shard, even."

I calmed myself down, my thoughts swirling as a storm. Eonoth's voice radiated from all directions.

"Did you believe that only the eldritch suffer during a dimensional collapse? They were akin to you before their traversal. It is between spaces that they are changed. In that regard, you are not special. You are not innate. Fragility is in your nature, and you are beholden to it, as is your world."

My eyes widened. Of course. Plazia mentioned how he remembered a time before he was corrupted. His dimension collapsed from under him, giving way to the

interdimensional energies. That exposure transformed him into an eldritch, and as the dimension landed on ours, Schema transformed it into a dungeon.

That could happen to our reality as it had happened to his. I put my hand on my head.

"How do you know all this? Old One tentacles? Maybe Sauron's eye?"

"It would be more of a question of how I wouldn't. I feel the nature of your reality with a depth I cannot describe, nor can you fathom. Needless to say, that makes describing the concepts a chore. You... You are but a child even in terms of your own kind. How am I to inscribe those concepts within you with mere words?"

It rumbled.

"No. I would need an exchange for that. I am willing to offer one."

I pressed my temples.

"In the end, you Old Ones want to watch something come and ravage my home planet then?"

"Baldowah wants the finality and consequence. Etorhma wishes to proliferate secrets and pockets of knowledge. Mesmera desires for there to be lies and deception. I search for the disturbances across time and space, as they please me. I can...Reach deeper in those spaces without destroying your reality."

Dread pooled in the pit of my stomach.

"Why haven't you all just splintered everything by now?"

"Many reasons. We wish to continue this little game of ours. We still lack fundamental answers to your existence, and we will have them. It will take the time we've never experienced as you have. It is us becoming proximal to something tantalizing. In that regard, we cusp on limits. We also wish to follow our accord."

"Can you, I don't know, tell me more about that accord?"

"Baldowah has touched upon it before with his simplistic understanding. It is enough."

"Ah. You don't like him either?"

"Hah. Him. You personify so that you can understand. Small. Petty. No. I don't like Baldowah. Its aims are a bore in all regards. Etorhma is the same. A weakling. Pathetic."

"And what are you?"

It chuckled.

"I am Eonoth. I am strong. Petty accords mean little to me. I only fear one."

"Who?"

"I cannot say."

I turned a hand to him.

"Polluterix?"

"Silence."

Eonoth's voice turned me to a pulp, its volume like a supernova passing over me. After a moment, I pulled myself back together. Even if Eonoth didn't say, he verified my assumption. Apparently, this Polluterix was the big bad of the Old Ones. I shook off some residual mental damage before turning a palm to the radiating star.

"Is the accord made so that you guys don't ruin this playground you all found?"

"Indeed."

"If that's the case, wouldn't forming all these portals and tears in space rip our reality apart? It sounds like that's going to end us pretty quickly at this rate."

"It destabilizes the stable. However, it won't hasten the fall of your planet. Yours is a fate sealed. We merely spread where opportunity resides. Humans are such a greedy, ignorant, and arrogant species, so they are rife for exchanges. We need only honey our wine but a little, and your kind will drink deeply from tainted goblets."

I couldn't deny that we had plenty of bad apples in humanity. I reached out a hand to the star.

"Can I stop this falling apart of space? If so, how?"

"I cannot say. The only entity that has cared for such is Schema. Speak with it. Perhaps it may illuminate your understanding should the AI's fear not itself."

Eonoth let out a sardonic laugh.

"Though it knows fear now. So much of it. Petty machine. It leans to us, and we beckon to it. It will fall from its supposed throne, one made of illusions it casts to protect itself. But you all do so, do you not? All of you are similar, even that which you create. You live by delusion, but you die to change that which is ineffable."

Even though Eonoth carried his classic sadism, a fact remained - this was one of the most fruitful conversations I'd ever had with anyone or anything. Eonoth gave me information on so many questions I'd had for a long time and without any recourse. It left me suspicious.

"Why are you telling me all of this?"

"The other Old Ones try to adhere to the accord out of apprehension. I fear nothing. For that reason, I don't worry about this information proliferating. You may know everything at my disposal. However, omniscience is not omnipotence. All of you will experience that. You will learn that as well whenever a droplet of time passes, and then, Mesmera shall seize your mind, body, and soul."

Eonoth's sea stormed above.

"That contract with Shalahora has guaranteed it. Fool."

I smiled.

"30,000 years. It's a droplet of time to you, but I operate on a different scale."

"You know nothing of time. It is unfortunate, but you also don't understand us. You are not even an ant to us. You are a poorly scribbled picture of an ant, and you are the size of an atom. We are the artists that shift all you preside, creators of what you experience."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm nothing, no one, and nowhere near you guys. I get it already. You call Baldowah boring while you just rant on and on about us being impotent."

I tapped my side.

"But, if you're so certain of that, then you wouldn't mind sharing how I could kill one of you."

Eonoth's sea calmed as if something dove into it.

"It's...An interesting question. You would need more. Much more, and in all regards. I couldn't call you nothing then, but a threat? It seems unfeasible as you are. You need mastery of many fields of magic. More than mastery. You must become the zenith, a beacon of absolute control over everything that you survey. More. You must be able to conquer more than exists and with ease. In less than 30,000 years. That is nothing, less than a moment."

The sea let out a single wave. Amusement grew in Eonoth's tone.

"Expand. You may then touch us. Otherwise, we will never fear you."

"Then why was Etorhma so nervous about Yawm?"

"Etorhma's fear was misplaced. He...Hm, jumped at shadows? Is that your phrase for anxiety? That is what Etorhma did. It overreacted to a subtle and unlikely outcome, entrenching itself in an unneeded solution. That is all."

I took a step forward.

"So Yawm was a threat?"

"No. Yawm's ideas were, and only to our accord, not us. Yawm wanted to fuse eldritch and sentients into a singular entity. That idea lacks basic knowledge of the concepts he was trying to blur. For that reason, he endangered much with the little he was trying to accomplish. Etorhma intruded before chaos erupted, as unlikely as that was to pass."

"Why did Etorhma feel the need to stop Yawm?"

Eonoth's voice lowered in volume.

"Yawm was a being enraptured with an idea. Possessed in its allure, yet blinded by its folly. He is what happens to a mind when seized by an unchanging principle. Though we understand little of your realm, we understand that in great detail. It composes the fabric of our being."

From what Eonoth said, ideals made up the Old Ones. Great. Just great. It wasn't much to go on, but it was a start. I gestured around us.

This novel's true home is a different platform. Support the author by finding it there.

"Is that why you guys make these spaces? They all have a theme. Your ideals, as you called them. Do they help you manifest or something?"

"Yes. About this dimension, do you like it? I'm trying to create a calm and hospitable arena for conversation. I've done well, to my estimation, as you have survived while here."

An enormous solar flare scorched a planet to pieces in the distance.

"Huh. Yeah. You're doing a great job. Is that why there's so much mana here?"

Eonoth's ocean boiled.

"It is a point of anger. Your dimension is so energy-depleted. It is as if nothing has ever existed there, and the matter is so disparate. We try to bridge the gap between us as hospitably as we can, yet you all break so easily. This is such a calm, serene place, yet your kind can't even enter it."

I furrowed my brow.

"There's a difference between feeling hospitable and actually being hospitable."

Eonoth's ocean simmered.

"Your kind exists a few degrees from atomical stillness. It is not my ignorance that causes you to burst from even a subtle variation in temperature, pressure, or all forces that exist."

That perspective unnerved me because I understood it well. I constantly had to pull and restrain myself when around anyone, and if I ever slipped up, I'd kill thousands in an instant. I winced before I pointed at the ocean above.

"You mentioned our weakness being a point in our favor, though."

"It is. This feeling of...Frustration. It is new to me. Novel. That is something I've lacked for all my eternities."

I scratched my head.

"Why haven't other Old Ones asked for languages from their followers? I mean, you went from the hardest to talk to Old One to the easiest."

"The accord. Fear. Stupidity. We are all knowing to our domain, but we know nothing of yours. To learn is outside our natures, as we are solidified already. You all are everchanging, like hazy memories. You...Your kind is like air and we are stone."

I turned a hand as a wave of radiation passed over me.

"How in the hell did you make a deal with Rebecca and Marcella here?"

"They spoke through the entrance, not within it. It took them many processes to speak with me."

If anything, Marcella was resourceful. I raised my hand higher.

"If you're able to tell me so much, what's stopping you from telling me about that thing that's coming?"

"We are all-knowing. All-powerful...But you've spoken a name. Search it out, and it will give you the answers you seek."

Polluterix seemed to be the end of this rabbit hole. Fair enough. Above me, dark figures flowed in the distance. They let out sonic resonances that left my bones rattling. Eonoth's voice pierced the sound.

"I may offer you much, should you seize it."

I let my hands drop to my sides.

"You already know my answer."

"That is the allure. I do not."

"It will always be no."

"Unless I send one of my incarnations to offer a shorter contract than Mesmera? Correct?"

"Eh, take a few years off and see how it goes. It also depends on who they are."

Eonoth chuckled.

"It will be what is needed most when you expect salvation the least."

One of the figures in the ocean created a tsunami in the distance. The wave crashed into the planet's surface, devastating all it touched. I sighed.

"I think that's my cue to leave."

"Or stay. Let it envelop you."

An intrusive thought entered my head. If I pressed Baldowah's dimension and Eonoth's together. They would battle, the same as earlier. Would that even help my situation? I had unleashed Baldowah on Etorhma since that prick's avatar hurt Althea. However, Eonoth had never done the same. Sure, he had crushed me to a pulp on multiple occasions, but that didn't really bother me.

One side benefit involved slowing the Old One's down. If they fought amongst themselves, then they might have less energy for Earth. At the bare minimum, it would stunt their outreach to Earth and give me some breathing room moving forward. It didn't even incite the wrath of Kryyah or whatever encroached on Earth since I wasn't the one closing the portals. Still, it could anger Eonoth, and he had no qualms with destroying me.

That's why I left it up to him.

"Would like to see Baldowah?"

Eonoth laughed.

"Ah, to see one of my own? Hm. Why not? We've never met in this place. Perhaps he shall enjoy what ensues."

I opened my palm, Baldowah's dimension within. Unlike in Etorhma's domain, Baldowah remained silent. Eonoth let out a laugh to shake the cosmos. Eonoth ushered its words.

"Baldowah? Where has your courage gone?"

Baldowah answered, its voice muted.

"We do not fear. You know this."

Eonoth laughed as portions of his universe flowed into Baldowah's domain. The sheer cosmic outpour of energy, wrath, and impact passed through my hands and into the portal. It rumbled the fabric of my being to its core. Eonoth rumbled.

"And yet, you seem to embody fear as we speak. Don't you desire finality? Consequence?"

Baldowah let out a low voice.

"Harbinger...I have chosen to give you my favor after the encounter with Etorhma. This will rescind my glory."

I furrowed my brow.

"Glory? You mean like what happened to Valgus?"

Baldowah ushered out its words.

"Of course. I may embolden you far more than I did to that creature."

I grabbed the edges of Baldowah's portal before tearing them open further. It dug into my skin and leached in odd energies. As their infestation spread, it sizzled the air near me. My vision blurred before Baldowah connected to my mind and pressed.

"This is no fight you wish to wage, little one."

I smiled, my expression calm.

"You're destroying my planet. This is how I fight back."

Eonoth's mind connected to mine. As it did, a vast clash formed. Baldowah's energies spiraled against Eonoth, and they gored one another along an unseen battlefield. A brimming wave of blood ushered in my mind, visions passing over my eyes as Baldowah raged.

"You've chosen to defy me."

Eonoth roared, its voice like infinity.

"He gave you what you yearn for. How is that defiance?"

I trembled as two entities larger than galaxies fought while connected to me. The ground across both planes tremored. Stars in the distance bloomed, supernovas passing over countless stars. Red blood pooled over them, drowning the endless fire in seas of red. Calming waters of blue diluted the blood, purifying its brutality.

The echoes radiated in all directions, each sound looming like an elderly man beset by the reaper. They destroyed reality and remade it in kind. My entire being throttled under the untold pressure, my existence an afterthought while they clashed. It left me trembling in fear as a wave of emotions overcame me.

I grabbed my sides, and the shaking became something palpable. My entire body rippled, and I couldn't suppress an unstoppable wave of raw emotion. It rattled through me as if I were an insect in a child's shaking jar. The core of my being would never rest here. I couldn't even breathe or think any longer. I gasped as a strange, odd piece of my mind awoke, and it glared at the beasts above.

It was the same part of my mind that ate the remnants of Valgus. As the battle waged above, shards of the Old Ones fell. I salivated as they did. Drool gushed from my mouth, and my mind reached out to grab ahold of the precious shards. The beautiful, alluring fragments of eternity. The hunger of my mind tore into the chunks, and it engorged on the enormous spoils from their mental battle.

Baldowah's voice echoed, and it strained out its words.

"This...This is what you wish to spur forth?"

Eonoth answered the call.

"You ask, and I will not answer, as I answer to no one."

Baldowah laughed.

"You answer to him."

Eonoth's words boiled.

"Ah, you personify it as well? How belittling of you and our kin."

Baldowah's voice sputtered.

"I have learned from my encounters."

Eonoth rumbled.

"Not enough. Let me show you."

I could hardly make out their conversation. My armor grinned over me, and I was unable to suppress it. It let out laughs, its voice like the clanging of metal and the cold

of hatred. Every piece of my mind tried tearing away from the battle to overcome my armor. It crushed my resistance, my armor acting as a wall.

All my faculties seized from me. A sense of terror and panic burned over my being as my armor feasted. It came alongside rage. I would not be outdone. I rallied. I put every ounce of grit into wrestling control from my own desire. As I had with Shalahora, I flooded out over my armor, and it trembled.

Like a beaten dog, it let out psionic whimpers at the onslaught, yet it continued eating. It could not stop, its own faculties as taken from itself as mine from me. It was as if some control code switched, and the armor kept gorging all the while. Moments passed, and I began overwhelming the armor. Even as I did, it snapped for the last bits of whatever psionic poison the Old One's effused.

In a silent surge, I pulled myself from the brink. My agency returned, and I pulled my mind away from the Old One's battle. In the distance, blood seeped from stars and replaced the calm, sedating waters above. Within the portal in my hands, the sanguine sea altered into blue waters of serenity.

If the clash between Baldowah and Etorhma was rain, then this was a storm, and it caused the fabric of my dimensional wake to quiver. It left me ailing, and I trembled. I felt something close to snapping, so I pulled myself out of the battlegrounds using the portal to Eonoth's dimension.

Once outside, I found the room encompassed in the ultramarine aura of Eonoth and the deep crimson of Baldowah. I siphoned the energies away using Event Horizon before peering at the battlegrounds.

Baldowah let out laughs, its voice full of fear and the underpinnings of something else. It gurgled on its own waters.

"This...This is war?"

Eonoth spoke in a strained voice.

"It is slaughter."

As their battle mounted, more energy pooled in. It caused the reality here to shimmer, bend, and break. Patches of reality tore, releasing interdimensional energy onto Earth. The air howled, and the stone walls opened eyes that peered into an unseen abyss. In a panic, I leaped into the portal of clashing Old Ones.

I ran through an enveloping wave of mana, dense as magma. After getting through the wave, I grabbed Baldowah's portal. I jerked it back towards Eonoth's opening. Waves of cascading power crushed me as I dragged myself back onto Earth.

I walked onto our planet, my body alight in mana. I layered the portals, one facing the back of the other. Like closing a sewer lid over a manhole, the squealing surges of mana stopped. As I did, I heard their battle. Baldowah's voice had changed. Elation replaced his fear. Joy joined his rage.

"This...This is everything I have ever dreamed. Thank you."

Eonoth roared.

"I will remind you what you are, Baldowah."

Baldowah laughed. His voice was bloody but unbowed.

"And I shall show you who I am, just as the mortals have shown me."

The portal closed, a massive gush of energy palpating onto our reality.

I fell down, heaving for breath. I had rushed, but all around me, the entire cave corrupted into a hellish wasteland. Despite the urgency, a wave of palpable exhaustion overcame me.

I stared at the room. I had no idea how long I remained embroiled in the Old One's battle, but it left my thoughts and mind hollowed out like a carved pumpkin. Around me, the corpse of the eldritch queen lie splattered across the walls. Beside me, the Old One's battle waged in a rippling of universal forces. The portals contained it for now, but I had no guarantee it wouldn't spill over. Either that or an Old One might move one of the openings.

It was a perpetual threat, and even without contacting Helios, I knew this new portal wouldn't close. I pulled the edges of it together, creating a long, thin line. I folded the line a few times like tying a long cord to save space. Afterward, I left a tiny gap that I plugged into my dimensional fabric. It began dissolving and leaking primordial ooze, so I reinforced it with my wake.

It mirrored the effect of Baldowah's dimension, but it carried around 30% more energy within. The warring forces furthered that, making it about three times stronger overall. Before I finished the project, I adjusted my dimensions so that the Old One's battle would gush into one of the pocket worlds.

It prevented their contained battle from leaking out onto our plane so easily. Despite locking them in, they still suffused energy at all times. I soaked in the mana, and while a boon to my reserves, I despised my situation. The Old Ones wanted access to me, and these portals granted just that.

I could try to think of the situation as a steady increase in mana, but that was foolish optimism. They were trying to corrupt me. Based on how my armor acted, they were getting closer to doing so. I gazed at my hand as that thought passed over me. This metal that laced all over my skin, it was how I achieved my goals. At the same time, it robbed me of agency at critical moments.

I grinded my teeth. For the first time in a long while, I wanted my armor off. I grabbed my forearm and wrenched away, peeling the metal off my arm and my skin along with it. Silver blood congealed into new metal as quickly as I could peel it away. I grabbed the helmet over my face and wrenched it off, patches of my face taken alongside the helm.

I howled before throwing the helmet away. It crashed into the side of the rock, creating an earthquake. Cracks rippled all across the underground cavern. I winced. I forgot to hold my strength back, and my feet cracked into the ground as my control over gravitation lessened for a split second.

I hit my head in frustration. A shockwave ushered forth, cracking the stone around me further. The cavern began collapsing before I raised a hand. My gravitation supported the space before I sat down on a large stone. Of course, I reinforced the rock using gravitation. Even now, sitting to rest was merely a facade. It relaxed me about as much as a mirage sated a starving man's thirst.

In my own skin, I felt trapped, and there was no way out of this body now.

Torix shouted from the cavern above.

"Are you quite alright? It sounds as though the battle is rather fierce."

I couldn't help but laugh. Battle. If hitting myself counted, then sure. I shouted.

"It's done. Just cleaning up."

I gave my cheeks a few slaps, and I made the conscious choice to end the pity party there. As I moved up, I struggled against the weight of the Old Ones' portals. They added to a growing stockpile of alternate realities I lugged around. Speaking of, I took a few minutes and got used to hauling them around, needing nearly twenty minds working together all the time.

It ate away at my mana assimilation, stopping me from gaining as many stats. Despite losing my psyches to that passive chore, I didn't actually lessen my channeling speed. After taking a moment, I found another forty minds waiting for me in my mind. Even if my armor robbed me of agency in the fight, it had given me more agency outside of it.

I peered down, and my sense of confinement faded. This wasn't all bad. Besides-

Skill Level Up! Dimensional Weight | Lvl 138->Lvl 139

My notifications kept me going.

Skill Level Up! Dimensional Saturation | Lvl 157-> Lvl 158

At the end of the day, this was all an investment. Speaking of, I didn't want Althea or Torix to waste any more of their time here, so I dragged the dimensions along. I reached the cavern's end. Behind me, the pulped eldritch queen's legs occasionally twitched. Shaking my head, I let out a sigh.

A large part of the Shattered Spire's economy rested on that thing, and I obliterated it without a second thought. Now, their swords were limited, as were their portal expertise and armor. That wasn't all. On my back, I assimilated a huge pipeline of primordial mana, stopping its insidious poison from corrupting this place further.

However, Marcella's guild relied on Eonoth's dimension to sustain the surveillance tree, the eldritch, and probably most of what made the city unique. It left me wondering if this was the right path. Before moving on, I brainstormed a few solutions. The easiest involved putting the portal back and repairing the queen.

That wasn't gonna happen.

Getting rid of her operation would create a power void. Crime would rise. Considering the sheer amount of roaming scavengers outside the city, that might be an enormous burden on the city and its occupants. A bit of thought dispelled that worry. Considering Marcella's abilities, she allowed the scavengers to raid as they did.

She could've wiped them out easily. After all, she dive-bombed me and Althea within seconds of entering her territory. That kind of omni-awareness should've allowed her to secure the entirety of her domain. Despite that, she chose not to. Thoughts raced through my mind as to why she wouldn't.

It might've been because of my guild's influence, which could've constrained her to a smaller area. Hm. No, Marcella had been anything but passive. A dark thought passed over me. She might want the scavengers roaming the outskirts of her city while having arrangements with them. I frowned in disgust.

Not only did she lure dungeoneers to their deaths, but then she collected more of their loot as they tried to leave. Absolute pond scum. Ugh. The more I thought it over, the less I liked her entire arrangement. She strong-armed everyone into bowing to her, and she used an Old One's volatile energy to do so.

Sure, she had a history and past. So did Althea, but you didn't see Althea going around and experimenting on people. She did the opposite, and that was because there was a difference between being capable and being good. It wasn't really something I'd had much time to consider since the system arrived, but it was something that crept up more and more into my thoughts.

I'd become strong enough to consider more than how I'd gain power. I had time to consider when and where to use it. Pacing out of the room, I disintegrated the eldritch corpse. I could've healed it with Kessiah, maybe even made it into something similar to a mana battery or converter. Yeah, I wasn't going to do something like that. Humanity and The Shattered Spires would be better off forging their own path.

Did that mean my armor and golems were the only way forward? No, but they'd play their part. Eldritch held so much instability and danger, but they were still alive. They could feel pain and suffering. That queen had existed for years, crying out with a broken mind as its body was beholden to forces it couldn't stop.

Remembering my armor taking over, I could relate to that distress.

In the end, the eldritch queen's suffering propped up the Shattered Spires. It was a crutch that would only weaken the populace. Their struggle in the dungeons would be where they found strength and fortune, and I would help them stay alive as they searched out unseen lands.

Before I floated up the tunnel leading out of here, I filled in the cavern using rock. That stopped this cave-in from destroying buildings or tunnels above. After all, if this place was anything like the Grand Canyon, then this entire subspace wouldn't fade from removing Eonoth's portal. Even a few updates in my status verified as much as the skeptiles successfully conquered new portions of the Grand Cayon's remains.

It left me wondering how to handle this place as a whole. As ideas popped into my head, I strode out of the cavern with confidence. I met up with Torix and Althea, each of them playing bingo while Torix chatted about his students. Walking up, I leaned against a wall before Althea spun the bingo cage.

She took the first ball that fell out. She read the number before falling to her side with a groan. Torix stood upright, both hands raised and his head crashing into the ceiling.

"I've done it! Hah. Eat the dirt from which my hands have crushed out of stone."

Torix's eyes flared red. He put his hands on his hips.

"Ah. It is a good day to be alive."

Althea groaned before throwing a rock at him.

"You're undead."

The rock clattered off of Torix. He pointed at her.

"Don't discriminate. My unlife is worth just as much as yours. Anywho-"

They turned to me. Half of my runes glowed red while the other half glowed blue. Torix cupped his chin.

"You look rather...Ahem, odd."

I took a long breath, my voice heavy.

"It's a long story."

Chapter 425: A Moment Between

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"You look rather...Ahem, odd."

I took a long breath, my voice heavy.

"It's a long story."

Althea furrowed her brow.

"We have time to hear you out."

I pressed a hand against my temple.

"Essentially, this is from the dimensions I'm carrying."

Althea winced.

"Another one, huh?"

I sneered.

"And it's Eonoth's subspace."

She murmured.

"Gross."

Torix pointed at me.

"Couldn't the Old One hear you say that?"

I shrugged.

"Maybe, but Eonoth isn't nearly as petty as Etorhma. So far, that was the only Old One that seemed to be bothered by words. All the other Old Ones are pretty bored by comparison, so I think they'd relish in a little banter."

Althea's eyes widened.

"They're watching us then? Huh. That does sound fun. It would be like TV."

I tapped my side.

"Probably more like radio. Anyways, I have a lot to tell you guys."

I remembered the conversation, repeating it verbatim. I kept Eonoth's inflections as best I could, trying to be an audio recorder. It freaked Torix out, but Althea leaned close, entranced in my story. After I finished, I spread my hands.

"So what do you guys think?"

Torix and Althea turned to each other. Althea let out a long sigh.

"Why did you have the Old Ones duke it out like that? It was dangerous."

I frowned.

"Because I think it will slow down their progression on Earth."

Torix put away his various bingo supplies.

"Ah, you aim to have them face one another rather than focus on proliferation."

I shrugged.

"That's the idea."

Althea furrowed her brow.

"If openings like this are all over the planet, then wouldn't they be pouring out energy from the battle in the same way as the openings you're carrying?"

I raised a hand.

"I don't think so. Their battle is definitely affecting the stability of their portals, and not every warp is so close to the point of conflict either."

Torix rolled a hand.

"And you assume they are closing because of some instability you've noticed prior?"

I opened my pocket dimension and pulled out two shards and two glowing orbs of seafoam-colored blood. One set glowed brighter than the other. I pointed at them.

"One orb was prior to Etorhma's battle with Baldowah. The other is after. If this logic follows, then that means I'm weakening the Old One's invasion and buying us time. It was worth a bit of danger."

Althea frowned.

"Oh man, the Seer's juices. Yuck."

I scoffed.

"Oh come on. Juices? Why'd you say it like that?"

Torix put a hand on my shoulder.

"Daniel. It's ok. We understand that, from time to time, you enjoy soaking in rather large amounts of your enemies' fluids. It's not anything we judge you for."

I flushed, my silver blood flowing to my cheeks.

"Oh, come on. That's...That's a mischaracterization. Slander, some might say. And it's just wrong."

Torix raised a palm.

"Even though we all know that it makes you feel oh so very right."

Althea and Torix burst into laughter before I narrowed my eyes at them. I murmured.

"Are you drunk, Torix?"

Torix's eyes flared.

"I have been finding poisons of various effects. I might've found a rather potent vitamin that isn't as easily recognized by our metal bodies, enabling a bit of buildup to impair functioning."

I furrowed my brow.

"Either way, two can play at this game."

Torix pointed at me.

"The one where you lose. Mwaha."

I pointed at Torix.

"You've been wringing different eldritch dry to find different kinds of alcohol, correct?"

Torix gazed at his hand.

"And what is ever so very much wrong with that?"

I smiled.

"We know you like drinking different kinds of eldritch fluid as well. Alas, there's no shame in milking an eldritch."

Torix flustered.

"I would like to inform you that the poisons I've derived aren't from mammary glands, so it isn't considered milking them. I've actually taken my selection of various drinks by utilizing other parts of the specimens."

I raised my brow.

"Utilizing huh? Sounds like milking to me."

Althea laughed before I pointed at her.

"And I've seen you take certain eldritch and use their oils for moisturizing balms or creams."

Althea crossed her arms.

"It keeps me from getting chapped lips or dry skin. Especially the flower eldritch since they smell nice."

I clasped my hand into a fist.

"Yes. You like to rub their fluids all over yourself."

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She flushed red before standing up. Her head hit the ceiling, and she pointed at me.

"You say that, but you liked my formulas just as much as I did."

I licked my lips.

"They were delectable."

We laughed for a while before they found even more ways I misused eldritch juice. We kept bantering back and forth for a time, and we laughed all the while. No one stopped the flow of the conversation, letting it rise and fall like the crescent waves of a sandy beach. The talk lasted for hours, each of us needing a break from our busy lives.

In fact, it felt like Torix and Althea spurred the conversation, each of them taking steps outside their normal comfort zone to keep it going. Their sense of urgency befuddled me, but after a bit of thought, I grinned. They wanted to keep me grounded after these insane events, so they made a concerted effort to do so.

It worked. I couldn't help but be reminded of how good life could be and was. As the conversation settled down, partially from Torix sobering up, Althea murmured.

"I wanted you to know I was wrong."

I raised my brow.

"About what?"

She sighed.

"When I said you had no reason to be training so hard. Personally, I still think I'm right that the weird method you cooked up is too much, but we really do need to get more powerful, and fast."

An awkward quiet settled over us. To shatter it, I snapped my fingers on both hands continuously, pretending they were a clapping crowd.

"Oh, oh my, hold the applause. Please, that's enough. Oh, I don't deserve all this. Well, maybe a little."

Althea rolled her eyes before taking a breath.

"Actually, that reminds me. Can you make me a skeleton frame whenever you make Torix his next body?"

I gave her a thumbs up.

"Sure thing. Do you mind if I ask why?"

Althea frowned.

"You're not the only one with plans to get stronger. I have a few ideas, and they're going to require some experimentation."

I considered pursuing the matter further. Before I could, Torix shook his head.

"Onto the rather dour topic from earlier. This conflict we've found ourselves in...It's horrific, isn't it? To think that something the Old One's can't describe has come to destroy Earth in particular. It's not something I believe we're capable of resisting. That's why I'm going to share a thought process with you both, one that I know Daniel will find upsetting."

Torix raised his hands.

"I say we abandon ship. This planet has become a toxic asset."

Althea and I glared at him. Torix threw his hand at us.

"Oh come now. This has to be the least hospitable garden world I've ever seen. I mean, can you even imagine this overwhelming response anywhere else? First Yawm, then proximity to Giess and Elysium, and now unstable dimensional spaces? Hordes of avatars alongside an encroaching, unnameable horror?"

Torix's eyes flared bright.

"From what I've gathered, there will never be an end to the chaos here. What would it take for us to pack up and leave this drab hell hole, so to speak?"

I frowned.

"For me, I would leave after Earth has been destroyed down to the atom."

Althea pinched the bridge of her nose.

"You know, Torix, I can see why you left your home world."

Torix shrugged.

"My home world suited my interests for a time. Once those opportunities dried up, I no longer worried myself with physical attachments. My true home is and has always been the sanctity of my mind, not the couch I recline on or the air I breathe. Those are merely physical needs we use to signify attachment. They are bygone, residual instincts leftover from our tribal beginnings."

Althea sat cross-legged. She crossed her arms.

"But this place has a history, like you or I. Even if you travel somewhere else, Mt. Verner will always hold a place in your heart. I think that's worth protecting. Besides that, if what Eonoth and Baldowah said was true, then this dimensional unraveling is going to keep happening everywhere we go."

Torix scoffed.

"I will say your point about history is compelling though not altogether logical. Despite that argument's merits, I would still urge us to run from place to place. Daniel could carry a continent, should he so wish. We can fit all we care for there, including Mt. Verner."

I tilted my head.

"I'd be abandoning my own species."

Torix's eyes flared.

"Have they not abandoned you? The only times humanity has seen fit to help us is either when death is the only other alternative or they have something to gain. I've yet to see any genuine goodwill from them."

Althea frowned.

"You haven't been looking hard enough. I've worked with lots of teachers, doctors, and wanderers. You wouldn't believe the lengths these people will go to so that they can help other people."

Torix tilted his head.

"Which have you seen more of since we've arrived: goodness or evil? My experience has indicated the latter more so than the former."

Althea nodded.

"Ok, true, but you said you hadn't seen any goodwill. I'd argue that humans are like most other species, though they tend to get antsy when they get in big groups."

Torix nodded.

"It must be from their evolutionary roots as a tribal people."

I turned a palm to Torix.

"I'd argue on different grounds. Let's say we run and run and run. Eventually, there will be no places to run to. At that point, we still have to face this problem, but we'd have far less space to save."

Torix sighed.

"Then let's assume we'll stay here even after the sun has consumed this dirtball in five billion years. What's our plan so that we can hobble Earth along until we reach that point?"

I waved my hand.

"Simple. We stop the dimensional collapse and whatever's coming."

Torix tapped his chin.

"Easily said and hardly done. It would seem that dimensional magic is something we lack and must reinforce ourselves with. Plazia's quite adept considering his aim of stopping the production of eldritch. Perhaps he could be a source of information on the topic?"

I nodded.

"We'll do that. I'll see if I can't have Florence contact some dimensional specialists from the rulers I saved on L-7. Someone should have a specialty or two in it. We can also talk to Schema since that guy looks like he could use some serious help."

Althea stared at the bingo game they had spread out. Torix got caught up talking and never finished getting up all the pieces. Althea smiled.

"This reminds me of before we killed Yawm. You know, when I beat you at bingo so long ago."

I smiled, having never told her I let her win.

"Yeah. Good times."

She let out a breath.

"You know, it's kind of crazy how wrong we were playing the game at the time."

I scoffed.

"I'd never played bingo. I didn't realize they had different balls, weird setups, and jury-rigged boards. It looked like the bingo game was pulled together from random pieces of other games they had lying around."

Althea smiled.

"Gah, that was so much fun...Anytime I think of it, I always find it so weird how someone or something from so long ago is still being brought up. You guys don't know, but I can't even remember the names of my friends from the research lab anymore, but Yawm...That's a name I'll never forget. He's like a nasty scar."

A chill ran up my spine.

"Yeah. He was about as much fun as a splinter sandwich."

Althea rubbed a hand where she and Torix's bingo game had been.

"He was, but put poisonous bark and nasty leaves in that sandwich, too. But...I don't know anymore. After hearing about these other avatars for the Old Ones, Yawm might not have been as bad as I thought."

I never even considered the idea. Before I could mull it over, Torix raised a hand.

"Have you ever heard of a psychological condition known as Stockholm syndrome?"

Althea waved him off.

"Pshh, yeah. I've read a few books here and there. Yawm treated us like raw meat ready for acid, but I don't know if that was his choice anymore. He...He was taken by something that controlled him, like Valgus. A long time ago, he might've been a good man. A decent one."

I furrowed my brow.

"That would make for an easy excuse. In his case, he made a choice to follow Etorhma, and the reality is, some choices carry heavy consequences. They will be borne by someone. For example, if I chose to stab a man, I may regret doing it right after. My regret doesn't make them bleed any less. I think that's the same with Yawm."

My eyes hardened.

"He chose to follow mad gods, and he was driven insane by them. Everyone around him suffered for it."

She frowned at me.

"At least Yawm was still trying to do something good even after being turned into a shadow of his former self. Valgus was destruction incarnate from what you described, and Shalahora has a dark past. Not because he's a shadow either. Oh, and Marcella-

Althea sneered.

"She's a con artist who's in love with power. Imagine if she kept spreading her influence. She'd milk this continent and world dry."

The more I dwelled on the situation, the more I agreed. I put my hands on my hips.

"Yeah. We'll have to see what to do with her after fully understanding how she ran this place."

Torix pointed at Althea with several fingertips pressed together.

"Ah, but before we move on. You have me curious as to why you brought up Yawm in the first place. Was it from your musings on the nature of oblivion or something else?"

Althea rubbed her arm.

"Hah, not really. I wanted to mention that Etorhma wasn't nervous until Yawm experimented on me."

I leaned towards her.

"That makes a lot of sense. Etorhma seems like someone who was rocking the boat and scared of the consequences. If you're the source of that, then you might be able to give us some info on them. Hell, we might be able to trigger whatever it was that Etorhma was trying to stop."

Althea frowned.

"Why would we do that?"

I shrugged.

"Spite. A desire to watch the world burn. Maybe out of boredom?"

She hit my shoulder playfully while I smiled. She peered off.

"Before my alterations, Yawm's experiments were more calculated and safe. After that, he sped everything up. There was this urgency he had all of a sudden. He ended up going through most of us pretty quick once he finished whatever he was doing with me."

I winced.

"Like putting meat through a grinder, but remember, a good guy when you look deep down."

She smirked.

"Ok, jerk."

I smiled.

"Alright, sorry. Yawm just gets under my skin."

Althea furrowed her brow.

"He literally cut under mine, so I got you beat there."

Torix cupped a chin.

"Previous dealings aside, do you have any idea what Etorhma was afraid didn't want you to do?"

Althea let out a sigh.

"Hm. Er, you both know I kind of...Like, ignore matter. I can pierce anything, and I'm able to phase out of this reality. Etorhma's Tears are why I'm able to do that. It's where those skills originate."

I turned a palm to her.

"You think there's a link there that exposes why Etorhma was nervous?" She wrung her hands.

"Hah. You know, like, maybe? I think that could let us know more about this accord thing, too. They might've wanted to stay within the laws of our universe or something. It could also be that I am partly an Old One, and they don't like it when we borrow their power so directly."

Torix's eyes flared bright.

"The more we understand Etorhma's conditions of fear, the more we can have the Old Ones at our beckoning and call as well. At the minimum, it gives us leverage against Etorhma."

Althea smiled.

"If you put it like that, uh, sure."

I rubbed my temples as I tried to flex my weakest muscle - my brain.

"Ah man, I've been trying to pin them against each other, and this could be a great way to slow them down even more. Ah man, great ideas, Althea."

Her smile beamed out.

"You too. And ugh, I don't mind the two-rune look. It's nice."

I raised my brow.

"Sexy, you mean?"

Her eyes narrowed.

"Maybe."

Torix waved an arm.

"Enough of your flirtatious musing. Ugh, to be prisoners of your flesh. I pity you both. I'm glad I abandoned that so very long time ago."

Althea rolled her eyes.

"What? How is Daniel a prisoner and you're not? You're made of Daniel."

Torix's eyes flared green.

"Semantics. Now, let's go and finish uncovering the secrets of the Shattered Spires, shall we?"

I smiled.

"Let's."

Chapter 426: Unweaving a Puzzle

Althea rolled her eyes.

"What? How is Daniel a prisoner, and you're not? You're made of Daniel."

Torix's eyes flared green.

"Semantics. Now, let's go and finish uncovering the secrets of the Shattered Spires, shall we?"

I smiled.

"Let's."

We walked out of the cavern, finding the mist still pooling in the depths of Central Park. As was the case in the Grand Canyon, the dungeon's amassed energies might take weeks or months to fully disperse. As it did, reality would alter itself around the incoming land and matter. For a moment, I wondered if the new mass on the planet would affect the gravitation, but once more, that wasn't something I could stop.

We flew out of the chasm, the insects tucked into crevices like roaches avoiding light. At the surface, we hovered back over to the Infinity Plaza. We paced past the devastated entrance before each of us walked into one of the lower dungeon doorways. Within the rift, a soft field of alien flowers coated an idyllic valley.

Sunbeams stretched out of the fluffy clouds above, the star of this shattered dimension locked in place by some strange force. It hadn't changed even long before we walked in, and quite a few theories hovered around about the place. Some believed this was a dungeon waiting to trap people inside it. Others talked about how it devoured souls by luring people to stay here.

I thought it had a simpler origin. Someone of incredible means loved a certain spot at a certain time of year, and they enacted sorcery to ensure this place would forever be what they wished. Regardless of the origins, we imprisoned the two ousted rulers of the Shattered Spires here. Under a beautiful blue sky, Rebecca and Marcella floated in gravity wells. Maintaining the magic, a golem of mine guarded them both, its form imposing. Completing our security measures, one of Torix's ghouls whispered in their ears. It maintained the sleep spell that Torix cast earlier. I gestured at the ghoul.

"You've got your minions casting advanced magic?"

Torix stood tall.

"But of course. If I couldn't teach a ghoul such a simple spell, then what kind of professor would I be?"

He walked up and snapped his fingers. The ghoul flew off, heading outside to manage other affairs while my golem peered down at its quarry with intent. I raised a hand.

"We've got it from here. Can you stop anyone from entering?"

It nodded before pulling itself away with gravitation. I took over its midair suspension of our prisoners. Torix tilted his head at my golem.

"I'm not the only one with minions that implement rather adept sorcery."

Once gone, we marveled at the scenery until the two avatars of Eonoth awoke. As the flowers around us bent from a wave of crisp air, Marcella's eyes widened. Her aura bloomed around her, bursting out in a rush at Torix. The mage interlocked his hands behind himself, generating a near-mindless summoned skeleton.

The aura's psionic attack obliterated the minion, but unlike a physical attack, a mental one carried no momentum. The leftover psionics fizzled like a bloodthirsty sword striking the air. Torix attacked her vulnerable mind before Marcella reached out an arm at him. The dimensional space around Torix trembled, and a threatening bloom of energy mounted.

Before she finished her sorcery, I snuffed it out with my dimensional wake. Marcella growled before setting her eyes on Torix. The necromancer nodded.

"You've obviously never needed to refine your mental approach, madam. Given your natural abilities, I can understand why."

Over the next few minutes, Torix dismantled her psionic defenses while I defended us from her magic. Torix left me stunned at his efficiency. He'd leveled his game up. I put my hands on my hips.

"Where were you hiding those psionics?"

Torix waved at me as if sweeping up dust.

"Oh, that? It's hardly worth mentioning. We all have skills we aim to develop in time. In regards to you, these assaulting and pinning tactics mean nothing. You lob your minds at me with utter abandon, and I may cull them all I like. You'll simply regenerate your mind as if I'm fighting an endless pit."

I turned a hand to him.

"Regardless of it countering me or not, it's incredible."

Torix gestured to Marcella.

"I bring up the point as the matter of counters is essential. Marcella is innately different than you. Her mind begins to lack proper functioning as I cleaved pieces of it away. That's how it's supposed to go - a series of initial clashes where the first mistake results in a loss. Mind magic is similar to fencing in that regard. Your techniques forced me to abandon my previous tactics when against you.

Torix glowered at the two avatars.

"However, my methods are more than adequate when dealing with entities well within standard expectations."

Marcella snarled, spitting at me. Before it hit us, I raised a finger, and her saliva evaporated. I raised my brow.

"Charming."

Althea raised her hands.

"Hey, I'm not going to let either of these guys do anything to either of you."

Torix and I telepathized to Althea in tandem.

"What the hell?"

"To accuse your teacher of such misconduct. Why I never-"

Althea thought over.

"It's to make them feel more at ease. They'll listen to us more."

Torix and I gave each other a look.

"Makes sense."

"A proper plan with deft execution."

Marcella and Rebecca glared at Althea. Althea's idea, while a good one, reached neither of them. I rubbed my temples before Torix turned his gaze to Rebecca.

"Is she the other avatar of this supposed duo?"

His eyes flared red.

"And her psionics are the most impressive between them as well. Shall I?"

I tapped his chest with a fist.

"Let me. She has hundreds of these things in her head. They can be dangerous in a swarm."

Torix shook his head.

"Must every psionic duel be relegated to a simple swarming of foes? It's growing old even for someone as ancient as me."

I frowned.

"I think as we move up the galactic ladder, we'll see more and more of this kind of thing. Besides, you, of all people, understand how individuals aren't as strong as entire groups."

Torix sent a message in his status before answering me.

"I suppose I may need to incorporate more group psionics in my tactics then. Until then, I suppose we must leave the most dangerous individuals to you."

I shook my head.

"We leave those to Shalahora. We also need your precision here."

Torix steepled his fingers.

"Hm. I shall wait until I am needed then."

Getting to it, I created a link to Rebecca's mind. I expected the same rush from its occupants as before. Instead, a few disparate minds flowed in a spiral as if on standby. I

went deeper while bracing for a multipronged ambush from the psyches. None came once more. At the absolute depths of Rebecca's mind, I gazed at a void.

I pulled my mind out.

"There's nothing there. She's gone."

Marcella's eyes widened.

"W-what?"

Torix leaned closer.

"Give us a moment to ascertain the cause. We aren't sure of anything yet."

After a few minutes, the lich strode back and forth.

"It would seem as though something has vanquished her mind to oblivion. There are no traces left. Even her long-term memories have turned to ash."

Marcella stood up.

"No. You're both lying. She's still here. Look at her."

Althea frowned.

"Maybe we can get her back? Torix, you know a lot of weird magic. Is there a way to revive her?"

Marcella gazed in defiance but with terror hiding under the surface. Torix shook his head.

"No. This entire set of actions and movements isn't being done by Rebecca. There exists a newborn golemnite that's had a template mind imprinted on it. It's puppeteering her body."

I massaged my temples.

"Ok...The golemmites. They're ethereal beings, strong in mind magic, and effective scouts for larger empires. I met one, er, when I was interviewing some people on Giess and at Obolis's glassing party. I remember some religious zealotry and an overly happy, obnoxious tone of voice. So, uh, what in the world is one of them doing here?"

Torix clasped his hands together.

"It's many of them, not only one. Likely, it's a front used to distract us while the others escaped in the chaos of battle. It would seem only a few of the other golemnites linger within as they were unable to escape once Daniel bore down on them."

My eyes narrowed as I sifted through my memories. Torix weighed his hands back and forth.

"It would seem that someone or something implanted many of them within Rebecca's mind along with imprints of the psyches that Marcella wanted to make."

Althea took a step back.

"That explains why everyone was so confused after the fight. Rebecca had put these things in their heads, and they were doing all of her guild's work."

I crossed my arms.

"And they composed large parts of their minds by the looks of it. That's why they were so strong when we fought but are so weak now."

Torix stood upright.

"It's also the source of their obedience. They carried little agency since such large portions of their souls were dedicated to these beings. Having it centralized into a singular source allows for it to be easily hidden as well."

Torix gestured to Rebecca.

"In many regards, these entities mirrored their leader's exchange with the Old Ones. They took their independence for power."

I sighed.

"That's the problem. Power means nothing if it isn't yours."

Marcella hissed.

"Easy to say when you have steel all over your body."

I rolled my eyes at her.

"Talking to you is exhausting."

Marcella tilted her head, her left eye twitching.

"You're all very chatty with your leader, aren't you? Do you all enjoy wasting his time?"

Something was off with her. Torix loomed over Marcella. The lich's voice dripped with disdain.

"It's part of being treated as equals. You'd do well to learn a thing or two from Daniel's approach, considering the vast difference in the results of your leadership."

I waved a hand.

"Oh, she won't need to learn anything more about leadership. That's a thing of the past."

Marcella growled out.

"See? You did exactly what I expected. I read you like a book."

Ensure your favorite authors get the support they deserve. Read this novel on Royal Road.

I furrowed my brow at her.

"Then you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. If you consider the situation for even a moment, you'll realize I wasn't given any other choice. You're entire persona and approach has been antagonizing me from the start."

I rolled my eyes.

"And nuclear bombs? You're insane. You deserve less than nothing. I can't trust you with a butterknife, let alone a city with living people."

Marcella took a breath, peering at Rebecca. Pain crossed her face before Marcella snapped at me.

"They were mine. I can do what I want with what's mine. All you've done is take from me. Take. Take. Take. That's all you are. A thief. I was right all along."

She was singular in her thoughts. It reminded me of Valgus. I let out a long breath.

"It sounds like you'd rather prove yourself right with your failure than be proved wrong with your success."

She took deep breaths before gazing at the ground.

"You don't know me."

Althea walked up.

"But we wanted to. We still do. You're the one that's closing that off. Not us. We want to listen and talk, but all you're doing is trying to upset us with words. Even in your position, and despite the fact your approach isn't working well, you're still doing it. Can you please change your approach and try to help us listen and talk to you?"

Marcella's words seethed.

"So that you can do what? Lie to me?"

Torix, Althea, and I met each other's gazes before letting out a laugh. Marcella roared out.

"Stop mocking me."

I gestured to Rebecca while staring at Marcella.

"Your best friend is dead, and you've hardly flinched. I'm wondering if language wasn't the only thing Eonoth took from you."

Marcella drained of color.

"You found its portal?"

I sighed.

"Obviously. I have it with me."

Marcella's brow was calcified in a perpetual scowl.

"You're going to destroy the Shattered Spires. That sustains this place, and without it, Schema will-"

I tilted my head at her.

"Do nothing. I've found other spaces like this. They can maintain themselves through other means besides pain and suffering. You've been believing false information that's been spoonfed to you. Do you mind telling me who told you all of this?"

She blinked.

"You...You're still lying to me. All of you. About everything."

I shrugged.

"I also cleared out the eldritch queen. In general, the entire system you made collapsed overnight. It's gone down to the roots. Accept that and move on."

Marcella gazed down.

"You took everything from me, and for what? Because I wouldn't obey you?"

Althea shook a hand at her.

"You stole from people while lying to them about what they were walking into. You enforced your will and killed anyone that didn't follow your orders. You invaded people's minds and even spied on everyone while letting those robbers kill at your doorstep."

Althea's voice deepened.

"You think we don't know you've been lining your pockets with those raider's spoils? This has all been to get resources, and all you really did with those spoils was make a lot of nameless tombstones out of families. These people were looking for a better future, and you made their children into orphans that we'll need to take care of."

Althea pointed at Marcella.

"Don't talk to Daniel about leaving a mess behind when that's all you've ever done."

Marcella smiled at Althea.

"Someone has to be the hero, right? I guess I'm the villain then."

Torix sighed.

"Life is not defined by a simplistic dual paradigm centered around moral identities."

Torix looked at me.

"You mentioned she was competent, didn't you? I've seen nothing of the sort."

I scratched my head.

"Huh...Yeah, she's not as sharp as I had hoped. It honestly feels like her abilities are highly circumstantial."

Marcella took a few breaths. She gazed at the ground.

"I'm partially sedated by that lich after having my life ripped out. Excuse me for my lack of elegance."

I raised my brow.

"We'll see how much life you have left after this conversation. Can you tell us about the Old Ones? Your contract? About Rebbecca?"

She snapped up, her eyes glowing blue.

"No."

Marcella's aura condensed over her. Marcella fought out of her gravity well before stomping to Althea.

"We'll see whether or not-"

My hand rested on Marcella's shoulder, my touch gentle. I smiled.

"It's better you don't."

Marcella gazed at her missing arm. Torix left runes that stopped it from regenerating, and it already scarred into a useless nub. I guided her with my hand back to the gravity well.

"I still have that if you want it back. However, you're going to have to explain your contract with Eonoth in detail, explain the sword, your aura, and anything you know about the Old Ones."

Marcella kept her eyes on me, but she sat down.

"Or else what?"

Torix's eyes flared red.

"Enough of this foolishness. You will disseminate that information, one way or the other. I've already demonstrated my expertise in regards to mind magic. I'll peel your thoughts back until you drool like a lifeless vegetable. Either that, or you can tell us what you know and allow me to verify with a quick psionic scan."

Torix let out a scathing laugh.

"Or else what? The arrogance. You've spent a long time atop a small hill, and you refuse to see the mountains around you."

Somehow, I doubted Marcella's condition more and more as we spoke. Marcella gave him a tight smile.

"If you're mountains, then there's a planet coming soon. It's going to crash here, and we'll see how tall you all are."

I nodded.

"Let it come. We'll crack it like everything else."

She shook her head at me in disgust.

"Not everything is something you can beat through high stats, Harbinger."

Tired of the pointless conversation, I made a psionic link with her. Torix's mind wrangled hers into a series of knots, Marcella incapable of even moving. I turned a hand to her.

"Do you think the mental entanglement is why she's talking like this?"

Torix crossed his arms.

"I doubt that's the case as I've done this with success in interrogations before, but this isn't accomplishing anything. Let us try a different approach."

Torix let her go, her aura returning in full force. Marcella's eyes opened wider, and she turned to Rebecca. Marcella bit her lip until blood came out. She turned to us.

"I just wanted to make sure no one hurt us again. All of this...I never wanted any of this."

I sat down and crossed my legs.

"None of us do, but at times, we destroy as we try to create. You can begin to redeem yourself, but it will take time, effort, and diligence. You need to accept that this has happened and that we're not your enemies anymore."

Marcella took a moment, peering up. A series of expressions smattered her face. Horror, reverence, shock, defiance, loss, and finally, acceptance. She gulped before taking a few breaths. Her eyes glowed blue. A second later, they faded. She murmured.

"My patron has spoken to me. Eonoth has offered my servitude in exchange for a slightly shorter contract than the other Old One. Ergh, Mesm-"

I pressed my fingertips together.

"Woah, now, don't say that name. No need to. Also, I'm not accepting that deal."

Marcella frowned.

"Why not?"

I smiled.

"It was brought to my attention that a few of my guildmates aren't exactly overachieving, so the last thing I need right now is another problem child that I have to look after."

Marcella leaned back.

"I'm...I'm a problem child?"

I shook my head.

"More like a...Sinking ship. That's on fire."

Torix moved his arms.

"And sharks circle the icy waters. Eldritch swarm the skies at this accursed vessel. There are many dumpsters upon its deck, and they too rage in an evergrowing inferno."

Althea laughed. Marcella shook her head.

"Your guild is nothing like I expected. I heard you were an unstoppable juggernaut, not a group of simpletons."

I smiled.

"You should remember Occam's razor. You've seen as much. And besides, just because we have skill doesn't mean we have the personality of cardboard."

Althea nudged me.

"Some people disagree."

My smile lingered.

"Eh, and they're pricks."

Torix peered off.

"Like you?"

I nodded.

"Just like me. Now-" I spread my hands. "We'll argue merits later and the lack of them later. Marcella. This is my final offer before we're pushed to further measures."

Marcella stared down. She turned to Rebecca, and Marcella closed her eyes. Marcella murmured her words like a last wish.

"Just...Please. Don't hurt my family."

I pulled out Valgus's shackles.

"From the looks of it, someone else has done that already."

I took one of the manacles and clamped it over her remaining arm. In an instant, her aura vaporized to nothing, and her hair turned from a deep blue into a blazing red. Marcella strengthened, but unlike Valgus from L-7, Marcella wasn't thousands of years old with time to accumulate energy and abilities.

As her aura vanquished, Marcella's eyes widened.

"My connection to Eonoth. It's...It's gone."

I shrugged.

"That's the idea. I'm beating fire with fire."

She cracked the ground under her feet as my gravity well lost its effect on her. She looked around, panic spreading over her face.

"It's gone. It's all gone."

She ran off, but I put my hand around her waist and pulled her back. She swung her hand at me, but I caught her fist. Her power didn't surprise me, considering what the manacles did. I frowned.

"Look, you're no Valgus Uuriyah."

She peered at me in confusion before scrambling to escape.

"No. Get away. Don't touch me."

She floundered about. I sighed.

"Look, stop moving, and I'll let you go."

Marcella kept flailing about. Althea walked up.

"Hey, come down, we're not-"

One of Marcella's kicks shot at Althea's head. Althea caught Marcella's shin in both her hands. Althea held the foot for a second before Althea's upper arm bones exploded. I winced as Althea let out a growl. The choker on her neck glowed, and she regenerated over the next few seconds. Marcella screamed.

"I'm not having someone put another one of your daddy's collars on me-"

Althea swiped her hand and sliced off the leg that kicked her. Marcella collapsed in my arm, and she let out a howl. Marcella grabbed at her bleeding nub where her leg had been. Althea looked at her torn jumpsuit.

"You make it so hard to be nice."

Althea adjusted her choker.

"And oh yeah, can you tell me you're jealous without saying it any louder? Sheesh."

Althea kicked Marcella's jaw, the precision and force just enough to knock her unconscious. Torix grabbed the side of his head.

"I've seen enough. Let me know whenever you've both exhausted your empathy and simply require the information."

His eyes flared black, and his words were icy.

"I'll arrange that it's gathered promptly."

A cold chill ran up my spine. Torix peered down at Marcella.

"You...They are a disappointment. What an unworthy enemy."

I hadn't told either of them Marcella's story, and seeing her shaking, pitiful figure, a burst of guilt and mercy arose within me. I raised a hand to our lich.

"We've got it from here. Go do what you do best."

Torix hovered off on a cloud of dominion mana. After a while, Althea and I sat down beside Marcella. After a while of waiting, Marcella awakened. She turned to Rebecca, who hadn't moved or spoken a word after we checked her mind and found it vacated. Marcella glanced at her sister and whispered.

"Is...Is Rebecca really gone?"

I nodded. Marcella's eyes reddened before she squeezed her hands against the grass. She shoved her face in the dirt as tears fell from her eyes. She lost all composure, and her body trembled as waves of grief coursed over her. The tall, defiant, and willful leader crumpled into a person who lost everything.

After a while, she stared forward in a daze. She looked up at us before speaking in the voice of a corpse.

"You know...This feels like the first time I've been able to think clearly in a long time."

Althea reached out a hand.

"It's that aura. It doesn't let you think at all."

Marcella grimaced.

"Yeah. Maybe."

I raised my brow.

"I've seen it on several people at this point. It imbibes the person with abilities, and they're often intuitive, powerful, and difficult to counter. It doesn't actually save you any time, though."

Marcella leaned back.

"It doesn't give time. It's opportunity."

I weighed my hands back and forth.

"See, that's shortsighted. You're assuming there's a limit to how much you could grow. From what I've seen, just about anyone is a formidable, given time. That's why time is the primary currency we use now. However, many people are tempted by shortcuts. That aura is an example. Sure, it allowed you to massively increase the size of your empire and personal potency."

I tapped the side of my head.

"But in order to maintain the sanctity of your mind, you've had to fight something off constantly. That eternal war takes up just as much time as the research, study, and training required to get to an avatar's end state. For example, I know another avatar that makes you look like a kitten, but he still doesn't have the time or energy to train."

Althea frowned.

"You mean Shalahora? Doesn't he help you with your psionics all the time?"

I nodded.

"Yeah, but it doesn't take much effort for him. Recently, that's kind of changed, but up until now, I was like a baby windmilling my arms while he was a hardened warrior with his hand on my head. He's struggling with it more now."

Marcella gawked.

"You know someone that strong?"

I turned my hand.

"Yeah. He could've instantly killed everyone in the Shattered Spires if he wanted to. He's not big on the whole mass murder thing, though."

I peered off.

"That's more of my thing at this point."

Marcella frowned.

"Is that why Elysium is so determined to get their hands on you?"

My gaze could cut stone.

"What do you know about Elysium?"

Marcella scoffed.

"I watched your streams while you were on Giess. The Gray Giant. I couldn't believe you were human, but Schema's approval of you verified all that. I fought long and hard to make sure I was prepared when we met. It fell to nothing in the end."

I shook my head.

"You destroyed over fifty of my elemental furnaces."

Marcella smirked.

"That's all I amounted to. A material setback."

Althea shook her head.

"For now, but it doesn't have to stay that way."

Marcella sighed.

"It will. I'm not able to fight without the aura."

I leaned towards her.

"It's the opposite. You're finally free."

Marcella shook a hand at me.

"Why don't you get it? I'm not free. I'm your prisoner. At least I chose to be under Eonoth. Now, I don't even get to choose who lords over me."

I put my hand on the ground.

"You've been a prisoner in your own mind. I know for a fact that everything you've done to help shape the spires happened while you were lucid. The situation only began to spiral out of control once you made a deal with Eonoth. That's whenever you began enacting greater and greater control over everything."

Marcella tilted her head.

"Where's your proof of that?"

I leaned my elbows against my crossed legs.

"I've been a leader. I know what decisions made from limitations are like. I've been analyzing the surface memories of citizens, and I've managed to create a bit of a timeline for when certain key events occurred in the Shattered Spires. A month after Central Park began turning into a dimensional chasm, you're policies began changing."

I turned a hand to her.

"At that point, your paranoia began to spike. Policies changed. Your approach ceased its improvement as if someone else began making decisions. That's because someone had. Your aura."

Marcella frowned.

"How is that even possible?"

Althea frowned.

"It's called mana sickness. It's weird, but mana can actually make a consciousness in your head. When it gets too strong, it takes over."

Marcella's eyes went distant.

"Even if that's true, you're giving me a lot of credit for what I did before I made my deal with Eonoth."

Marcella turned to Rebecca. Marcella closed her eyes.

"Maybe more than I deserve."

I raised a hand.

"Then what was your end game? Rule the world?"

Marcella shook her head.

"At this point, what can I even say in my defense? It all sounds...Ridiculous."

Althea crossed her arms.

"That's because it was."

Marcella pointed at me.

"You might be right about me, but isn't that what he's trying to do, too?"

Althea put a hand on my shoulder.

"Daniel doesn't rule. He leads."

A well of emotion rose in my chest.

"Thanks."

She smiled at me.

"It's the truth."

I didn't deserve Althea. Marcella sneered.

"Look. I'm not jealous of you two. More like...Disgusted."

Althea shrugged.

"Envy can take different forms in different people."

I laughed before I turned a hand to Marcella.

"Tell me this. What was the plan when you obtained the aura?"

Marcella looked up.

"Hm. Rebecca and I were planning to expand into Boston and a few other big cities nearby. We wanted people to get the blades and shields we had since they made killing the eldritch so much easier. It wasn't going to be easy, but nothing worth having is."

I nodded.

"But then you had to have the spires more secured, right? The Seer's protection wasn't enough. You started making the surveillance tree and having people's minds inspected. After all, Elysium could come in and infect you with the Hybrids at any point. Hell, I might infiltrate your operation as well."

I leaned back against my arms.

"There's some validity there, but the aura began getting its claws into you without you noticing. From what I gathered, you've probably been struggling to make anything happen without swinging your powers around recently. You know, brute forcing everything. That's because your ability to socialize has been eroding all this time."

Althea peered at me.

"Ok, for real, this is kind of freaky how much you know about Marcella. How?"

I shrugged.

"It's that skill I made, Infinity. While I was making it, I did let situations pile up, but at least I spent my time getting a bigger broom to sweep it all up with."

Althea pursed her lips.

"Huh. Uhm, great job then."

Marcella blinked.

"You're like a walking advertisement for him."

Althea gestured to me.

"Have you seen him? He looks evil to just about anybody. Someone has to try and make him look as decent as I think he is."

I leaned back.

"Ouch."

Althea sighed.

"I'm sorry, but it's true."

I put a hand on my chest.

"That's why it hurts."

Marcella peered at us.

"So you're both chopping up my actions to this aura, then?"

Althea and I peered at each other. We looked back to Marcella.

"Eh, yeah."

"Uhm, I think so."

Marcella sighed.

"It's like someone takes away what I've done no matter what I do."

I shook my head.

"You did that when you made a deal with the devil. We're giving you a chance to prove that you aren't the demon we've seen so far."

Marcella winced.

"I'm not getting back my position, am I?"

Althea rolled her eyes.

"Of course not. You're lucky you're alive."

Marcella leaned forward.

"You kill your rivals?"

I smiled.

"Rival? No. People that use nuclear bombs on civilian populations for leverage? An execution is on the menu."

Marcella let her hands slap her sides.

"Then what's the point in all this? Why are you still talking with me?"

I pointed at Rebecca.

"We want to know what happened to her and you. For instance, why do you have an aura and she doesn't?"

Marcella scoffed.

"Because she isn't an avatar."

I raised my hands.

"Then what the hell happened to her?"

Marcella gulped before frowning. She went to say something before she stopped. Fear spread over her before a resolve replaced it. She said.

"It was an agent from-"

She blinked before she snarled at herself. A moment later, blood began dripping from her nose. It poured out of her eyes, ears, and mouth. She trembled as her skin began melting even through the protective barrier of the antimagic shackles.

"It was an agent from Cygna, the Silent."

Chapter 427: An Unmaking

I raised my hands.

"Then what the hell happened to her?"

Marcella gulped before frowning. She went to say something before she stopped. Fear spread over her before a resolve replaced it. She said.

"It was an agent from-"

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"It was an agent from Cygna, the Silent."

As the words left her mouth, a wave of palpable apprehension passed over me. Althea took a step back before reality around us rumbled. Marcella gazed at her sister, Rebecca's mind empty and hollow. Marcella closed her eyes, and her tears intermingled with her blood. She murmured.

"I'm sorry."

From above, energy coalesced. The clouds around us reverberated before condensing into solid water. They crashed down in a heavy wave as the ground around us caught fire. Like gasoline, the water plumed up in a spreading, magenta-shaded blaze. I opened my pocket dimension, and Althea dove into the portal right before the flames consumed her.

They enveloped me, and they burned all in their path. My skin bubbled as arcane energy effused my being. My memories faded, the fire eating away at my sense of self. Above, the clouds shimmered as strange, esoteric patterns erupted over the sky. They circled a singular point, a horizon-shattering ritual forming on the spot.

It bloomed into a magenta-shaded ball of energy. Beside me, the dirt began disintegrating into nothing. Air funneled in from all directions as the arcane mana destroyed all around us. I gawked in awe, my lucidity robbed from me. No pain racked my body. No dismay urged my mind forward. Only emptiness hugged me from all sides, the sensation more peaceful than any sleep.

Around me, tears in spacetime formed. The energy cleaved even the area itself apart. It dismantled time here, debris and objects frozen in place. Even outside of time or space, this terrifying energy siphoned all to nothing. It built into an enormous, universal sun overhead before crashing down onto Marcella and Rebecca.

They long ago burned away, but the lightning robbed them of more than a physical body. I blinked, wondering who I was just thinking about. Peering around at hellfire and arcane surges, I forgot where and who I was. My body bled away into silent oblivion as the world surged into an immaterial stasis.

I watched it all crumble away, awash in peaceful bliss. It reached me, and I became nothing. After an unknown amount of time, my eyes opened. All around me, reality bled as several tears in space spread in all directions. They congregated into a singular, massive hole in reality. It dwarfed the lunar rip, and this single tear threatened all of the Shattered Spires.

Maybe the world.

I burst into action, instinct guiding me through the process. I grabbed segments as I stumbled around. Even if I didn't understand the why, where, or how of my situation, I knew letting this energy spill onto our reality would destroy all I loved. To prevent the fall of my planet, I scrambled to gather the pieces.

I bolted from tear to tear, grabbing the rips and pulling them together. As I amassed a growing rupture, the interdimensional energy tingled my skin. A spreading, icy cold infiltrated my body and mind alike. My armor grinned and fed on the substance, my aura running wild in the dark. I let it have its fill to help stifle the overwhelming surge.

As I grappled with the portals, I pressed the ruptures into a singular point. Like bubbles connecting in the air, they snapped together, becoming an evergrowing void. I handled them all, grabbing the portal at its endpoints. Spread out to the limits of my reach, I tugged at the dimensional edges. They resisted my pull, the rupture steadily growing in all spaces.

A roaring panic surged in my chest. I peered around, trying to find something to help, but a crater surrounded me. As if an antimatter asteroid collided where I stood, I suspended myself using the tiny dimensions I carried. Whenever I attempted to pull at gravity, nothing responded around me either.

Something stole the fundamental rules of reality for this space, and I struggled against a growing hole all the while. The veins in my arms burst, and my skin split as I held the edges of the gap. My bones ached, and corded ligaments frayed at the edges. I wielded my dimensional wake in tandem, yet it only slowed the growth.

Taking a moment, I racked my brain for solutions. Nothing presented itself. At this rate, the rupture would consume all of the Shattered Spires and destroy our world. I gritted my teeth and snarled at the void, the spreading wound infesting our world like cancer.

The jagged edges of the rupture slinked away from my hands, and it drew across the sky like an ink-drenched snake.

Desperate and out of options, I called at the back of my mind. A dark, abhorrent entity awakened, its hunger unending and brutal. It had eaten the avatars and shards of the Old Ones. It must eat this rupture. As I called it forth, it wouldn't heed my call. As the gap spread in my hands, a realization crossed over me.

It wasn't some separate being. It was me. All this time, I had access to this horrifying ability. Of course, I did. I could devour mana, physical matter, even my own body and mind. However, I never attempted to consume another person's thoughts, soul, or spirit. And yet, I could. I always could, and I never allowed myself to take that step.

I held myself back out of fear of what I'd become. As I gazed at the endless eternity before me, I wanted nothing more than to close the gap. Despite that desire, I never wanted to awaken this evil. A part of me wished I had never touched the armor orb whenever I fought Baldag-Ruhl.

I wanted to be a normal man. I could fight monsters and live a simple life. Instead, I grappled against monstrous entities that devoured realities.

Regardless of my wants, I learned long ago that he who fights monsters becomes them. I closed my eyes and surged a dark shade of myself to the surface. Event Horizon unlocked something as if I opened a gate. In a sudden, raging oppression, I devoured all in my aura.

A case of theft: this story is not rightfully on Amazon; if you spot it, report the violation.

The matter oozing forth. The latent thoughts infesting the ether. The unbridled and corrupting energy. I indulged in all of it as my surroundings devolved into a mass of destruction. Some piece of my body rumbled in satisfaction as I absorbed the interdimensional energy in vast waves. It siphoned towards me, my body akin to the arcane surge of before.

I became a void.

As I absorbed my surroundings, the rip around me shrank. Without the volatile energy sustaining it, the tear no longer expanded. It continued shrinking as I engorged on the interdimensional energy. My entire body writhed as the power surged across me. It left icy pricks in its aftermath, and an itch ravaged my skin, eyes, and even my mind.

It grew into an overwhelming sensation. I immersed in it, something at the cusp of my mind swelling and surging. Some part of myself ballooned, growing overlarge as I reached a defined limit. As the warp became a manageable size, a rumble echoed from inside the portal. My eyes widened, and I gawked at the endless dark.

It bore into me, a wave of fear erupting in my chest. I shivered as some behemoth arose in the dark. I only knew of its existence because of my dimensional wake. Without it, the monster would've been imperceptible. It gazed at me, its body amorphous and its thoughts ineffable. It pressed down onto me using some unseen force.

I blanked out before coming too once more. I still held the portal open, and I fed on the outpour. If I stopped, the rupture may grow to a point where I could no longer stop it. By now, cracks had formed on my armor, mana surging in my blood and causing my insides to glow. The entity had left, and I scrambled to close the rupture.

It reached a manageable extent, being the size of a standard room. I wrapped reality like a towel, folding it over itself. My hands shook as I struggled against the overwhelming force. On and on, I continued wrestling the violent rupture into a stable, docile crack. It kept shrinking until it pulled together and disappeared.

As it did, I tried to think of what just happened. Remembering the interdimensional behemoth, I leaned back, my mind splintering. All turned to black. Once more, I awoke. Around me, the crater lingered below like a scar on reality. I gazed up, finding a circle above where no clouds dared enter. I hung as a limp body on the tiny dimensions I hid throughout myself.

Taking a breath, I lifted my shaking hands. Scars traced my body, each mark a bright gray and sensitive to all stimuli. I could hardly call forth mana, let alone move my dimensions. I blinked, trying to recall why I was even here and where I was. Gawking at the horizons, I couldn't help but appreciate the absurd beauty.

Wherever I was, it mirrored a painting that reflected a childhood memory, one sweetened by time and imbued with meaning through stories. I gawked at it, my memories of the previous events cloudy at best. Taking a breath, I tried moving.

Everything in my body hurt. My head rattled in my brain, and each thought ignited a spark of discomfort.

My back felt old and worn, and my legs trembled at the thought of supporting my weight. Since Schema's system arrived, I'd never felt so worn and ragged. It wasn't the same as an injury itself, more akin to a lack of sleep, a hangover, and soreness molded into a singular, salient sensation.

I let out a breath, sending messages to my guildmates. After a while, I checked the rest of myself to see if I could do, well, anything. I opened my eyes wide. For some insane reason, I put Althea into my pocket dimension. I facepalmed before letting out a grunt of pain. Even a light tap hurt. I shook my head before pulling Althea out, and I let out a sigh of relief as I did.

My pocket dimension didn't slice her to ribbons or trap her forever. As she floated out, she put a hand on my chest.

"I could feel something weird while I was in there. What happened?"

I blinked.

"I...I don't know."

Althea made wings and flapped them to keep herself in place.

"Why are you covered in those marks? And were you able to save Marcella and Rebecca?"

I frowned.

"Who?"

Althea rolled her eyes.

"Ok, now you're just messing with me."

I looked at my hands and back to her.

"Who's Marcella and Rebecca? Are they guildmates?"

Althea furrowed her brow.

"you can stop doubling down. The joke isn't funny."

I spread my hands.

"I mean it. I have no clue who you're talking about."

Althea's wings grabbed at the air as she swung her hair back.

"Ok...It looks like we have a mess to clean up."

I gazed down.

"I can't move. The spatial tears are holding me in place."

Althea frowned.

"Why not leave them behind?"

I winced.

"I can't. The true tear will vomit interdimensional energies out."

Althea flew over before landing on my shoulder. As delicate as a feather, she avoided putting pressure on my scars.

"Then let's start parsing together what happened. So uh, first off, Marcella led New York-"

She explained everything that had happened over the last while, and as she finished, I pointed at the sky.

"So after Marcella said a name, everything I can kind of remember happened. Do you think her saying that name is why the thunder struck down?"

Althea nodded.

"I would think so. After a bit of thought, I don't think she would've been able to even say it if she wasn't wearing those shackles. Also, I...I'm not saying the name she mentioned."

I raised my palms.

"Please, for the love of all that's holy, don't."

She leaned down and put her hand through my hair.

"You don't have to tell me twice. I don't want to become fried chicken like her."

I sent a message to Torix about Marcella before shaking my head.

"It's strange that nothing you've said has rang any bells as we talked. I expected some fine wisps of memory to flare up as you spoke, but nope. Nadda. Zilch."

Althea leaned down, one leg hanging off me. She drew in the air with her hanging leg.

"Well, you were near that weird lightning and fire. It could've messed with your memories."

I shrugged.

"It wouldn't be the first time. Shalahora, the psionic fluid from L-7, and even Eonoth disturbed my memories before. The thing is, all of that was temporary. I can't remember this even after regenerating fully or you describing the situation in full. It's all just a void."

She opened her own storage using one of Schema's spatial rings. She pulled out some breath mints.

"These always help me concentrate."

I nodded before we popped the mints into our mouths. Instead of regular peppermint, a spicy tang flooded my mouth alongside a bit of primordial mana. It oozed out in a controlled, consistent fashion, and it offered a minty blast from actual cold, not the flavor itself. I relished the treat for a bit before I turned to her, my body slack on the portals.

"Wow. Those are great. Did you have them ordered from some other empire or maybe from the exchange store?"

She puffed out her chest in pride.

"It's one of my special pharmaceuticals."

I raised a brow.

"You have pharmaceuticals?"

She gazed at me, her eyes piercing.

"Of course. I started a company with Kessiah to make them."

I grinned.

"What? That's amazing. You gotta tell how that started."

She smiled back.

"Yeah. I've been watching movies and shows from your old world with her, and everybody used all kinds of substances. Alcohol was by far the most common, but people took pills, teas, brews, and other drugs as well. I figured I could add mana and other enchantments to their formulas to create something better than the original."

I leaned back.

"Wait a minute. Don't tell me you gave me these to test them?"

She put a hand on her chest.

"Of course not. I gave them to you to share in something that brings me joy."

A pang of guilt went through my mind.

"Ah, sorry for assuming-"

She chimed.

"Now, if you'd like to carry these around, then I can offer them for free. If you accept the offer, I'd like to be able to say the guildleader uses these mints on the boxes we sell."

"Aaaand there it is."

A mischievous glint crossed her eye.

"Oh, come on. I can't miss Goody Two Shoes all the time. Just most of the time."

I nodded.

"Fair enough. I never thought about making a business, actually-"

A notification rang in my ears. I opened a message from Torix, and confusion washed over me.

Torix Worm, The Harbinger's Erudition | Level: 18,000 | Class: Archmage - Now, I do understand that my memory has failed me before, but I must reiterate this point: who is this Marcella Meyor and Rebecca you keep speaking of? I've never heard their names in my life.

Chapter 428: True Oblivion

I nodded.

"Fair enough. I never thought about making a business, actually-"

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Torix Worm, The Harbinger's Erudition | Level: 18,000 | Class: Archmage - Now, I do understand that my memory has failed me before, but I must reiterate this point: who is this Marcella Meyor and Rebecca you keep speaking of? I've never heard their names in my life.

I frowned at the message.

"That's...Odd."

Althea steepled her fingers behind herself.

"What is?"

I swiveled my status to her. She read the message before scoffing.

"Ok, is he joking about this too?"

Torix and I exchanged a few messages, his irritation growing before he insulted my scholastic capabilities. Either way, it verified that Althea knew Marcella, and no one else seemed to. I double-checked other guild members via messaging, from our scouting operation to our record-keeping corps.

Althea crossed her arms.

"I think that Old One did more than just erase her body. I think...And I know this sounds insane...I think it destroyed everything about her, from her memories to other people's ideas about her."

I murmured.

"It was oblivion. To fade, even from memory, lost to time."

Althea tightened her arms.

"Uh...What?"

I shook my head.

"I don't know. It's just something odd I've thought about arcane mana just now. I always thought it was effectively antimatter or an anti-energy equivalent. Now, I don't know. It seems to be something closer to literal oblivion, as if someone is tearing a being out of space and time on all levels."

She gazed at the clouds.

"How in the hell are we supposed to beat something like that?"

I peered at her.

"I have no idea, but we have a lead."

She sighed.

"Your pocket dimension."

I pointed a finger gun her way.

"That's right. I think my pocket dimension is one of the few places the Old One's can't reach. It could even be why they're nesting their portals all over the place. They're trying to get me to put one of the portals in there."

Althea blinked.

"Oof. Yeah. Bad idea, but it's good we know that now."

I took a deep breath.

"This...This is going to be an uphill battle. Speaking off-"

I tried moving. It hurt everywhere and everything.

"I can't even budge. I'm lucky I can still hold onto these portals at all."

Althea put a hand on my cheek.

"It might be time for a break. Schema knows it's been a long time coming."

I cracked my neck.

"Maybe so. I...I don't want to, but I'm feeling more than a bit off. I'm running on fumes at best."

She put her hand on one of my scars.

"Does it hur-"

"Ow."

She jumped off me, flipping into a persistent hover using her wings.

"That answers that question. I think we need to get you back to Mt. Verner, and you can rest easy until you're feeling better."

I gawked at her.

"Feeling better? I feel fine."

She rubbed one of my marks once more, and I winced. I recoiled after a second, and she rested her hand on my chest.

"Daniel. You need to take some time to heal."

I met her eye.

"There's an out-of-control Spatial Fortress on Blegara. I'm not going to let it consume their world."

She closed her eyes before taking a breath. She reached out and flicked one of my scars. I let out a yelp, the agony surprising and sharp. I twitched before I murmured.

"Alright...Point taken."

After a while, I sent a message to Helios. He arrived several minutes later. Sauntering out, he gazed at his claws before tilting his head at me.

"It would seem the mighty Harbinger needs a ride once...More."

His words trailed off as he gazed at me. Helios gawked despite being blind.

"What...What in Baldowah's name happened to you?"

I spread my hands.

"You can't even see me."

Helios gawked.

"But I feel your mana. You're a shadow of your usual self, like a cinder atop a once roaring fire."

I turned a palm to him.

"Beautiful analogy, but dammit, I'm fine."

Helios shook his head.

"No...No, you're not. Tell me what happened."

I gave him the story that I remembered alongside Althea's talks about Marcella. As we thought, Helios had no clue who Marcella was despite, according to Althea, having known about her for a while. After letting him understand the severity of the situation, he put a hand over his face and laughed.

"Ah, yes. You were smitten by a mad god, and now you rest wounded upon your throne."

Althea frowned.

"Have you been reading literature or something?"

"Shakespeare and Charles Dickens. Human poetry is interesting, and I enjoy hearing it spoken aloud. It sounds far more elegant than the brutish language you all seem to butcher."

I scoffed.

"A spoiled aristocrat, as always."

Helios smiled, his eyes piercing despite the darkness they saw.

"And you're a buffoon who runs into lightning whenever he can. I wonder which of us is less fortunate?"

Althea leaned against me.

"I'd say it's me. I lost both parents and grew up in a research lab. Somehow, I'm less angsty than either of you."

Helios and I stared at each other before laughing. Althea blinked.

"What?"

Helios raised his brow.

"She's right, isn't she?"

I shrugged.

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"That tends to be the case."

Helios made a portal.

"We're lucky this space is considered continuous to Earth. Portalling here is rather simple."

I tried moving into it.

"Good, because I feel like hot garbage."

I felt as weak as a puppy, and the dimensions held me in place like spatial anvils. Helios and Althea got behind me and shoved me forward. Despite their aid, I couldn't move. After a few attempts, Helios's gravitational gauntlet gave Althea the grip she needed to get me moving. As she finished shoving me into our top-floor suite at Mt. Verner, Althea wiped her brow.

"You need to get on a diet. Sheesh."

I rolled my eyes.

"I haven't eaten in...Since our last date."

She waved me off.

"You know what I mean. You may need to quit, I don't know, breathing in the universe or whatever it is you do."

"I channel mana into my runes."

She raised her brow.

"Sounds like breathing in the universe to me."

As I sat down on a comfy couch, I thanked my extra set of rings and amulets that gave me enough mana to keep myself afloat. Otherwise, I'd crush the entire building. Helios

walked over into my and Althea's room, his concern showing despite his usual sardonic cynicism. He raised a hand after a quiet moment.

"If you need anything, do inform me. I know I can be grating, but I don't want to see our guildleader feel as though he's only appreciated when he's at his apex."

I waved my hands.

"No, no. I'm totally fine. After a few days, I'll be back to normal. You'll see."

He put a hand on my shoulder and gave me a curt nod.

"I'm certain you shall recuperate quickly."

Before he left, I turned to Althea. I tilted my head at the portal leading back to the Shattered Spires.

"As much as I want to spend some downtime with you, Torix is really going to need your help."

Althea blinked.

"What? Absolutely not. You're not leaving my sight."

I gave her a soft smile.

"I'll be fine, and besides that, you're the only one that remembers that Marcella leader person. I'm sure the Shattered Spires is a mess in her absence, and you need to help Torix pick up those pieces."

Althea frowned before kicking the ground. A crack in the concrete raced up the wall before she grimaced.

"I feel like life has a way of pulling us apart sometimes. And uhm, sorry. I didn't mean to crack the wall."

Guilt raged over me in a wave, but I swallowed it down like bitter medicine before grabbing her hand.

"Hey, you know we'll live a long time. Once our situation slows down, we'll be in a much better place. We'll have all the time in the world and then some."

Althea peered at one of my scars.

"Given the Earth's circumstances, that might not be as long as I'd like."

Helios raised a brow.

"Someone's feeling snappy."

Althea looked up at him.

"Oh really? Considering you're the resident mayor of Snappyville, then I guess you'd know."

Helios gawked in awe.

"Where in the world did derive such horrific comebacks?"

She narrowed her eyes.

"Lots of bad movies. Those are my favorites. If you don't watch it, I'll have Daniel start making awful puns."

I narrowed my eyes with her.

"Yeah, puns."

Helios grumbled.

"You both are insufferable."

Althea turned to me.

"Be careful while I'm gone, ok?"

I gave her a playful push.

"You too."

She held my hand for a moment before she turned and left.

"Love you, and thanks for saving the world again. I, uhm, figured someone should say that."

She walked through Helios's portal, and it folded together into a tiny slit before disappearing. Helios walked through his other warp.

"Good luck with your downtime. By now, it might be more painful than your labor."

After closing his portal, I sat on a couch by myself. Elemental runes hummed in the background, their finely tuned algorithms keeping the temperature and humidity perfect. The couch carried further enchantments, its coziness far greater than most normal furniture. It hugged me with the warmth of a home. In fact, every aspect of my surroundings oozed comfort.

Yet a disquiet grew in me.

Like an itch I couldn't scratch, I searched my mind to see what could be done. After having worked for so long, the sheer lack of stimulus was painful, and I wanted, no,

needed something on my docket. As I brainstormed, I recognized only seven minds at my disposal. Lacking my normal breadth of mental continuity, I felt stupid, slow, and incompetent.

There was no way I was going to channel runes like this. I'd blow up the building, and I had no clue if I could even regenerate at the moment. I could study the cipher, but it all felt hazy and confusing at the moment. My mind was functional, but it hummed on half a cylinder instead of its normal V8 speed. Well, V8 for me, at least.

After considering my prospects, I summoned forth my obelisk from my dimensional storage. It had been literal years since I touched the damn thing, but it still carried immense utility. Taking a breath, I surrounded myself in its lifelike holographic projection. I found the same forested creek and chirping birds around me from all those years ago.

Unlike before, my augmented perception found gaps in the projection from pixelations to poor sound quality or loops. Spending some credits, I upgraded the package to eliminate some of the discrepancies. Once I attained an acceptable level, I opened Torix's library, the one he gifted me so many years ago. Surrounded by the smell of old paper and lamplight, I opened one of the older books amongst the bunch.

It was time to get educated.

Diesel

Around me, spatial clouds loomed above like icy hailstorms ready to unleash a hellish blizzard. The pavement below my feet carried hundreds of cracks and tiny bits of debris like glass and stone chips. The floating buildings of New York left me floored by their grandiose designs and beauty, and I remembered having studied a few of the buildings for a college project.

But yeah, I never imagined this.

I massaged my temples as I gawked at a colossal hole in The Empire State Building. From what I heard and, well, could see, Daniel and the Seer fought here. I couldn't for the life of me figure out why, though? Even after all the factional interplay and constant tug of war here, no one conquered The Shattered Spires.

It was a genuine anarchist state. One where people fought tooth and nail just to get by, let alone thrive. Despite that, a lot of oddness had come about here as of late. I'm talking about tons of people walking around in uniforms for someone they didn't know. You'd think these people had been born yesterday based on how little they knew about damn near everything.

Lots of signs were posted on portions of the city as well, from infinity symbols to weird, esoteric runes like the ones covering the guildleader. Taking a second, I breathed out a large piece of my frustration. Why was I even frustrated in the first place? It was the guildleader's job to make messes.

And it was my job to clean them up.

Getting to work, I opened my contacts using Schema's messaging system. Taking out an obelisk, I filed through several system tabs before finding the one used for messaging my repair team. By now, we had this down to a science. After getting them on board of an architect, I took out a pencil and bit into it.

The nostalgic taste of wood helped keep me focused. It also gave me something to do so I wouldn't bite my nails. My wife hated that habit, but man if it wasn't hard to quit. Anyway, I got to work on a hologram, my pencil acting as a stencil for my holographic projection. In three dimensions, I cross-referenced previous photos found of the old building.

I'd be damned before this work of art was forgotten by history. We'd rebuild The Empire State Building to its former glory or die trying. To that end, my enchanted compass helped me out, some of its suggestions cutting and others not so much. Even after months of using it, I still hadn't assessed all of its abilities. The powerful mind and overwhelming mana abilities made the compass into an artifact I wouldn't be able to outlevel. Ever.

It still felt surreal. Even as I gazed at it, it reminded me of how far we'd come. Springfield had been a mold-infested wasteland, and we pulled that hollow shell from the brink. Now, my hometown formed the center of a growing empire, one that spanned planets. And, uh, despite everything pointing to how bad an idea it might be, I acted as one of the head honchos of the entire operation.

Yeah, they need better recruiting methods.

Despite my woeful incompetence and inability to handle the tasks at hand, I had to admit one thing - this was my dream job. I loved tinkering around with interesting engineering projects. I have ever since I participated in a class project involving toothpicks. All the kids made all kinds of different shapes to see who could construct the tallest tower and which one could support the most weight.

In the end, I won the height parameter but only got second place in weight bearing. I took a breath, knowing that it shouldn't have bothered me. It still did, but that's also why I made more toothpick towers. I kept on making them until I constructed a tower that reached the classroom ceiling and could hold textbooks.

It took far too long and required an unreal amount of elephant peanuts, but I'd done it. The thing was, I didn't work with toothpicks anymore. People's lives were on the line, and that pressure was a heavy thing. Heavier than textbooks, at least. That's why even as I finished up the first iteration of plans for the building, I knew we'd review and revise several times before finalizing the project.

Speaking of, the team arrived in the distance. I could already see their wind-burned faces, and I smiled. The architect golems traveled fast enough to rip normal human skin off, but systemization gave us the fortitude to survive a trip in their gravity wells. I wish they carried us more like the guildleader because his gravitation pulled the wind along with us. It was more like falling than getting dragged in a rocket car. But hey, beggars couldn't be choosers.

My team came into full view. Thirteen other engineers, ritualists, and runic practitioners huddled into three gravity wells around the architect. The majestic, almost alien architect golem landed beside me, one sharpened foot landing on the ground like a metal ballerina of death. I gulped as it bowed.

"Diesel. It's good to see you once more."

I coughed.

"Ah, you too, Archy."

"I have told you before that I require no name."

"And I told you that it's easier talking to a doom-robot named Archy."

It set the other team members down.

"Then I shall do as you ask, friend of my creator."

I shivered. Even after several months, these golems creeped me the hell out. I'm not saying they weren't helpful, polite, or powerful. On the contrary, this single golem could likely kill the entire city if it wanted to. Somehow, that paled in comparison to Daniel. I could hardly wrap my mind around it.

Interrupting my thoughts, the team walked over on wobbly legs. I held up a hand and shook the hand the tallest one here.

"It's good to see you, Jim. How are the kids?" I said.

Jim let my hand go.

"Oh, same old, same old. They've been studying in one of those schools Althea opened alongside Torix. How are your kiddies doing?"

I scratched the back of my head.

"Oh, they're doing good. Samantha had a fever the other day and we just about died from worrying."

Jim waved me off.

"Oh, don't mind that kind of thing. The system makes sickness less of an issue."

I put my hands on my hips.

"Sure, but not until you're integrated. That doesn't happen until you stop growing."

Scott walked up.

"Oh, come on, man, you know that even small populations can keep dormant versions of diseases alive for long periods. And you know how it is. Even if we're immune, the children aren't."

I raised my hands.

"Listen, I don't need another lecture on vaccines. I get them. I'm just not militant to anyone who doesn't."

Scott sighed.

"You say that until your daughter gets sick."

I sharpened my eyes.

"Bad manners, Scott."

Scott furrowed his brow.

"Huh. It was. Sorry."

I gestured at The Empire State Building.

"We got bigger fish to fry anyway. Guess who did this?"

Scott's eyes grew distant. He murmured, but everyone heard him.

"The Harbinger."

A quiet passed over the others, a solemnity pressing down on everyone. The fear and reverence were palpable, and I let it soak for a bit before I nodded.

"That's right. He's making sure we get to keep our job. Speaking of-"

I motioned my hand at all of this city that surrounded us.

"This...This has got to go. Do you see the transportation system here?"

Jim winced.

"Can you imagine handling sanitation when there are no actual pipelines?"

Scott guffawed.

"Don't get me started on communications or electricity. This is what we call the dark ages, fellas."

I cracked my knuckles.

"Well, now, that's what we're here to fix. Isn't it?"

My team cheered. I flushed a bit from the support before rubbing my hands together in excitement.

"So everybody, let's get this show on the road."

Chapter 429: Exploring a Changed City

Diesel

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Daniel

After about two weeks of study, I uncovered a lot about magical theory and the history of its development across Xanathar, Torix's home world. None of what I uncovered applied to my magic, leaving me listless and bored. It reminded me why I dabbled so little in actual magic theory.

The primary model from that world involved immersing one's self into a zone of thought. These mental states emulated the primary forms of mana from augmentation to dominion. At this point, I summoned those mana types as if they arose from within rather than having to think through them.

A mere burst of feeling or emotion surged mana out, so I no longer needed careful consideration. In fact, suppressing the mentality of the energies was a much more useful field of study for me. However, the research into mana poisoning was paper thin. Few sorcerers lined up to be guinea pigs for the research, and you couldn't gain valid data by forcing individuals into a study. It warped the data, making it unusable.

The studying did help me incorporate a bit more precision using lower volumes of mana than before, but the last two weeks amounted to little in the grand scheme of things. As I moved around the suite, those thoughts muddled my research and study, though that could've been the after-effects of my wounds.

By now, the scars had begun fading ever so slightly from my skin. The light gray thunderbolt marks turned jagged as bits of black metal grew into them like roots. My head still rang like a bell all the time, and I could barely move the dimensions inside my body. Despite resting, only eleven minds swarmed in my psionic domain, and by now, I worried about my full recovery.

If I couldn't recuperate, Blegara might be lost to an end-state eldritch. Anytime I forced out more than I could handle, the scars across me grew, setting me further back. By now, I had resigned myself for at least a month of subpar functioning unless I found a

better means of healing. It left a bitter taste in my mouth, but all I could do was press on.

At the same time, it wasn't all bad. Portions of my memory healed. I could recall tiny bits of my conversations with Marcella, and the first memory involved a piece of intel. Apparently, my guildmates wreaked havoc after gaining the legacy I let loose on the world. I never considered the prospect in detail, so that had been eye-opening.

Sure, my legacy helped augment people, but I hadn't thought of how much it warped people's lives. I checked it out.

Legacy Menu

Below is a list of various achieved legacies alongside their bonuses. Legacies are awards that may be granted to select guild members, and they may be granted on a deferential basis.

Sovereign | Sovereign Class Legacy | Tier S+ | Grants +110 to all attributes. +11% to base stats. Note - Only available to Followers.

Endless & Undying | Endurance Legacy | Tier S+++++ | Grants 1,200 endurance, 1,000 willpower, 350 intelligence, 300 constitution, 150 strength, 100 luck, 100 perception, 100 dexterity, and 50 charisma. +15% health, mana, and stamina generation. +5% health, mana, and stamina total.

Willful | Willpower Legacy | Tier S+++++ | Grants 900 willpower, 750 endurance, 250 intelligence, 125 constitution, and 90 strength.

Meticulous | Intelligence Legacy | Tier S+++ | Grants 500 intelligence, 450 willpower, 250 endurance, and 115 constitution.

Orbital | Constitution Legacy | Tier S++ | Grants 400 constitution, 300 strength, and 250 endurance.

Powerful | Strength Legacy | Tier S | Grants 300 Strength, 100 constitution, and 250 endurance.

Aware | Perception Legacy | Tier A+ | Grants 150 Perception, 250 endurance, and 200 willpower.

Fortunate | Luck Legacy | Tier A+ | Grants 300 luck, 60 charisma, and 250 endurance.

Leadership | Charisma Legacy | Tier A+ | Grants 200 charisma, 150 luck, and 250 endurance.

Note - All legacies require at least level 300. They must also be a member of your guild. This bonus does not apply to you, only to those who join your guild after meeting whatever parameters you set. Legacy bonuses do not count towards tree or perk unlocks.

After accessing the legacy menu, my best one for a normal person granted 3,350 stat points. An average person averaged a bit less than two stat points per level-up, assuming they could afford dungeon cores. In that situation, my legacy granted around 2,000 levels worth of stats, not including the percentage multipliers.

That made my legacy guildmates much stronger than a normal person. If you combined that with the rings, better training, and access to better class variants, then guild membership was a potent steroid to anyone fully initiated. I hadn't considered how much that would affect a society under my rule since the menu seemed to always help more than it hurt.

Making people more powerful would help them fight monsters, so it seemed like a good thing. In general, it was, but it carried pros and cons. Only looking at one half of that equation, the one that felt nice to look at...That kind of shallow thinking wasn't befitting of a ruler, let alone one that ruled over worlds.

At the same time, I healed into a shadow of my former self. I could move my dimensions once more, and mana called forth from my fingertips like water from a hose. However, I wasn't ready to face any meaningful foe like the rogue eldritch on Blegara. Althea hadn't visited a single time either, though we messaged multiple times a day. Apparently, The Shattered Spires needed more help than they anticipated.

That gave me a window of time to work with. Doing so, I came up with a simple plan to broaden my perspective. The problem arose from my status; I was simply too high

up in my organization. At this point, people revered me like some deity when I was nothing of the sort. I needed help just like everybody else, and I couldn't get a proper understanding of how people lived in my guild since they wouldn't be honest knowing who I was.

That disconnect resulted in roaming legacy wielders that devastated entire settlements. I couldn't help if I was so blatantly ignorant, so I left my room while initiating a plan. I passed by marble hallways and decadent mana lamps before pacing down to the residential and financial sector of Mt. Verner.

As I did, my appearance garnered more than a few stares, many bowing to me. It made me uncomfortable as always, their reverence more like cold water than a cozy warmth. It was a dichotomy of reverential treatment. Its purpose was to demonstrate thoughts of praise and regard. It also alienated whoever was treated in such a way.

And my presence was like a soul-sucking alien as people hushed their conversations while I passed by. Despite the high scathing veneration, I peered at the changes to the district. All along the stalactites above, phosphorescent ivies glowed from the rooftops. They carried flowers that glistened like moonlight, and mana saturated the air like an electric current.

It vitilized the people here, everyone awake at all hours in a city that never slept. They spent time working, talking, and beautifying this place. The residents carved out more of the cavern, taking out huge portions while supporting the ceiling using enchantments. The unobtrusive design enabled nature to take center stage, and the broadened avenues allowed for parks, sidewalks, and broader streets.

Trees grew here, some of them blooming flowers and fruit I'd never seen. Flecks of silver speckled pears, each leaf glowing vibrant shades of lilac and violet. Along the branches, orchids bloomed, their petals flapping like butterflies on their branches. Even the grass let out wonderful chimes as a gentle wind coursed through the tunnel. A gentle harmonizing music rang through the city like the sound of rain.

The architecture incorporated stone to match the exposed portions of the cavern walls, all of it polished and sculptured. I marveled at homes full of families and successful adventuring groups. Different crests and insignias lined their grand entryways. Inspecting closer, many of those insignia boasted a skull with two burning eyes alongside a symbol of magic, from conjuration staves to ritual ingredients.

Torix's college created an upper crust of society here. Another product of his teachings, birds of mana floated between each home. These mana constructs chirped and sang like normal birds, and they left contrails of glowing mana behind them. To feed, they sat at the mana lamps and soaked in the light, many dancing to compete for the best spots.

Enchantments lined every doorway, offering further support and structure to the solid homes. In fact, a close inspection revealed metal walls layered for maximal strength. A high-level individual could break them down, but a lower-level person would struggle. To be fair, most of those here leveled to around the two to three thousand mark.

They rarely reached the level cap, but they'd seen their fair share of war from Elysium and Yawm alike. Different marks on homes demonstrated that. A world tree showed their participation against Yawm. An ocean full of life meant they fought on Blegara. A spire of twisted metal meant they faced Elysium.

These people walked with scars along their hands, faces, and necks. They must've considered the wounds to be a part of themselves, as I did. It was an eccentricity of the system. At times, a person's scars fade. At other times, they regenerated while covered in them. For me, it seemed as though reforming slowly brought them about.

Rapid healing scoured my body clean of any blemishes, but I never liked that appearance. I preferred the grit and imperfections. They reminded me of who I was. From walking around, it seemed I wasn't the only one. Aside from Torix's insignias, many families boasted any artifacts they owned that I created.

Banners on their front yards exposed symbols of rings, swords, and rifles, all below a symbol of my face and eyes in a menacing glare. They had different amounts of symbols, from multiple rings to only one artifact on them. In general, the more artifacts a banner had, the larger the home it rested on. It seemed to be a potent status symbol.

Either way, I wanted to stay here and enjoy the residential district, but a sense of unease at my inactivity ate at me. As if hounded, I kept myself active and passed the precinct before walking into the financial one. They held the same visual motif, though the buildings differed in both purpose and design.

The grander, more ornate structures housed larger spaces for various activities. I found runic enchantment shops, bookstores, obelisk repair centers, and one of Althea and Kessiah's pharmacies. As I passed by, I found the store's name. The Althsiah, Home of

Your Cure. It sounded way better than I expected, considering they just mashed their names together.

It arrested my attention, and I couldn't help myself. I walked into the store. Inside, hundreds of vials lined the shelves. They contained a variety of taglines for the many origins of their goods. Blood tinctures, mana imbued elixirs, docile symbiotes, they even had a section for berzerking brews. I picked up a few of them, each vial carefully crafted to hold their different contents.

The blood tinctures came with immunosuppressant pills alongside certifications of their disease-free status. The elixirs were bundled beside powdered mana crystals and instructional pamphlets. If someone wanted a stronger effect, they simply had to mix the extra powder in. That particular variety of warnings and wavers came alongside the thick glass bottles.

The symbiotes were clusters of various beneficial organisms. Every creature held some kind of drawback and benefit, each of them designed to bring out the best of certain builds. One set of living contact lenses augmented the sight and lessened the hand jitters of snipers, but they also muted one's emotions while active. Another set of bracers had claws to latch onto a person's hands. They gave extra strength and fervor in combat, but they caused poor precision and motor function for several days after their activations. They even came with night sweats for a week after.

Curiosity burned in my chest at the sight of them, so I put several dozen bottles into my dimensional storage while taking other bottles off of the shelves. After buying the supplies, I popped open several vials to try the mixtures. It was a fine way to blow a few thousand credits, as each vial was a liquified experience.

The berserker brews held ascendant mana molded to various upping herbs and stimulants. They caused the jitters from a fried nervous system. The boosting elixirs gave a temporary bonus to a stat before damaging the body in turn. Considering how resilient everyone's bodies were after systemization, it was a fine tradeoff.

In fact, that also solved many of the problems of addiction. Most of these compounds were absorbed and processed in minutes. Any withdrawals also occurred over the minutes thereafter, reducing the development of a dependence. Of course, Althea and Kessiah did their best to minimize addiction rates. To be honest, someone would have to make the compounds addictive on purpose to get past the system's innate safeguards.

I couldn't help but wonder how aspirin caused problems with the githyankis based on what Neel said. I pondered about him for a while as I wafted in the enchanted liquids like some insane convict going through his last bender. My own composition weakened the effects of the compounds by orders of magnitudes, but I enjoyed them nonetheless.

By the time I got to the currency exchange center in Mt. Verner proper, I floated a dozen empty vials beside me. I dumped them into a trash receptacle before walking up to the exchange center. The receptionist wasn't a remnant, instead being a native from Springfield. I couldn't remember their name, but the orange hair and blue eyes looked undeniably Irish. He had freckles and broad shoulders, and the guy looked like he pulled ladies left and right.

Good for him. Either way, his eyes widened as I stepped up.

"Hello, guildleader. Is there anything I can do for you?"

I nodded.

"I need standard dungeoneering supplies, a cloak that hides my status from leveled individuals, and normal-looking clothes for a wanderer."

The receptionist peered up at me, recognition glowing over his face.

"An infiltration mission? Say no more. I'll get you just what you need. Before I do, do you have a budget?"

I shrugged.

"This can't pass fifty million credits."

His face paled.

"Oh my god...What in the world were you thinking we had in stock?"

"I'd imagine quite a bit since you can order it from some of the interconnected empires we've allied with, right?"

"Of course, but even then, fifty million is a price tag reserved for scarce, esoteric goods."

I smiled.

"Good. I can get some pretty good-looking mundane gear then."

The receptionist scoffed.

"Alexander was right about you. You do get right to the point. The aura's there too. Man, crazy."

I furrowed my brow.

"Alexander? Which one?"

"The arcane mage. He talked about a lesson about pain tolerance with you."

I snapped my fingers.

"Ah, him. How's he been doing?"

"Oh, he's great. He's actually my older brother. He helped keep me alive during the culling, and he's been raising our little sister for a while now. I send him money from time to time for whatever she needs. I visit too, but he lives out in the countryside of the city. I only make it over twice a week."

"The countryside, huh? That sounds like it's outside the barrier of the city. Not that it's my place to judge, but that seems unadvisable, given he cares for a child."

The receptionist waved his hands.

"Oh, he's in the city confines. Your barrier covers lots of extra space, and even after all this time, we're still filling in the gaps."

I put my hand on my hips.

"Well, hell yeah. I'm glad to hear it. By the way, what's your name?"

He reached out a hand.

"Connor."

I grabbed his hand.

If you spot this narrative on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

"Daniel. What will the cloak cost? And a rifle or some normal-looking weapons."

Connor scratched the side of his head.

"The cloak is the only item worth talking about price-wise. To get a good one, it's going to cost around three to four million credits. I'll cut our share of the proceeds as this is helping the guildleader out. It doesn't seem right to profit off you, given we're in business due to, well, you."

I opened my pocket dimension before handing him one of my premade rings.

"Thank you kindly."

He gawked at the item as if I handed him a gold bullion.

"This...This is too much. These aren't sold, so the prices aren't set, but they're far higher than the cloak costs."

I scoffed.

"Maybe if I was paying for it using this, but this is a gift. It's for the little sister. She doesn't have to wear it all the time, but anytime you guys are traveling, it can help keep her safe."

Connor stood, the ring weighing his hand down. After a moment, tears fell down his face. I leaned back, my face aghast.

"Oh man, I, uh, what's going on?"

He waved his hand.

"I...Just...This is incredible. Thank you."

I peered back and forth, an intense quiet settling on us in a strangling fashion. It felt like such an overreaction to me, yet he carried on as if this was expected, all the while immersed in a wave of emotion. I could hardly take it, so I gestured to the cloak.

"So uh...How does the cloak work?"

Connor wiped his face.

"Ahem...It, uh, it will hide your title and status from anyone at or below level five thousand. What makes the cloak special is that it hides from level 5,000 as well. Most items like this miss that threshold."

I nodded.

"So only classers can see through it, and they're much rarer than cappers?"

Connor nodded.

"That's the gist of it. It's quite protective and can pull up lower attribute totals if that's something you struggle with. Knowing you, that's not something you have to worry about."

I shrugged.

"If it's raw attribute totals, probably not. Using them? Well, that's a different story. Anyways, thanks for getting me sorted out. I appreciate."

He bowed far too deeply while holding the ring.

"No, thank you. Thank you so much. Our family is forever in your debt. Thank you again."

As I walked off, I had to shake off some unease. Connor had held that trinket like he was Gollum, and I handed him the one ring. In essence, I might have, and it further drove home how alienated I'd become. After passing through my suite, I changed into the new garbs and altered the size of myself.

I still stood tall at nine feet, but I wouldn't be mistaken for a classer or guildsman. In dark leather, I had a hood over my head and a variety of consumables meant for combat. Daggers lined my chest, the metal glinting. Several vials hummed at my side, the potions thrumming out with volatility and promise.

Ok, look, I mimicked a cheap version of Terra.

There, I said it. I didn't know a single other real dungeoneer, and he had this grizzled look that felt down to Earth. My other guildmates barely wore armor since their bodies outdid what most protection provided. It would make me stick out like a sore thumb if I followed that fashion trend. It would also be nice to try out some of these other combat techniques using daggers and consumables. A sword, too, maybe.

I wouldn't be an expert, but I could probably manage, given my immense statistical advantages. The other odd part of the outfit was actually wearing it. I hadn't worn clothes in a long time, and I wore the leathers like a cat forced into an ornate and itchy Christmas sweater. Either way, I headed out of the fifth floor of Mt. Verner and headed towards the city proper.

After passing the lavish streets and decadent designs, I passed a few alleyways to a newer district. It was three miles from the city center, but it still used the architect golem's primary visual aesthetic. However, this place carried signs of being 'poor' relative to my guild's weird standards.

Most buildings lacked integrated enchantments. In the developed part of Springfield, most buildings had all kinds of buffs that augmented whoever rested or worked within. Here, people existed in the sphere of only my own citywide boons. My bonuses dwarfed most buildings' integrated runes, but while mine revolved around pragmatism, these runes oozed comfort.

For example, skilled enchanters created self-regulating and individualized mana constructs. Depending on a person's preference, these constructs modified their surroundings on the fly. It made temperature easy to forget, given how controlled it was. The same could be said for gravitation, where decadent businesses lightened the load a touch for a sense of ease inside their building.

My brain thought of how that would soften a person's bones over time, but by now, I had already established that I was a total weirdo. Other signs of being oh so very poor were a lack of crystalized mana or my armor pieces. Torix's alumni banners also steered clear of this district alongside signs of being a part of the guild's wars.

That's why I passed the unenchanted buildings and not quite so ornate lamps. It all screamed of opulent luxury to me, but the average level here sat in the upper hundreds. Think 500-1,000. People turned rowdier, and they carried less leveled gear. Some people didn't even shower every day, and a few of the buildings already showed slight wear and tear from lacking maintenance.

I passed through the streets, the entire time feeling like an imposter. I was, so that sensation fit right in. I would've been far more nervous if not for how little attention I garnered. No one even gave me a second glance, my cloak giving me exactly what I hoped for - anonymity. As I walked by, a few people talked trash about The Harbinger and his policies.

I couldn't help but have a hidden grin across my face at their griping.

Even better, they complained about absurd trivialities. In general, I had a policy that certain people whined and complained, no matter the circumstances. You gave them ten

thousand dollars? It could've been a hundred. Did you save their children from a car accident? You should've paid for full coverage on their insurance policy for them as well.

The more absurd their complaints, the more you could respect what they complained about. Ergo, these people complained about how powerful the golems were, how hard it was to get a legacy, and how the Harbinger hadn't cleared all the eldritch on Earth. It was a long list of entitled complaints, and that meant I was doing pretty well.

Still, I hadn't harvested all I needed after mingling in the masses. After passing a building that already had water damage on one corner of an immaculately sculptured roof, I stepped to the downstairs level of another low-lit basement. A sign at the front declared - Joshua's Gingertown, Where Fun Meets Taste. I wasn't the biggest fan of the title, but I liked the old wooden sign quite a bit.

As I stepped into the tavern, I relished my surroundings. The place emulated a vintage-styled English pub. A set of barrels and old wooden stools lined the bar. Sawdust spread out over the floor to clean up beer and spilled spirits. Old kerosene lamps lit over the tables, and the smell of cigars and whiskey drifted through the air.

It impressed me. Sourcing all of these pieces was far more difficult than simply making gold or marble. Even more so, the owner stood and served at the barkeep, his vest and rugged mustache putting a smile on my face despite my envy. I had always wanted to grow out a mustache, but alas, I quit growing a beard after integrating into my armor.

A profound and deep sadness welled within me. My desire for a mustache would never be sated, so could my life ever truly be complete? Most definitely not, but I trekked forward in spite of it all. As I sat down at the bar on one of the barrels, I was stunned at how profoundly uncomfortable it was.

Ignoring the angular wood beneath me, I met the barkeep's eye. He gave me a gesture of recognition before finishing up two other member's drinks. He walked over, polishing his glass.

"I haven't seen you around here. New to Springfield?"

I nodded.

"I'm trying the town on for size. It seemed stable enough, and I heard the guild's strong. If I'm honest, I never expected all of this."

Joshua shook his head.

"You're telling me. I arrived here a few months ago, and I remember the first time I saw a Vanguard golem. I damn near shat myself right there."

I laughed.

"The ones with red eyes?"

Joshua shivered.

"They don't come into the town proper much anymore, but for a while, they were here all the time. I could hardly sleep at night. I kept thinking one of those thirty-foot-tall metal titans would come and eat me."

An early twenties man at one of the tables raised a drink.

"Like Attack on Titan?"

The barkeep sneered.

"Ugh. Kids and their animame."

He spoke the last word as if fusing the words anime and edamame. He gave me a look of defeat.

"I was thinking more of an Evangelion angel myself, but all these youngsters know about is the newer stuff before the culling."

I leaned back.

"Huh, you sounded like you never watched any anime."

"Oh, I never said that. There're some good shows nested in the medium, just like anywhere else. It's a shame we lost a lot of the more niche shows after all the electronics failed, but most scavengers have been able to retain a lot of the more popular shows using tapes and CDs."

I nodded.

"Oh. I didn't know people were restoring lost culture. That's good to hear."

Joshua kept polishing his glass, though it was already sheened.

"People do when and where they can. It's tough, but a few cities like this have really opened people up to less militant pursuits. It turns out that not many people talk about Mozart or Shakespeare when monsters are running spikes through your throat."

I scoffed.

"Who'd of guessed?"

Joshua smiled.

"It would be a hell of a way to go, wouldn't it? Speaking lines from Hamlet or Macbeth as a monster tore your head off?"

I reached out a hand.

"It would. By the way, the name's Daniel."

"Mine's Joshua, though you probably knew that already. What brings you here?"

I peered around.

"I've been looking for a dungeoneering group. I'm also trying to get a lay of the land."

Joshua raised a brow.

"Where you from?"

"Castle Rock Colorado."

"Oooh. Nice area. I had a cousin who moved there. I don't know what happened to him, but I like to think he moved to the actual Castle Rock and lived atop it like some king."

I adjusted my hood, keeping my face in darkness for the most part.

"The actual Castle Rock was a dungeon, though the legion recently cleared it. That's part of why I came here. That, and I can't help but wonder if the guild's everything people say it is. I mean, can it be?"

Joshua's grin reached his eyes.

"It's that and more, son. That and more."

The mid-twenties man behind us let out a loud boo.

"You just like that they helped you build your bar."

Joshua raised his glass.

"Damn right, I am. And besides, why wouldn't I be?"

The mid-twenties man shouted back.

"Because you're not a charity case."

The innkeeper fired back.

"Says you. I don't want people thinking I won't take free credits."

The mid-twenties man snapped.

"Shameless."

Joshua sneered.

"Hypocrite."

The tension faded in an instant as they laughed. I tilted my head at the man and his crew.

"Who are they?"

Joshua rolled his eyes.

"Oh, that miscreant? That's Jamal. Those two other members are Nissa and his sister Jasmine. They were friends that found each other after the culling."

A spark of pain shot through my chest. For some reason, the group reminded me of Michael and Kelsey. Before I settled that emotion, a hand tapped my shoulder. The man from the table walked up.

He wore a set of leather armor, each piece a different color and enchanted by a different set of hands. His dreads hung by the sides of his face, wooden beads styling the strands of hair. He wore earrings, and he had the kind of smile that was somehow charming and offputting at the same time. Hmm, it was kind of like a pug in effect, though not at all in appearance. Jamal leaned against the aged oak of the bar.

"I heard you asking about us from the table. Do you mind telling me what you're trying to dig up?"

I mirrored his posture.

"I'm trying to find a dungeoneering group. I wanted to get my feet wet after traveling here, but it's been harder to find a group than I expected."

Sympathy arose on Jamal's face.

"I get that. We struggled to find larger subsections of the guild that would take us too. We're either nowhere near the requirements for a mission, or we're woefully overprepared. I'm not saying it to brag, but I'm level twenty-five hundred already. I'm not guarding someone's caravan as they travel the countryside if you know what I mean."

In all honesty, that sounded like a fine job to me, but I didn't probe further. I gestured to his table.

"Do you mind if I sit with you all then?"

Jamal gestured to Nissa and Jasmine.

"We're welcome to talk business anytime. Plus, you seem competent enough."

I raised a brow.

"Appearances can be deceiving."

Jamal tilted his head.

"You have no situational awareness. You didn't even flinch whenever my hand grazed my knife handle just now."

I furrowed my brow.

"Why would I?"

He pointed at me.

"See, that's how I know you know a thing or two. You're not even framing your questions as if I could threaten you."

I scoffed.

"You can't. You'd die to a golem or worse if you tried."

Jamal sat at his table behind me. He smiled.

"Thing is, I could've still sliced your head clean off your shoulders before you noticed, golems or not. That never even crossed your mind, though, did it?"

His knife would shatter like glass, so no, it hadn't. I gave him a sheepish grin.

"Honestly, it hadn't."

Jamal waved me over.

"My point exactly. Our crew could use another fighter to help round out our support package. It's not like we're lacking per se, but it would be nice to know we're covered."

I raised my hands.

"I'm game then."

I reached their table. Jasmine eyed me like a tiger in the grass. Like her brother, she wore dreads and beads in her hair, though she used darker-colored woods. Her skin tone was brighter than her brothers, closer to caramel than dark Earth. She also used vicious iconography on each of her wooden beads, from wolfs tearing prey apart to cthulian imagery of eldritch horrors. A scar traced her chin, the laceration from something jagged and not sharp.

She frowned at me.

"You remind me of this arrogant prick I knew in high school."

I leaned against the table.

"How so? Cause it can't be my dashing good looks."

I dripped sarcasm, but Jasmine narrowed her eyes.

"So you think you're handsome?"

"To goblins, maybe."

She slapped my shoulder.

"You can take a bit of heat and a joke. That's enough for me."

Nissa frowned. She wore enchanted robes, and her gear dwarfed the others in quality. Tattoos wrapped around her neck, and she kept her hair short in a brunette bob. Her fair skin carried freckles from many lost battles against the sun, and she was also the youngest of the group while wearing circular glasses. They reminded me of Harry Potter's glasses, actually.

She raised her brow.

"We don't even know if this guy can do anything. Or if he'll kill us."

I leaned against my hand.

"What's that going to get me, exactly?"

Nissa hit her staff against the ground.

"Our equipment, at the least."

I furrowed my brow.

"And a bounty, one that exceeds the worth of your collective gear severalfold. I'll ruin my reputation here as well, and I won't be able to join the guild, given my criminal record. In essence, I'd give my future away for the chance at gaining equipment I could work my way to having over a few years."

I frowned.

"It's a bad trade, isn't it?"

Nissa adjusted her robes.

"It sounds like you've given murdering us a lot of thought."

I peered at the bar's aged oaken walls.

"More like I've thought about the concept of murdering in general. Either way, I understand the ramifications well enough to know what I'd be losing in the exchange, assuming I survived it. That should be comforting enough."

Nissa adjusted her glasses, wiping off some grime.

"I suppose, though I'm still not fully in favor of this guy joining our group."

Jamal clapped his hands together.

"We can't know unless we try, right? I say we go for it."

I leaned back up.

"Ah, great. When's the trip?"

Jamal raised his hands.

"We've got a job lined up, but we're fine with postponing for a few weeks while you get ready."

I waved a hand.

"I'm ready now."

Nissa squinted at me.

"You're telling me you run into a dungeon without any prep work?"

I rolled a hand at her.

"I'm assuming I can read your group's prepared documentation as we travel. As far as supplies go, I'm topped off and have what I need."

Jamal cracked his neck.

"There's only one last thing to verify."

He put a hand up.

"Let's see if you have any power in that arm."

I spread my hands.

"I'm not planning on wrestling an eldritch to the ground anytime soon if I can help it."

Jamal's eyes lit with a competitive fire.

"You never know if you'll have the choice. Now come on, or you're not joining the group."

I gave the rest of the bar a cursory glance. I found no other groups, so I turned back to this one and shrugged.

"Alright. Let's do this."

I put my hand on the table, an internal bar of steel offering plenty of support for our arm-wrestle. To be honest, I hadn't arm-wrestled since I was in high school. I had no qualms about it, though I remember there was a risk of breaking someone's arm if you used the wrong angles of force or something.

Either way, I planned on losing steadily but well enough to earn respect. As I grabbed the guy's hand, his eyes widened, and he laughed.

"Dude, you feel like you're made of steel."

I grinned.

"I have plenty of hand conditioning skills."

He took a breath before starting the countdown.

"If you say so. Ok. Three. Two. One. Go."

He began the epic battle of monumental proportions. I had to emulate the jittering of a muscular struggle, though the guy also cranked my arm and hand from a weird angle. It felt like he understood the game much better than I did, and it put me in a position where he leaned over my arm while I could only curl him.

Nissa rolled her eyes.

"You literally had an arm wrestling club before the system. Why do you even do this?"

Jamal flashed a cheeky grin and spoke through a strained breath.

"The glory, Nissa. The glory."

I shook as he pressed down onto my hand. As his face flushed, I clenched my jaw, trying to appear like I was in a stoic struggle. After a while, I let the guy win, and he leaned back. He put his hands up.

"The man. The myth. Undefeated."

The girls rolled their eyes.

"Childish," Nissa mouthed.

"Stupid," Jasmine murmured.

I shook my hand as if wringing out some discomfort.

"Gah, you got me."

Jamal smiled.

"It was a good match. That seals the deal. We'll see if you're a fit, new guy."

They ordered me a few rounds of drinks, and Joshua hung around the table for a while. As Jamal handed me the drink, a subtle sharpness entered his gaze. He spoke with nonchalance.

"This brewery has a few connections with Torix and his crazy poison brews. Now, we're not poisoning you or anything, but this booze works for anyone at around level 2,000 and some investment in endurance, constitution, and, well, you know, the basics."

I nodded.

"I can handle that then."

Jamal smiled.

"Pray tell, what couldn't you handle?"

He wanted to know my level range since my cloak hid that info. I offered the drink for a cheers.

"Something meant for someone at level three or four thousand."

Jamal clanked the glass.

"You'll fit right in then."

I tossed the drink back, and my metabolism eviscerated the poor booze and poison like a rabid bear challenging a puppy to a death match. After a few more drinks, we talked for several hours, discussing the dungeon, life outside of dungeoneering, and plans for the future. By the time we finished talking, they had warmed up to my knife abilities and consumable-based strategy.

It had been fun, though my acting skill wasn't good enough to pull off being inebriated. That's why I left them fumbling about on their table before walking back to Joshua. As I did, I raised a hand.

"Do you have any rooms?"

He pointed a hand at me, his eyes piercing.

"Listen here and listen well. If anything happens to them in that dungeon, I'll set a golem on you, boy."

I leaned against the bar.

"What's making you think I'll be so hostile?"

Joshua sneered.

"I poured booze in your glass that'd make cappers fumble around like wiggly noodles. You haven't even flinched. Hell, you didn't even notice it was a higher grade of booze than the others at the table."

Damn. He got me. I sighed.

"Look, I'm not here to start anything. I'm collecting info."

Joshua leaned toward me. He met my eye.

"Those kids. They're all they got in this world. I've seen them and got to know them well. They're good people. They treat other dungeoneers well. They've brought back quite a few groups to this town. They follow the law. So, if they disappear in that dungeon with you, then I'll pay every dime I've got to get the worst bounty on your head that I can. Am I clear?"

I met his eye, and a sympathetic smile traced my lips.

"They will come to no harm while I am with them. I can promise you that much."

Joshua held my gaze for a moment before pulling back. He went back to polishing his glass.

"Good. As long as we're clear on that, then I hope for your safe and profitable travels, wanderer."

I pointed my thumb at them.

"But I'm asking, in all honesty, do you have the rooms?"

Joshua tilted his head at the back.

"There's a staircase leading to a few hollowed-out spaces with beds. Make sure the dehumidifiers are on; otherwise, it gets dank in there."

I went over and picked the three adventurers up, two on my shoulders and one held in my arm. As I passed him, he eyed me again. He shook his head.

"If you're trying to appear normal, you're doing a horrible job of it. You're not even leaving cracks in this old wood while carrying three mid-leveled adventurers."

I scratched the back of my head.

"And you're a lot sharper than most bartenders tend to be."

Joshua smirked.

"You could say that."

I waved a hand as I walked into the backrooms.

"I guess we both have a few secrets."

He nodded.

"It would seem so. Sleep well, traveler."

As I stepped back to the old rooms, I found a line of brutal cave rooms, ones carved out of solid rock and supported via scaffolding. My golems made this abomination in about

three seconds, and I wanted to fix the place then and there. I didn't, but damn, did I want to. After setting each member into their own bed, I sat down and rested on my own cot.

It had been years since I slept, and for the first time in a long while, I closed my eyes. As I drifted to sleep, I couldn't help but have a goofy grin plastered to my face. This had been a lot of fun despite the fact I could read their life histories in my status. I also knew whether they lied or told the truth by their heart rates alone.

In fact, I knew full well the innkeeper had rooms back here. None of that mattered because this was the most normal I had felt since before the system arrived. Alongside the normalcy, a cascade of nostalgia and warmth for a rose-tinted past came alongside it all. It reminded me of long nights staying up too late in high school while watching horror movies with Michael and Kelsey.

This whole evening had carried the same energy as one of Kelsey's pranks that ended just right, not too far over the line but still crazy enough to get a laugh out of me and Michael. In that regard, this had been like a homecoming of my old self which was something I hadn't felt in a long time.

I raised my hands, and beyond the concealing magic of my cloak, the bright scars still traced my skin. They reminded me of my mortality, the wounds from a mad god. They were reminiscent of moon slices spreading over dark steel. Before this trip, I worried about being able to recover to my full might.

However, my wounds gave as much as they took. Today, I was a normal man, or at least closer to one. I held down a laugh as I relished in the weakness these scars gave me. It was like entering a world where others could see me for who I was, not what I could do, and that was a refreshing feeling. As I settled into slumber, I found more empathy for the Old Ones.

And I could see why they wished for weakness.

Chapter 430: Adventure Calls

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I drifted into a deep sleep, my mind clear and serene. For the first time in years, I dreamed while I rested as if nothing weighed on my shoulders. As I paced through a blur of images and feelings, something stuck out to me. Blurry, undefined images of the interdimensional behemoth arose in my memory.

I felt the presence of its mind trying to claw me to pieces. It ravaged the memories I cherished, and it left me hollow as a husk. The impending panic and terror bloomed alongside rage and hate. As I readied to retaliate, my eyes opened. I pulled myself up and opened my status. Four hours passed, and the others stayed asleep.

By now, the bar had emptied, and no one else remained conscious. To pass the time until they awakened, I looked through the details of their dungeon map and the data set they acquired. I used an alias in my status in the meantime, similar to a username and also a function I never considered even looking for. It wasn't anything that unusual, apparently, and it let me open several info-laden files they sent me.

It would be an underwater dungeon, and I'd be well within my ability to handle if the situation went South. However, I didn't want to reveal my powers or abilities. Working within the confines of my level, I drafted up a set of plans. Once the sun rose, I stopped by several nearby stores and stocked up on an assortment of supplies. After getting it all collected, I headed back to Joshua's pub and did the necessary mental prep for any situations I may find myself in.

As I toiled away in my room, a hand tapped against the exposed earth. I already knew who it was, but I gave them a nod of recognition.

"Come in."

Jamal stepped inside, and he whistled.

"Wow, you're up and planning already? No wonder you said you'd be ready at any time. You'd make it happen even if it meant not sleeping."

I smiled.

"I have the willpower perk."

Jamal leaned against what was supposedly constituting as a doorway.

"That doesn't mean you can't sleep. It means you don't have to. Most people I know with the perk still get several nights of sleep a week."

I smiled.

"Then they're wasting a lot of its potential."

He walked over.

"We'll see about that. What are you working on?"

I pointed at the map.

"I'm scouting out a few exit paths, alternative routes, and finding environmental oddities to take advantage of."

Jamal nodded.

"Damn. Smart. Most dungeoneers wouldn't consider that until they arrived."

I shrugged.

"I have the data, and I'm a frugal guy. I don't like it when I let what I have go to waste."

"I can see that. So then, Mister Frugality, we'll be ready later today once you've finished your prep."

I drew on the map, making a line from one room to the next.

"Won't you all be hungover?"

"Probably, but Joshua has a mean tonic to help with that."

I peered up at him, gawking in surprise. Jamal waved my disbelief off.

"Oh, come on. You got to let us live a little."

I held my tongue before letting out a sigh.

"It's your lives on the line, so do as you will."

He slapped my shoulder.

"You're pretty intense, you know that?"

I frowned.

"Unfortunately, I've had to be."

Jamal gave me a slight shake. I allowed him to move me. He said,

"That's in your head. You take on responsibilities that aren't yours, and no one even asks you to."

I peered up at him.

"You know, I thought you were the leader of this bunch. I'm surprised you have such a lackadaisical approach, considering you've taken that position of your own accord."

He walked over to a wall, a kerosene lamp lighting the room.

"It's not what you're thinking. See, you imagine it as if I'm setting us up for failure. It's the opposite. By letting my mates have some fun, they get to enjoy life. The more they enjoy life, the harder they'll fight to keep it. If all they do is train and live in drudgery, they'll go insane."

I wrapped the map before tucking it under my arm.

"Kind of like The Shining?"

Jamal met my eye, a mischievous grin tracing his lips.

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

I shrugged.

"If you say so."

He tilted his head.

"I'll go get the others up and see if Joshua won't give us that tonic. We'll be ready in a few hours."

I nodded before he left the room. I pocketed all of my supplies using a normal-dimensional storage ring. The capacity was sorely lacking, and every time I connected to the estranged space, I was reminded how disconnected from me it was. It was like a new pocket dimension every time, and I had to reorient myself whenever I opened it.

Using it at a rapid pace was damn near impossible since I had no sense of what lay within it. Either way, it served its purpose as I walked out into the bar. Nobody entered

a pub at this hour aside from us, so Joshua scribbled out accounting expenses on a sheet of paper in a booklet. Jamal scoffed.

"I can't believe you're still using paper to handle your accounting. They have software packages for that, you know."

Joshua licked a finger before turning a page.

"Too bad I ain't usin'em."

In front of the counter, three bubbling seltzers carried small hints of quintessence alongside a cocktail of herbs. They smelled like pine needles and campfire smoke. As Jamal picked them up, he tilted his head at me.

"What about Daniel?"

Joshua looked at me, and a knowing smirk grew on his face.

"He looked fine enough to me."

Jamal shrugged before heading back to the backrooms. I pointed back at them.

"Those drinks smelled pretty good. I'd be fine with ordering one."

Joshua raised his brow before letting out a sigh. He took out several bottles, one of them a ten-gallon jug full of pine needles. He took a tall glass and sliced up a mint, a block of white powder, salt, and an herb I didn't know about.

After prepping the ingredients, he piled it into a glass and grabbed it in his hand. A small bit of quintessence surged from his palm, and it enmeshed the ingredients. He handed it to me.

"That'll be twenty credits."

I exchanged the currency via status menus, and I raised a brow at the brew.

"Was that quintessence I just felt?"

Joshua crossed his arms.

"You must've imagined it. That's why I always recommend adventurers get enough sleep."

I was aware of the entire building and everyone inside it. Joshua had been awake whenever I slept and whenever I woke up. I raised the glass.

"I'll take that to heart then."

I sipped it, and a blast of flavor erupted like a wintergreen breeze and a chilly morning mug of coffee. A touch of smokiness lingered as the aftertaste. My eyes widened.

"Wow. This is great. What did you make it with?"

Despite himself, Joshua grinned, the expression sincere.

"It's a trade secret. I'm glad you liked it, though, and you can have as many as you can buy."

I took a swig before letting out a contented sigh.

"I might have to take you up on that."

I piddled before Nissa and Jasmine dragged themselves over to the countertop. Each of them carried their glasses in their hands and sat down at the bar. In tandem, the ladies chugged their drinks down, and as the blast of magic swirled through them, they hit their hands on the wooden bar.

Nissa let out a whoop.

"It wakes me up like a good book every time."

Jasmine shook her head.

"Like a fresh liver to warm you up in winter."

I held down a bit of surprise before Jamal gestured to his sister.

"She's a hunter, and she hunted well before the system arrived. Whenever you kill most animals, certain parts start spoiling right away. The heart, kidney, and liver, in particular, are best eaten hours after the kill. Ergo, she really likes fresh liver, and anytime she hunts anything, she sits down with her cast iron skillet and cooks it right away."

This story originates from Royal Road. Ensure the author gets the support they deserve by reading it there.

Jasmine opened her bag and pulled the cast iron skillet out. She brandished the enchanted iron.

"You wouldn't believe how good the seasoning on this sucker is."

Jamal nodded.

"It's a gift. Really, it is."

Nissa blanched.

"Please. No. Don't remind me of that time you held a deer heart near my face."

Jasmine put her iron skillet on the countertop. She moved it as if cooking.

"It tastes great in fajitas. You liked it before you knew what it was."

Nissa leaned away.

"Oh god, you're going to make me sick again."

I walked over.

"I've never even had venison, and I've definitely never tried heart or anything like it."

Jasmine raised a hand.

"That's a real shame. Organs are by far the healthiest meats. They're one of the few sources of antioxidants outside of vegetables and fruits, and scientists theorized they were a major spurring agent for why humans evolved as we did and as quickly as we did. They're like little experience bombs for our bodies since they act as the storage places for nutrients."

She shook the hand, an obvious passion oozing as she spoke.

"It's likely why most eldritch ingredients are organs as well. They store their energies in those places as we have, and that's why learning to harvest organs is essential for any good hunter or scavenger. You leave a lot on the table otherwise."

Jamal crossed his arms.

"Isn't Nissa supposed to be our group's nerd?"

Nissa adjusted her glasses.

"You already know I'm far nerdier than Jasmine will ever be. But yeah, if you get her talking about the carnivore diet, then we might all get drowned in studies and details."

Jasmine opened her mouth before Jamal put his finger over his lips. He mouthed.

"We need to focus on the mission, guys."

They settled down, and we locked in for a while. Jamal had come up with a plan for clearing the dungeon out. The entire expanse was an underwater cavern, and several people died in the dungeon recently until one explorer came out and explained why. It turned out that even without eldritch trying to eat you, underwater caverns were insanely dangerous.

The first issue revolved around nitrogen narcosis. It was the saturation of your bodily tissues with nitrogen. This occurred while breathing underwater if you used the wrong magic and usually led to a drunken state. Several people tried rebreathers and visual lenses, but they ended up getting loopy to the point where they no longer understood the severity of their situation. In the end, they drowned in the depths of the flooded cavern.

Eldritch devoured their bodies, but they left the unenergized supplies behind. Afterward, several individuals actually went underwater cave diving before the system arrived. They put up warnings for this particular dungeon. After it was cleared a few times, several people started going missing once more.

Jamal and the crew wanted to cash in on the hefty award for clearing the area. Nissa even had the technical skill for the correct pressurization of air while diving. Aside from that, they had cleared it before, though it had been well over a year ago by now, so I didn't count their experience for much.

Dungeons evolved all the time, and month-old data could be out of date, let alone year-old experiences. Either way, it bolstered the group's confidence, to my chagrin. At least the map was new. Either way, with that false confidence in reserve, we readied ourselves before leaving the tavern while stocking a few extra tonics from Joshua.

We journeyed through the newer city, many of its nooks and crannies known by the team of three. Like a parkour training group, they bolted around the tops of buildings and swung across steel railings made for that express purpose. I followed them, but I kept my leaps and jumps simple.

I didn't want to expose my identity via complex gravitation. I kept to small panels and telekinetic supports when needed. After we parkoured through the outer city, we reached where buildings and encampments weren't fully realized. Here, along the

outskirts of Springfield, temporary encampments awaited my architect golems' time and attention.

I gestured at the camp.

"Why are they living in tents when they could just build a house out of stones? They're plenty strong and fit enough to do it if they wanted to."

Nissa sneered.

"Why would they when they could just wait for The Harbinger's puppets to do everything for them?"

Her words cut more than they should've. I frowned.

"Do you think it's a bad thing that he offers to build housing?"

Nissa sighed.

"Not necessarily. That is to say, it doesn't have to be, but at the same time, it's hard to get the gumption to do something when you know you can just wait long enough, and it will be handled for you. We don't think along those lines, but most people do. That's why you have this huge group of homeless people awaiting their silver spoon."

I furrowed my brow.

"Why doesn't anyone, I don't know, start up a construction company or something to fill the void?"

Jamal laughed.

"Good one. What will they sell that outdoes the free palaces The Harbinger gives us?"

I took a sharp breath.

"Fair point."

After we walked up to the border patrol, I ogled at a guardian golem covered in Shalahora's shades. As people passed by, the shades flew off the golem and phased through the immigrants. When the specters did, they inspected their minds and ensured no Hybrids settled inside them. Moreso, they checked for altered psyches that were reconstructed from Elysium's disgusting bone cipher techniques.

Jamal and the others felt a shade pass through them, and each of them shivered. The same happened to me before the shade gave me a nod of acknowledgment while the others weren't looking. Whenever we passed the guardian golem, it eyed us, its glare menacing.

Nissa trembled under its gaze.

"Jeez. We've already been cleared, so why is it staring at us like it found a pile of smuggled fentanyl?"

I smiled up at it.

"I don't know, but it won't stare for long."

It turned away, having heard me. As it did, Jamal let out a long sigh.

"Dude, whenever I see those absolute monsters, I can't help but wonder what the real Harbinger is like. I've heard he's even taller and stronger than the golems."

Nissa chided.

"I've heard that too, but it could also be that he's an excellent crafter and not as much a fighter type."

Jasmine walked, her steps lithe like a tiger.

"I doubt it. I knew some friends who fought in the Elysium Wars on Blegara. Apparently, they watched him fight a silver infested town for hours. He was a living calamity, and he ripped and tore them apart without rest like some possessed demon. He would actually rise into the air and smash himself into the ground like an asteroid just to kill them faster."

Nissa rolled her eyes.

"Like an asteroid, or, you know, a falling brick. Even a child could think of that."

Jamal adjusted one of the straps that held his mana stones.

"But I've never seen another high-level person do it. I think the only reason he can is because I've heard he's unkillable."

I murmured.

"No one is immortal."

They turned to me as if I just appeared out of nowhere. Jamal laughed.

"I've never even seen him injured."

I smiled.

"You might have. You just never knew it."

Jamal hit my shoulder.

"Oh, ok. Sure. I missed the steel Godzilla human."

My smile dampened.

"Easier than you think."

We left the border patrol, and everyone stuck to a trade route for quite a while. The idle chatter and jovial tone put a smile on my face. It was an easy thing for them to relax on the road my guild maintained. As Diesel said, vines and ivy-covered an endless row of mana lamps, and they connected the larger nearby settlements to Springfield.

Dark metal bricks covered the ground like a smoothed cobblestone road of steel. Despite being dark, they cooled my feet as I walked. They installed temperature controls to stop this place from becoming insanely hot. Cooling us further was a golem flying overhead. Every few minutes, they passed by, and their bodies ushered forth an enormous burst of wind in their wake.

As Nissa held her stave, she let out a grumble.

"Why do they have to fly so fast?"

Jamal frowned.

"Because they're strong, Nissa. Strong as hell."

Nissa shook her head.

"I don't understand why The Harbinger makes them that absurd. It's complete and utter overkill."

I clicked my tongue before coughing into a hand.

"I don't know. Maybe it's easier for him to make them that way?"

The group let out another hoopla of laughter. Jamal smacked my shoulder.

"You are too much sometimes. Your jokes just come out of nowhere."

Jasmine wiped away a tear.

"And he's so dry with it. Like, how do you say that with a straight face?"

I had a thin smile on my face.

"Who knows?"

After we reached the last bit of our trade route, we gazed at a forest. Primordial and ancient, the old wood expanded into taller spires like pillars of brown. Bushes and brambles clogged up any further running, and a thousand creatures' cries blended into a melodic hum. It was nothing like the forest of my childhood, more akin to something out of a fantasy.

Before even stepping off the road, Nissa took several minutes setting up rituals and buffing magic for all of us. I raised my brow before Jasmine gazed with pride at Nissa.

Jasmine gestured to her friend.

"Nissa's attended Torix's academy. She's related to someone from the first platoon."

I scratched the side of my head.

"What's the first platoon?"

Jasmine leaned back.

"You don't know? They're the original legion that helped kill Yawm of Flesh. They own some of the best houses and horde most of the resources you can find in Springfield. If you can get a solid relationship with just one of them, then the sky is the limit."

Nissa adjusted her glasses as she flushed red.

"I'm just lucky to have an aunt who fought with her life on the line."

My eyes grew distant.

"Those were...Dark times."

They gazed at me. I coughed into my hands.

"For the guild."

They nodded to each other. Jasmine scratched her cheek.

"But yeah, Nissa was pretty skilled even for the school's absurd standards. One of the professors even offered for her to be an intern."

Nissa pointed her staff at Jasmine.

"Be quiet before I put silencing magic on you."

Jasmine wiggled her hands.

"I know sign language, girl. You can't silence this."

They kept cutting up until the moment we stepped foot into the forest. At that point, the chatter ceased. A cloak of eerie dread poured over us all, and I kept quiet alongside them. Jasmine took the lead, and everyone traced her steps and movements exactly. Our rate of travel slowed to crawl, literally at times, and no one said a single word under that dark canopy.

It drove home how dangerous these outskirts still were. My golems and guild cleared out the truly dangerous eldritch, but mid-level monsters still roamed the badlands. Even without saying anything, I could tell this experienced group of adventurers genuinely feared for their lives here, and I aimed to fix that problem once I got back to the guild.

Along the route to the dungeon, we passed a variety of detours, foreign species, and odd geographical markings. Several valleys, rivers, and mountains dotted the

landscape, and I was certain they never existed in Michigan. In fact, Mt. Verner was a geographical oddity, yet we found mountains that exceeded its height and size often.

While passing one, I sent a message via my alias of Daniel.

Daniel | Level: Unknown - I could've sworn that Michigan never had these kinds of mountain ranges. They remind me of the Rockies.

Jamal McGuire | Level 2,481 | Guild: The Harbinger's Legion - Quite a few dungeons have fused with their surroundings. From what I've heard, people have actually been able to feel a significant increase in gravity, but some magical force is beginning to counteract that pull. There are some rumors about the planet eventually rivaling larger worlds like Jupiter. There's even one wild story about how other kinds of moons are going to form.

Daniel | Level: Unknown - You got to be kidding me. Why do people think there's going to be another moon?

Jamal McGuire | Level 2,481 | Guild: The Harbinger's Legion - If you look at it, the moon's actually become bigger in size. Apparently, it's closing in on Mercury's old width, whatever that was.

Daniel | Level: Unknown - What do you mean by old size?

Jamal McGuire | Level 2,481 | Guild: The Harbinger's Legion - So, apparently, all the planets are getting bigger, at least according to some astrology nuts I've chatted with a couple of times. Even abnormalities are being seen in the sun.

Daniel | Level: Unknown - you probably mean astronomy, and yeah, what a time to be alive.

Jamal McGuire | Level 2,481 | Guild: The Harbinger's Legion - It is, isn't it? How about we keep it that way.

Daniel | Level: Unknown - Alright. No more distractions. Let's keep it centered.

After a few more hours of traversal, we found an incredible entryway to a subterranean world. Several new rivers poured out over a massive cavern and into an abyss. Moss and ivies draped over the edge, their leaves glinting in the light like tiny mirrors. Beams of sunshine danced off the misting waterfalls, and birds flew below.

Their singing echoed throughout the chasm, the opening enormous. Further inside, the water glowed from ambient mana flows, and kelp rippled in the water like rhythmic gymnasts fighting for our attention. It reminded me of an enlivened BloodHollow, and a wave of nostalgia passed over me. I murmured.

"This takes me way back."

Nissa shoved a spider off her shoulder.

"Uchk. Gross. Not you, by the way. Did you like spelunking or something?"

My eyes grew distant.

"For a time, I did. It's been quite a while since I've been able to do it recreationally. Unfortunately, anytime I've entered a cave has been for pure business since the system arrived."

Nissa clapped her hands before spreading them. Her grimoire appeared, and I could see why she'd done well at Torix's academy. At the very least, she had style.

"It doesn't look like that trajectory is changing anytime soon then. Let me set us up before we head in."

After a full hour of waiting, Nissa established a dozen rituals for empowering us. She also cast an ensemble of buffing magic, from depressurization magic to oxygenating masks to sound-transferring bubbles over our mouths and ears. As the magic enveloped my face, I spoke into it like a radio.

"Pshh. Can you hear me, over?"

Nissa sighed.

"Oh, this is going to get annoying."

Jasmine nudged Nissa's elbow. Jasmine's wooden beads jostled as she said,

"Come on, let him have some fun."

I leaned over, speaking into my hand.

"Pshh, Nissa doesn't know what the word fun means, over."

Jamal and Jasmine laughed while Nissa rolled her eyes. We all settled down a moment later, and everybody gawked at the enormous dungeon. The sight evoked a growing sense of unease that arrested all of us. Well, most of us. The dungeon seemed as if it was classified in the upper middle of rifts, though I wouldn't struggle if push came to shove.

Like, at all.

Jamal, Jasmine, and Nissa didn't know that. Nissa closed her grimoire before it faded into an ethereal plane. Her hands shook, and a bead of cold sweat dripped down her face. She let out a long sigh.

"Remember, Nissa. This is for the bookstore."

I furrowed my brow.

"Why didn't you just open one using an architect golem?"

Nissa frowned.

"And what, join a huge repertoire of mediocre competitors? No thanks. Whenever I open my bookstore, it's going to have scrolls from across the cosmos. You'll be able to find ancient texts from lost empires or esoteric, befuddling runes. Mana will drip from bottles of ichor, and mana constructs will sing on the shelves."

My eyes widened.

"That sounds amazing."

Jasmine held down a laugh.

"And expensive. I can respect the hustle, though."

Nissa held up a hand.

"Thanks."

They high-fived before Jamal pulled out two daggers imbued with origin mana. The cyan blue energy hummed as a gentle blue covered his hands. Jasmine pulled out a bow. It oozed a poisonous smell, an acrid stench like chlorine and acid. Nissa's stave glowed a bright blue as heat coalesced over her as a thin shield. They each put a dozen talismans over them alongside life-saving enchantments.

I did none of that. They gawked at me. I shrugged.

"I use other stuff to survive, alright?"

They rolled their eyes. Nissa let out a long sigh.

"You're like one of the guildies, always acting like you're invincible."

Jamal met our eyes.

"Let's hope he is. Is everyone ready?"

We nodded. Jamal flashed a roguish grin.

"Then let's see what's changed in a year? From the looks of it, I'd say just about everything."