

## New World 431

Chapter 431: Living by the Skin of Your Teeth

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."

Taking out a metallic rope of enchanted steel, we tied one end around several trees before testing it. It held firm. Once secured, each of us rappelled down one after the other. Since the rope extended far longer than needed and held far more weight than required, we all went down at once, using our hands and enchantments to slow our descent.

The magic held my hands against the rope and offered friction in a controlled way. It reminded me of a gas pump stopping whenever it filled a car's tank. Closer to the lowest level of the chasm, a stark dichotomy formed. The upper level was a dark, gloomy cavern. Dirt smothered the vibrant mosses, disguising their natural charm.

A blend of grays coated the walls as if competing to see which tone caught the eye the least. If not for the natural light from the opening, the grotto would be masked in

darkness, a forgettable gap in the forest. Yet the glowing water below evolved the unremarkable into the extraordinary.

It was like gazing at a high-contrast and brightened video. Surreal and cutting, the sharp coloration ate away at the eyes and senses. The corals glistened with phosphorescence, their dark orange bodies dimming to a lighter shade of apricot towards their ends. Azure stone contrasted the dull gray above, its bright shade all the more striking as it matched the corals' intensity.

The cyan water hummed from a suffusion of mana, and at the end of the metal rope, origin mana soaked into the end. Tropical fish flowed under the water alongside muscular, armored sharks. Tiny swarms of piranhas devoured any corpses left behind and even wounded prey, and the ecosystem fed on the corals as sustenance.

As we neared the shining water, Jamal took a moment to create a tiny island for us to stand on. He wielded origin mana to generate the rock before bending it to his will using dominion mana in efficient bursts. With better control, he could've created the object in his desired shape from the get-go. He could've also wielded quintessence to handle the process all at once

However, Jamal engendered ways around his limitations. Swift applications of each mana type let him cleave and fuse blocks of stone, each piece slotting together. At that moment, I imagined Jamal as a carpenter before the system. He smiled up at us.

"Our last regroup, everybody."

Once at the bottom, he nodded at the group, and we nodded back. Despite myself, I couldn't help but wonder why we weren't using telepathy, but I chose to remain quiet. Sharing one's mind wasn't something everyone wanted to do, and that was, far and away, the worst complaint about our guild orientation process.

Rightfully so. Sharing your mind sucked, but it was necessary. In this instance, everyone here had to trust each other. It seemed so strange that, as adventurers, we were more willing to put our lives in each other's hands rather than our minds. In many ways, I understood that feeling. There was something intimate and familiar about sharing your psyche. The vulnerability was palpable.

And yet, it would've made this mission far less risky. We could speak to one another, but if multiple people spoke in tandem, our communication would devolve. Telepathy

could direct specific thoughts, and it carried better and more reliably than sound would, especially underwater.

I let that last-minute question die in my throat as Jasmine enchanted Jamal. He sank into the water, and Nissa followed. As I stepped up, Jasmine cast another type of smell-oriented sorcery. Despite my sharp senses, my smell muted quite a bit. The leather scent of my armor evaporated.

It made our sinking into the water far less haphazard as all the fish ignored us. Bubbles of air covered our mouths, ears, and eyes. Having memorized our map, we avoided most of the most dangerous portions as we passed different rooms and traps alike. Along most of the way, I cross referenced the map to the dungeon. Everything aligned quite well, and the intel seemed solid.

Of course, not every situation played out as stealthily as we hoped. After passing the fourth underwater chamber, a pair of sharks swam at us as vicious, wriggling masses of muscle. Their thin scales frayed upward, revealing teeth underneath them. Their mouths unhinged before splitting in three places.

Sparks of silent terror erupted over the group before our training asserted itself. By instinct, Jamal swam forward. Nissa and Jasmine floated backward, Nissa shining and Jasmine cloaking against the azure stone walls. I stood between the mages and the sharks on the cavern floor. As they neared them, I threw out a few knives.

I estimated the forces correctly, and they only pierced a foot deep into their bodies. The sharks, more like propelled maws, writhed before swarming at me. I leaped sideways while leaving a vial at my previous location. A burst of ice erupted from the glass, and one of the sharks ensnared in the frozen block. Its eyes, nested inside the teeth, turned to me. I smiled.

And it trembled.

Jamal channeled earth spikes into its body before Jasmine uncloaked. She cut open its side while putting a variety of enchanted hooks into its body. They ripped out multiple organs as if designed to harvest them unharmed. Remembering Jasmine's tirade about organs as a whole, the hooks might actually be just for that.

Nissa lifted her staff, and a bubble of air formed over the shark's mouth. After having its entrails torn from its toothy body, it stopped moving. I lined myself up to the side of

its head before throwing a knife that pierced one eye while going out the other. The second shark writhed away, its teeth receding before we rallied.

It took about fifteen minutes, but Jasmine harvested every organ from the creature. Curiosity sparked as I watched her do so, and I wanted to buy the information from her about them. They might be helpful for the guild as a whole. Either way, we swam out after leaving the meat and cartilage for the hungry piranhas.

The rest of the chambers proved uneventful by comparison. One cubbyhole sprung a trap of poisonous kelp, but a rock barrier from Jamal held it at bay before Nissa burned it in yellow fire. In all honesty, their approach befuddled me. Each of these eldritch could strengthen them and allow them to level up or earn achievements. Despite that fact, they avoided them like the plague.

I kept wondering about that until one of the piranhas floated over and bit at Jasmine's leg. It tore her entire foot from her body in a flash, and she didn't even think about retaliation. Instead, she channeled origin mana to produce a viscous, bloody mixture.

After tossing it into the water, she flowed away and cast magic to stop her bleeding. The piranhas swarmed where she once was, leaving us be. We waited a half hour for her to heal, and the entire time, I could hardly believe how fragile she was. Jasmine was a level 2,400 human. That piranha was only level 700. Despite the level gap, Jasmine lacked any and all defensive measures to protect herself. In essence, she was a pile of sand, and the eldritch were stone.

It left me unable to comprehend how squishy they were. It might be from a lopsided build or my own experiences being so far from the norm. Still, to be that vulnerable meant every fight, even against lower-leveled eldritch, was a dance with death. These people desperately needed my legacy and rings to survive.

However, they used talismans and defensive charms to bridge that gap. After a while of thinking, a spark of realization washed over me. They were the same as the construction companies. Since my guild offered free buildings, people didn't make organizations that revolved around building.

In that same vein, these individuals awaited my legacy and rings to fill in the gaps in their builds. Until they got the bonuses, every fight would be nearly impossible to survive unless they avoided them altogether.

Therefore, they avoided all fights and focused on treasure or information-based quests, not the killing kind. Those thoughts mulled through my mind as we got closer to the center of the cavern. Here, the mana concentration condensed, becoming more palpable and fluid. At its zenith, we swam into the final opening.

Nested at the deepest recess of the cavern, a red dungeon core spiraled, its force humming through the liquid surrounding us. A set of sharpened corals nested around the treasure alongside several bodies from other explorers. Their treasures lined the corals, pearls, and polished corals, making the place a haven of loot.

Obviously, the pit acted as a trap, but our group expected as much. Nissa went about establishing her rituals to destabilize the entire endeavor. At the same time, Jasmine found gaps in the corals that she lined using thin wires. Once taut, her origin mana flooded the strands. The magic eliminated sound, smell, and taste.

It weakened the senses of the corals, and Jamal created a pathway down towards the pit using his earth magic. If this had been a coral trap, they'd of cleared it easily. But it wasn't.

This was an illusion.

Given my sheer volume of perception, I saw right through it. In fact, I saw through the entire dungeon's trippy vibe the moment I glared at the water. The reason it looked like a filtered video was because it was one. Sure, the wildlife was real, but nearly everything else had been an orchestrated set of venues meant to exhaust us.

Our team had done an excellent job evading it all, but at this point, they still hadn't uncovered the pit's real source - it was a spined sea cucumber. Underneath the illusion, it had vomited out its guts and stomach. The treasure was at the bottom of its writhing tendrils, and the sharpened corals were its teeth.

I motioned to the group, all of them enveloped in the advanced illusion. They peered at me before they jumped in. I spoke, breaking an hours-long silence.

"Something doesn't feel right."

Jasmine and the others nodded, taking my words seriously. After a few more minutes of testing, Jasmine mouthed.

"This place. It's artificial. This...This is an illusion. Daniel, what gave it away?"

I shrugged.

This tale has been unlawfully obtained from Royal Road. If you discover it on Amazon, kindly report it.

"A high luck stat."

Jamal winced.

"Yikes. I need to invest more points in it, then. Have you figured out what this really is?"

Jasmine's eyes widened with wonder and whimsy.

"This...It's organs."

Everyone groaned before Jasmine glared. She spread her hands.

"This is incredible. It's used its body as a trap by regurgitating its insi-"

Nissa leaned over and threw up into her air bubble. The vomit sloshed around over her before she threw up again. Nissa burst her bubble and swung her face side to side, cleaning herself off. After putting her bubble back over her face, she gasped.

"Shut the hell up, you complete weirdo."

Jamal frowned.

"She's saving our lives."

Nissa swung her staff.

"Are you kidding me? She damn near drowned me there."

The eldritch below rumbled as it smelled the vomit mixing into the water. It writhed for a moment before pumping out portions of its blood at the group. The compound stuck to magical shields Nissa's talismans spawned. It sizzled on the surface of the bubbles, but far worse, from all directions, the eldritch smelled the potent cocktail.

The group shoved the congealed pheromone mixture away, the resident monsters of the cavern beholden to it. As they swarmed towards us, Jamal hit his head and stammered.

"Think, Jamal. Think."

We had seconds. Before I was forced to reveal my identity, I threw two of my vials towards the singular entrance leading into this place. After tossing two knives at them, the glass ampules shattered and unleashed a kinetic explosion. Stone fell down from above as that portion of the cavern collapsed.

The eldritch outside had already clambered into a frenzy against the caved-in wall, but I bought us a few minutes. The giant organ mass readied another liquid spray at us. Before it could, I threw another vial above the creature. Nissa fired a kinetic bolt, shattering the ampoule. It exploded as the monster sprayed the liquid.

The liquid redirected, falling back onto it, and I threw another vial. This wasn't even a potion or elixir. It had been a strange cooking ingredient imported from Blegara. The tar-like liquid simmered in the bottle as a vile oil, and after throwing it over the monster, another kinetic bolt from Nissa destroyed the enclosed jar. As the gunk dispersed, the eldritch sea cucumber went berserk.

It ripped itself out of the stone below, desperate for the reduced fish sauce. The Vagni used it as a local seasoning that worked even underwater. As the sea cucumber/ball of entrails smothered itself in the liquid, we fell down. Jasmine used her cleansing magic to eliminate our own scent, and Jamal covered us in an earthen barrier.

Nissa emptied out the water, trying to help prevent us from being smelled. The cavern's air exposed our gasping breaths and dripping clothes. We were silenced as the rumble

of the eldritch wildlife erupted above. If they desired the liquid from the sea cucumber, then they despaired for the Blegara fish sauce.

The feeding frenzy swarmed over our heads like a hailstorm on a car roof. The volatility of their feast was something only the eldritch could hope to uphold. The rumbling resonated into our earthen chamber, rattling our bones and clattering our teeth. The smell of blood oozed through the stone, and red droplets fell from the cracks.

It dripped down, drenching the wet and pallid seafloor. As blood dripped over us in the dark, Nissa trembled. She let out small whimpers of fear. Jamal prayed while peering up. He tried to avoid flinching as the droplets pelted his forehead and eyes. Jasmine froze in place, her breath held and her heart calm.

Minutes passed, the room cracking under pressure. As it filled with water, panic set in alongside claustrophobia. Jamal grabbed Nissa's shoulders. He said, his voice full of hollow confidence.

"Hey. We're getting out of here, alright?"

Nissa shook. Jamal tilted his head at me.

"Besides, look at Daniel. He doesn't even look worried."

I whispered my words.

"We'll be fine. We get to clean up this mess after the eldritch finish eating each other. Remember that."

Jamal nodded.

"Exactly. Nissa, please set up the shields. Oh, and take your time. We've got it to spare."

He spoke with sincerity. Nissa gulped before taking a steadying breath.

"Yeah. I've got it covered."



On her second try, she put the air-breathing shields and magic back over us. As the water enveloped our faces, Jamal put his forehead against hers.

"That's our mage for you. Cool under pressure."

She rolled her eyes, though a grin crept up her face.

"It's the least I can do after Daniel bought us some time."

Jasmine stammered.

"Guys. I froze. I...I feel like I passed out."

I held down a burst of laughter as Jamal rolled his eyes.

"You could've just let us think you had it handled."

I knocked on the earthen wall.

"Come on, guys. It's about to collapse, and the feeding frenzy is done."

The others nodded. I reared back a fist.

"Ready?"

After some affirmation, I slammed my fist through the rock wall. I put enough power to match Jamal. After swimming outside, we couldn't see anything. It was pure, thick red in all directions. Occasionally, a swollen fish swam by my eyes. As we wafted beside the corpses, Jasmine used cleaning magic to condense the red into a single, congealed ball.

She put it in her pocket dimension. Ew. All around us, the sea cucumber's body sat in half-eaten fragments. Piranhas devoured tiny slabs of meat on the sea cucumber's torn

body, and sharks rested inside the meat chunks, their entire bodies immersed in food. Below, the symbiotic coral fragments exposed cracks all along their surface.

Jasmine began carving out the essential pieces from animals, taking the most energy-laden parts. During her harvest, Nissa, Jamal, and I grabbed the various pearls, shells, and other valuables left behind. It took nearly three whole hours to catch everything, and we ended up swimming out of the expanse with their storages full.

It arrived with an air of solemnity. It turned into quiet focus as we passed the caverns, and we found a new route back that shortened the distance dramatically. I had memorized the path back along the way, turning a two-hour swim into a thirty-minute one. At the end of the cavern, we found the steel rope still hanging by several trees in the exposed grotto.

After crawling back up and dripping all the while, they gasped for air while I kept everyone secure. As if all the tension had faded. Jamal held up his hands and let out a quiet, whispered roar of success.

"We did. We fucking did."

I smiled at them.

"We did."

Jasmine fell backward.

"Dude, I thought we were done for when we were in that little earth torture chamber."

Nissa gasped.

"Oh, please don't remind me. That was a literal hell on Earth. No more underwater caverns."

Jamal shook a hand in success.

"That was brilliant work with the fish sauce. I never even thought to use cooking ingredients as a lure. What made you think of it?"

I shook my head.

"Honestly?"

Jamal snorted.

"No, lie to me. Of course, be honest."

I peered at the vast open sky.

"I figured that fish would know better what makes fish taste better for fish."

A quiet passed over everyone before the group laughed, the relief palpable after nearly dying. I kept my gaze sharp.

"Guys, something could get us, and we're weighed down with valuables too. Another group could come by."

Jamal's eyes narrowed.

"Hm. Good point. Everybody, let's get up and go."

We got up and headed back to the main road. Jasmine collected herself under the trees, her home here among the greenery. We followed her lead as she kept us from unsettling the monsters of the wood. Mountains and valleys blurred in my eyes before we reached the main road. At that point, once we stepped on the dark bricks, Jamal shouted.

"We made it. Hah."

Jasmine and Nissa grinned, their success giddy and full of greed. Nissa rubbed her hands together.

"Oh, we're going to be so rich after this."

Jasmine raised her hand.

"I don't know how much we can make off of everything, but-"

She shook some pearls.

"It's gotta be worth something, right?"

I nodded.

"Right."

We headed back out, each of us running along the road. Even a normal systemized individual could run around 50 kilometers an hour. Since we didn't need to make massive twists and turns, we found ourselves peering at the growing skyscrapers of Springfield within hours.

Each spire pierced the sky as an immaculate, shining pillar of stone. It grew in our sight; the materials and designs varied yet in harmony. At the edge of the city's colossal barrier, we passed through customs. The shades and golems gave me another wave as I shooed them off. In the town, we parkoured our way back to Joshua's bar, and as we went inside, we found Joshua pacing back and forth.

The bar had been closed.

When he saw us, his eyes lit up as if he won the lottery. He spread his hands.

"It is so damn good to see you three safe."

Jamal pushed me forward.

"That's because of this big lug right here. It turns out he's pretty resourceful when he needs to be."

I gestured a hand to him.

"don't sell yourself short. The earth shield stopped us from getting caught in the feeding frenzy."

Nissa raised her stave like a gun.

"Did you see my shot on that fish sauce bottle?"

Joshua's brow furrowed, his mustache crinkling.

"Excuse me, but uh...Fish sauce bottle?"

We sat down and told him the long story, and Jamal enlivened the tale, making it far more than it was. To me, it had been a desperate struggle for survival where we escaped by the skin of our teeth. No matter how we tried to twist the results, I nearly had to expose myself. If I had, that meant a normal group would've died.

It left me quietly stunned. Hours ago, they had been so close to death, yet everyone here cheered as if nothing happened. The normalization of life and death struggle wasn't something I had expected to take hold so quickly, and yet here it was, hitting me like a sack of bricks. Something about my expression gave away my internal thoughts, and Joshua leaned over his bar at me.

"I'm guessing things got pretty hairy?"

I shook my head.

"Hairy as a sasquatch."

Joshua nodded before pulling out a glass. He pulled out the ingredients for his tonic. As he made them, I leaned back. I stretched my arms overhead.

"Aren't you supposed to save those for hangovers?"

Joshua didn't say anything. After a minute, he finished the tonic and slid it over to me. I opened my status to pay before Joshua put his hand through my screen. He scoffed.

"It's on the house."

I picked it up and sipped. It was delicious, as always. I smiled.

"Ah, thankful I helped keep them alive?"

Joshua turned to the team.

"I'll leave that up to you to decide. All that said, you can have as much of that tonic as you'd like. You won't ever have to pay a dime."

I lifted my glass.

"Thank you kindly."

His eyes grew serious.

"No. Thank you."

After a few hours of drinking, everybody passed out on counters once more outside of Joshua and me. Without a word, I picked the three of them up and waved a hand at the barkeep.

"See you tomorrow?"

Joshua polished a glass.

"As always."

After setting the others into the backroom, I sat down on my own cot. At that point, my mind raced across the holes in my guild. Firstly, I wasn't thinking about incentives as I distributed my support. People would form industries and businesses to fulfill a need. If I took away that need entirely, there'd be nothing to brim the void if I wasn't there.

In fact, my guild likely already eroded the armor industry, eliminated stamina potions, and destroyed construction as a concept. While some of it wasn't a problem, the armor was a particularly salient point. People looking for my legacy created squishy builds in anticipation of the incoming defensive stats. My guild, one built on endurance, attracted the squishiest builds.

How ironic.

Worsening that trend, our guild barely had smiths or armorers. Even Diesel's power amor project ended whenever my golems came online. We thought of putting people in the golems as if they were Gundams, but the project fizzled since people experienced whiplash in them. It was like putting a water balloon in a rocket.

Either way, we had to get the armor industry up and running. We couldn't dictate what people did with their builds, but we could at least help in the meantime with excellent defensive gear. In fact, offering up a store that sold defensive treasures of all kinds would be a massive boon, one that supported the guild by keeping prospective guildmates alive.

Our scouting was atrocious as well. It had always been a personal weakness since I had the habit of running into the fray. Of course, on most occasions, my enemies were simply too far away to ever gather meaningful info. However, dungeoneering was entirely different. We needed to develop a database of dungeons alongside their development trajectory. I sent that request to Amara since her system abilities dwarfed my own.

Lastly, we needed to further clear out the forests. I sent a few requests to leading Speakers of the guild, asking them to organize cleansing missions of surrounding eldritch. Over the next few years, we may be able to walk through the trees without fear. Well, maybe. Time would tell on that front.

All that drifted through my minds as I rested on my bed. I no longer felt the desire to sleep, and my scars steadily faded, the insidious expansion of my armor like the slow march of time. The fighting and movement helped the healing, acting as an active recovery. My wounds were like a timer for this new life I had.

And I aimed to soak in the fun while I still could.

However, my healing also came alongside an expanded facet of myself. As my actual body regenerated, it carried an expanded dimensional wake. I should've only been able to encompass a corner of Springfield in my current state. That assumed the ratio of mana production and the number of minds aligned to my wake's breadth. There wasn't a reason to believe otherwise.

Despite that, I could feel the limits of my wake crawl further than they should. Even more so, each shade of mana arrived alongside a strange, burgeoning sensation. Event Horizon carried a profound hunger, one that could assimilate without end. The Rise of Eden held the ability to purify the energy of a land, almost turning it holy. Even Perfection's Providence felt as though I could bend minds to my will.

As I gazed at my palm, I felt a resurgence of memories alongside my healing. I had gorged on the interdimensional energy for a long time, and in turn, the faculties of my armor expanded. It felt good, like becoming something greater. In tandem, a sadness spurred forth. I would only get further and further from a life like this as time passed.

A part of me accepted that. Another part raged against this machine made of momentum. Either way, as Joshua left his bar's main room, I turned to the wall, gazing at the blank stone. I could only take every day one step at a time, by grounding myself, I could achieve a sense of purpose in my life.

And my purpose was to move. It was time to enact change.

#### Chapter 432: A Sweeping Reform

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I hopped up out of the cot, trying not to let myself get caught on a snag in the worn mattress. After passing the rooms and out of the bar's central entrance, I experienced a sleeping city. Here, in the outskirts, the gloom of a twilight left activity far lower than during the day. As I closed into the central parts of Springfield, light and life washed over the city.

Bars had music once more, the thrumming base and hypnotic sound muffled from the walls of the buildings. Multicolored lights beamed from within, and the rumble of a crowd carried through the glass windows like a stampede. Many people congregated and talked along the parks of the city, the seating arrangements hosting a different clientele than we first imagined when building them.

Business people spoke through mana-based radios, each of them carrying a series of rudimentary enchantments to do so. Other young levelers lived the high life, stepping past clubs and hangouts designed for their entertainment and credits. A few less scrupulous individuals even sold selective ingredients along the streets, though none of them touched anything directly illegal.

Beyond the shops and downtown, I passed toward the true heart of the city - Mt. Verner. In the air, I never noticed the differences here. On the ground, they were undeniable. The density of enchantments, magic, and machines rose as I got closer to the peak. Wealth from the college, mechanical industries, and medical centers poured into these communities.

The same banisters below Mt. Verner hung from walls and pillars alike, though their density paled in comparison to the underground area. As they garnered enormous wealth, the prolificism of machinery also expanded. No one owned cars, but a few owned mana constructs that helped ward the home or clean up the nearby street.

At night, I found ethereal entities mirroring skeletons. They wielded scythes and wore straw hats. While their owners slept, these apparitions cut their grass, pruned their hedges, and helped plant flowers or weed gardens. The work that once was handled by a class of manual laborers was replaced by magic entirely.

Aside from the apparent wealth, the bolder designs emphasized the use of enchantments in the designs. One home floated off the ground entirely, only held aloft by gravitation and a single spiral staircase leading upstairs. A dry set of sand and stones spread out beneath the home, and the Japanese dry garden caught the eye like an amethyst surrounded by jade.

Another home had a spherical pool, one held together once again using gravitation. It spiraled above the house, and a set of enchanted armbands would help keep anyone on the pool aloft. A few fixed seating spots would help guests lounge in the pool while creating waves in the floating blue marble. When undisturbed, the waves continued in an eternal set of spirals around the water. It was utterly stunning.

After walking beyond the base level of Mt. Vener, I tread past the guardian golems. They saw right past my cloak, and once inside, I headed into Torix's college. The grandiose hallways had changed from raw rock to embroidered brick or sculptured stone. I never noticed as I simply swam from one place to the next, but this was no longer an underdeveloped hiding place from Yawm. It was the center of a burgeoning empire.

My empire.

An intense feeling of inadequacy flooded over me, and I held back my knee's sudden urge to wobble. I gulped before taking a breath and silencing the wave of emotion. Stepping past it all, I walked back into the third layer of the underground fortress. At the entryway to Torix's college, a set of enchanted doorways were closed.

Above them, on a set of molded marble, a set of mana engraved words read:

Tread forth whilst others idle, and separate yourself. Go forth into that unknown, and in your enlightenment, bring the world alongside your discovery.

Ad Infinitum.

It was an inspiring quote, likely written by the founder himself. As I opened the doorways, I entered a permeation of additional buffs. When fully revved, I hardly noticed them, but in my weakened state, they increased intelligence, willpower, and perception. I wasn't the only night owl enjoying the buffs, either.

Many students walked about, none of them idle or sitting still. Here, amongst the intellectual elite of the guild, most took the willpower perk that eliminated the need for sleep altogether. They never even considered resting when there was work to be done, and their sheer excitement for academia and study ignited my own desire for understanding.

But it wasn't the time to read or research. As I walked in, I suppressed the enchantments on my cloak. My presence and aura surged, and the busy library went silent. No steps walked or paced amongst the hallways, and the flipping of pages quieted. I spread my hands.

"Hello, everyone. I'm Daniel, your guildleader, and I have a mission for any who are eager to listen."

Over the next few minutes, a group formed, and I paced back and forth while using my speech voice. I detailed three different missions, each of equal import but carrying entirely diverse skill sets. The first mission involved the study of the permanent portals from Marcella's Infinity Plaza.

I wanted to create a mission to research and develop those portals across every planet I owned in my empire, and I would fund any research into the matter. If we gained that technology, we could eliminate the persistent warping costs from using Schema's portalling systems. Any local industries could be expanded and proliferated across every world, enabling far easier access to goods, including defensive treasures that would keep people alive.

The second mission detailed the creation of a runic inscription company. I would be creating a guild-led organization that sold defensive talismans, prearranged runic configurations, and stabilized mana stones for generic power needs. This would help modernize the outskirts of my guild while filling in a need that hadn't been shored up for or by adventurers.

The last request I made was for the creation of a guild-led alchemical company. We had the rare advantage of being able to maintain dungeons long-term, resulting in a much better understanding of the eldritch under our purview as a whole. Using that knowledge for empowering elixirs, concocting cocktails, or portioning potions could help fill in the other gaps for our guild's industries.

I found a receptive audience from a backend standpoint. It took a while to wear down their oppressive sense of awe before I began getting honest answers as well. No one here wanted to stop their research, but they relished a sense of direction and purpose for the fields they were already interested in. I recruited those already involved in the fields I asked for or those interested in learning the fields.

After organizing an initial set of groups, I messaged Torix about the operations while telling them that I'd be here at the same time tomorrow. The more students and competent professors they could inform, the better. It only took two hours, and I constructed a firm framework for these future organizations.

And this was merely the beginning.

After leaving the college, I paced over towards the dungeoneering branch at Mt. Verner. As was the case with most organizations, their headquarters rested on the second floor. There, I found a nearly sleeping receptionist who almost relieved themselves at the sight of me. A quick conversation later, and I had Isa Antoun, the dungeoneering lead, heading to her office.

I stepped past the hallway, and I couldn't help but appreciate the rustic approach she took to the dungeoneering main branch. A few taxidermied eldritch hung on the oak walls, and the subtle scent of tanning agents lingered from them. A few odd chemicals escaped my knowledge, likely a treatment designed to keep the eldritch from reviving.

Beside me, maps and charts covered the walls alongside experimental armor or weapon pieces. A few dots detailed dungeons, and the data points changed color depending on the severity or need for clearing. The grizzled dungeoneering veteran approached while wearing her leathers coated in the same materials.

Sleep still sank its claws into her eyes, but despite her weariness, Isa sharpened at the sight of me. She reached out a hand.

"Daniel, it's good to see you again."

I grasped her hand.

"You as well, Isa. Sorry for waking you and calling on such short notice."

She shook my hand before scoffing.

"I understand how tumultuous your schedule is, sir. There's never a need to apologize for doing so much for the guild. After all, it's better I work around what you're doing than you work around me."

A pang of guilt hit me, considering how lazy I'd been the last few weeks.

"Don't mention it. Now, I've got a few guild operation expansions I wanted to run by you."

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

"What did you have in mind?"

I raised my hands.

"I'm planning on making a forestry clearing operation."

Isa crossed her arms, the muscles rippling in her forearms.

"Really? We already cleansed the largest of them."

I nodded.

"We have, but we need to dispatch the middle-tiered ones as well. I had the idea of having my golems carry search parties out into the wild and have groups of adventurers clear them out."

Isa winced.

"Sounds like a lot of work."

"I'll have the Speaker's offer up contractual rewards. We also need to help get people to actually fight the monsters instead of only trying to harvest goods from dungeons."

Isa flushed red.

"Oh, so you've heard about that?"

I smiled.

"I've lived it. Recently, that is."

She eyed my cloak.

"So that's what this is all about. Hm. We can definitely make it happen, though I'd prefer a more organic approach. Forcing the issue doesn't lead to the change we're looking for, usually."

I stepped to my side, bumping a chair. It flung away before I grabbed it, cracking the wood.

"Dammit. Anyway, get people who are willing to fight and have the awards exceed the payments for simply returning goods. We need people to get leveled, asap."

"Is there a reason? It helps motivate those asking questions if I can give them an answer."

I gazed at a set of maps.

"There's going to be a massive expansion in the danger of different dungeons here soon. I need as many prepared people so that I won't have to spend all my time protecting them."

Isa's eyes widened.

"Do you think there'll be an invasion by Elysium?"

I shook my head.

"No, but it could be worse. We're working with a lot of unknowns, but suffice it to say, we're going to need as many strong individuals as possible. That also means keeping the forests and terrain as clean as we possibly can so that our world isn't overrun. Can you do that for me, Isa?"

She gave me a salute.

"Absolutely."

I raised a fist.

"Good. Start harvesting more from the eldritch, like energized portions of their bodies. We can use them to create a backbone for an alchemy industry. I also want to start up armory competitions with rewards rivaling dungeon clearing. Upper-tiered smiths will even get my legacy and rings as awards."

Isa spread her hands.

"But your golems create all the mana we need, and your armor exceeds-"

I met her eye.

"Isa. Listen to me. I can't be there for everyone. I will lead billions and then trillions of people in time. If my guild can't fend for itself without my direct support, then we'll lose large portions of the population if anything happens."

Isa leaned back, and she gulped as if waking up.

"I...You're right. Of course, you're right. I'll get on that as quickly as I can."

I put a hand on her shoulder.

"You've done well for my guild. I trust you to handle this promptly, but right now, you need rest. Get some sleep and start hacking away on the project tomorrow. I would've waited, but right now happens to be the only time I'm free."

She shook her head.

"You live an insane life, sir."

I scoffed while lowering my hand.

"A little, yeah. You do as well, though, don't you?"

She smiled, the expression full of menace.

"Killing monsters is my every day, sir. Nothing strange about it."

I turned away.

"It was good seeing you again. Take care, alright?"

She saluted.

"Of course, sir. You as well."

After heading out, I passed by the stone masonry along one wall and a slab of granite on the other. The contrasting materials gave it greater variety and more visual fullness. I never noticed those details as I rushed back and forth like a madman, trying to finish everything all at once. At the end of the hallway, I walked down the stairwell before heading back outside the mountain proper.



Passing the wealthy suburbs of the town, I enjoyed watching two hummingbirds play with a mana construct, the energized being looking like a miniaturized hawk. By now, the sun crawled up overhead, covering the growing city in shades of orange and yellow. Passing the beautiful shades and vistas, I walked back into the Northern edge of town where Joshua's bar resided.

There, I headed down the stairs to find Joshua up and handling a shipment of different brews. A man in uniform carried a platform holding a dozen cases, and an antigravitational panel kept it afloat. As I passed by, I eyed a few of the drinks.

"What are those?"

Joshua gave me a nod of recognition.

"These? They're the standard local beers, wines, and meads we like to buy weekly. Recently, the meads have been flying off the shelves."

I nodded.

"Are the bottles enchanted?"

Joshua and the uniformed man laughed. Joshua nudged the delivery man.

"Can you believe this guy?"

The delivery man's hands shook, more as a feature than out of nervousness.

"He's got a...A good sense of humor."

Joshua gave the delivery man a shake.

"Hey, take care, Micky. Say hello to the kids. We can have dinner on Thursday."

Micky gave Joshua a jittery nod.

"Absolutely. I'll let them know you'll bring the c-candy they like."

After he headed out, I helped Joshua tote the caskets inside. As I carried three of them, Joshua sneered.

"Show-off."

I pointed down.

"Sorry about that. I can just put them here, then?"

Joshua recoiled.

"Now, I didn't say all that."

I smirked. We headed inside, and Jamal was already up, planning the rest of the day out. As I paced down, he turned and spread his hands.

"Ah, Daniel, it's good to see you."

I walked by, letting my feet creak the boards.

"Good to see you too. Let me offload these."

I set the caskets near the bar where ice enchantments helped a series of fridges stay cool. Beside them, blocks of quintessence powered the enchantments. Jamal eyed them.

"It's hard to buy quintessence like that. It works far better than normal origin mana, and it's more stable, too."

I pushed each casket in front of each fridge.

"I thought the golems handed out these crystals like their candy?"

Jamal rolled his eyes.

"They do, if you can get their attention, but there's thousands of people flooding into Springfield every day. They're spread a little too thin to just hand out mana all the time."

I wondered about building a mana-based power network, but I put that on the back burner for now. Once finished moving the stock beside its appropriate place, I walked in front of the bar.

"What are you working on?"

Jamal covered a set of documents.

"Woah, now. These are top secret until the other two wake up."

Speaking of, Nissa and Jasmine walked out, their expressions a mixture of vampiric apprehension for light and being poisoned. Joshua trotted over, and he made four glasses of his tonic this time. As I grabbed my glass, I gave everyone a cheers as Joshua stocked the drinks. As the day started, Jamal moved his documents and spread his arms.

"Behold. Profit."

The guy had already inventoried our gains and sold off quite a bit of our haul. He'd done such an extensive and rapid job of it that I couldn't help but think the guy was a natural merchant. Jamal raised three fingers.

"Guess what this is?"

Jasmine leaned against her hand.

"How many brain cells you have?"

Nissa raised a hand.

"How high you can count?"

Joshua and I stifled a laugh before Jamal gave them both a tight smile. Jamal nodded.

"Oh, you both are so very clever. Truly, I'm blessed to be with you both."

The ladies high-fived while drinking their tonics. Jamal shook his hand.

"This is the number of digits we gained from our last mission's profits. 120k in total."

Jasmine nearly spit out her drink. Her eyes widened before she gulped down as if swallowing a stone. She sputtered.

"No way. 120 grand? The fuck?"

Jamal put his hands on his hips.

"That's right. We just made more than we have in the last six months."

I kept looking. Jamal frowned.

"Ahem?"

I turned to Joshua.

"I think he's talking to you."

Joshua facepalmed. I pointed at myself.

"You mean me? What?"

Jamal pinched the bridge of his nose.

"It's a lot of money, man."

My eyes widened.

"Oh. Ohhh. I see. Good. That's, it's good."

Jamal shook his head as if dealing with an idiot. Perhaps he was. He raised a hand.

"I figured we should give the new guy a sign-on bonus. A gesture of goodwill, so to speak."

Jasmine nodded.

"I don't see why not. He played his part."

Nissa sighed.

"If we must."

I blinked.

"Sign on bonus? I thought I was being tested."

They gawked at me in disgust. Nissa murmured.

"You expected not to be paid? Ew."

I peered back and forth.

"Not really, no. I expected you guys to go out on a limb, and trust me. This is my repayment. I'll take a portion of the next haul."

They laughed far harder than they should have before Jasmine wiped a tear from her eye.

"Time after time."

Jamal took a satisfied breath.

"The guy is a joke machine. A real comedian, I tell you."

Nissa shook her hand.

"It's the timing that gets me."

I waved a hand in frustration.

"Alright, whichever way you guys want to split it, I'm good."

Jamal broke down the profits for a while, and he gave a detailed set of documents showcasing where and how he sold everything. After getting it handled, he showed the 127,291 credits. He gave me a 38k cut while they each got 30 thousand. I tried my best to get them to not give me anything, but they wouldn't accept it.

It felt like stealing from the poor, as self-serving and arrogant as that sounded. Either way, I hadn't wanted to take the money, but there was no genial means of stopping it. After Jamal distributed the credits, he raised his hands with excitement.

"So, I've been thinking of how to use this sudden influx of cash flow."

Nissa shook her head.

"Absolutely not."

Jasmine leaned against the countertop.

"I'll listen, but don't expect much."

I sat down at the bar as Jamal raised his hands.

"I want to start up a sub-guild here at Joshua's bar."

As if someone defecated on the floor, the ladies' faces crinkled up. Jamal crossed his arms.

"Ok, so what in the hell's the problem?"

Nissa leaned forward.

"This money is going to my bookshop, period."

Jasmine shook her head as if tired of the conversation before it even began.

"Jamal. I'm going to travel with the money. You know that. I've been wanting to see the eight world wonders after systemization since it started. I want to see what's changed."

Jamal's eyes dimmed a bit.

"That's...I can see that. But here's the thing, if we invest in a sub-guild, we can get new perks and get other adventurers working under us. The passive income could support those, er, loftier pursuits."

Nissa massaged her temples.

"I never wanted to be an adventuring guild head."

Having hopeful eyes, Joshua peered at Jamal. The barkeep raised his hands.

"I won't say any more than this, but everyone needs a home. Guild or not, you all are always welcome here."

Jasmine reached out and grabbed Joshua's hand. Jasmine smiled.

"Thanks. After I finish seeing the world, I know where to come back to."

Joshua peered away, his eyes itchy all of a sudden. He coughed into a hand.

"As long as you know."

Nissa grinned.

"You know, you've always been a big softy with us. Why is that?"

Joshua gulped.

"You three remind me of some people I used to know. That's all."

A depth resided in that statement, the hurt, longing, and scars intermingling into something sacred. Jamal shook his hands at Jasmine and Nissa. The leader blinked.

"Guys, neither of you is ready to leave the Earth or travel to its dark corners yet. We have to get some levels, maybe even some classes before we're prepared to do something like that. In the meantime, we can use the sub-guild as a way to officialize our status. It'll give us access to better missions and more profits in the meantime."

Jasmine raised a fist.

"You don't get to reach into our pockets and decide what we do with our money."



Nissa sneered.

"We all risked our lives out there. We all contributed. It's not right to tell us what to do here after it's all said and done."

Jamal shook his hands.

"I'm telling you both, this isn't just for me. It'll help us all."

Nissa stood up.

"I'm about to say some things I'll regret. Excuse me."

Jasmine furrowed her brow.

"You can't keep telling us what to do all the time. We never elected you as our leader or our tyrant."

Jamal hit the bar.

"Oh, come on. We barely talked about."

Nissa raised a hand.

"We've talked this over so many times. Stop acting like we're not exhausted with it. By now, you know what we think. You're just trying to wear us down."

As Nissa took a step away, Jamal turned to me.

"Before you go, let's hear what the new guy has to say."

I gulped as they all turned to me. Jamal gave me a nod.

"Well?"

I blinked.

"Me?"

Jamal gave me another hurried nod.

"Yes. You."

Chapter 433: Honesty

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"Well?"

I blinked.

"Me?"

Jamal gave me another hurried nod.

"Yes. You."

As they spoke, I had my own thoughts on what they should do, but I also understood how little context I had for the situation. These three had adventured together for years. Each of them held their own ideas for their futures, and I was merely a double agent using them for information. Despite that, I had knowledge they lacked in a few areas. After taking a second, I parsed through a few stories and ideas before standing from the bar.

"I have a few thoughts, though I don't know any of you as well as you all do. Please, take whatever I have to say with a grain of salt."

Nissa rolled her eyes.

"Enough preamble. Out with it."

I took a breath.

"I think you're both right and you're both wrong."

Jasmine's head fell back.

"Of course, you're riding that fence for dear life."

I peered her way.

"Not quite. I have specific ideas, and I'm sure about them. I just know how information is delivered oftentimes exceeds the importance of the information itself."

Jamal shook his hand.

"Come on, man. Lay it on us."

I pointed at him.

"You don't get to say how we spend our portion of this score. That's entirely up to us, and trying to help us sell the goods to create goodwill before asking for the income like this is in bad faith."

Nissa smirked before I turned to her.

"I've travelled the world a bit on my way from the Rockies to here. You're not ready to go out and search for any runes or esoteric bits of information. In fact, you're going to need to get level capped and preferably well into a class before you head out on your own. Same for you and your great wonders trip, Jasmine."

Jasmine narrowed her eyes.

"What makes you so sure?"

I crossed my arms.

"I mentioned coming from Colorado, and I can tell you from experience, the Rockies are an eldritch-infested wasteland. You and Nissa both have to be careful against typical forest eldritch, let alone the monsters you find near landmarks. That's why travelling anywhere by yourself is paramount to suicide."

Jasmine tilted her head.

"What if I have a legacy and a ring? That'll improve my combat capabilities dramatically, and I can leverage that to visit the places I want."

I swallowed a bit of annoyance at her abusing the system I established. I frowned.

"You'll lose the legacy whenever you spend several years travelling the world."

Jasmine nodded.

"Sure, but I can always keep the ring."

Jamal shook his head.

"You think you can outsmart The Harbinger?"

Jasmine massaged her temples.

"He doesn't even care about us. He's preoccupied fighting cosmic horrors or whatever the hell he's up against. It's going to be a long time before he starts caring about the rings and what happens to them."

I leaned forward.

"Now, I don't know for sure if this is the case, but I've heard a rumor recently. Apparently, The Harbinger is going to be putting stricter requirements on keeping the rings."

Nissa snapped her fingers.

"And here I was hoping to get some of the benefits before he put a tighter lid on those artifacts. Assuming he follows through with what you said. If that's the case, then that guy's timing is immaculate for screwing me over."

Jasmine spread her hands.

"Why would he even care about the rings?"

I raised my hands, keeping my voice low.

"From what I've gathered, he went to The Shattered Spires and heard of crimes committed by his guild members. He'll be tying the rings to his legacy from here on out. If you try to keep them, he'll send his golems to get you."

Their faces paled. Jasmine murmured.

"He wouldn't."

I frowned.

"I think he would."

Nissa put her hands on her forehead.

"The metal giant wants everybody to fight until they die like him? Great. Just great."

I let my hands flop against my sides in resignation.

"Hey, I'm just the messenger."

Jamal leaned against the bar.

"We knew the situation wouldn't last forever."

Jasmine glared at him.

"You're just happy my travelling plans have been postponed."

Jamal put his hand against his chest.

"My desires and aims are pure and just. Beyond reproach, really. It's a part of my charm."

The ladies frowned at him. I shrugged.

"My advice would be to keep your heads down and change the kind of missions you're doing. Right now, you're all focused on making money. In my opinion, levels are this world's real currency, and simply killing eldritch would help-

Nissa threw a piece of ice at me. I snatched it out of the air. I took a deep breath, acting melodramatic. I walked over to the bar and leaned over, my breath ragged. Jamal furrowed his brow.

"You alright, man?"

I raised a shaking fist.

"Of course not."

I turned to Nissa, the ice between my fingers.

"That was...Cold of you."

A cacaphony of boos erupted, and I dodged six other pieces of ice thrown my way. I laughed while grinning.

"What's with this chilly reception?"

More ice was tossed my way. It coursed towards me from cups supplied by Joshua, the pieces becoming an avalanche. I kept dodging as my laughter became maniacal.

"Why, that's very mean, not very ice at all."

Joshua raised his arm, an ice spear coalescing.

"If you make another ice pun, I'm not serving you that tonic ever again."

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

My mind danced with possibility, but I suppressed the urge to watch the world burn. I took a breath, letting a few ice pieces clank against me.

"Alright, fair enough."

Joshua let the spear land in his hand before snapping it in half. He threw it in an open fridge. Jamal shook his head.

"What were we even talking about?"

Nissa waved her finger in his direction.

"You were trying to spend all our money."

Jamal rolled his eyes.

"That's not what this is. It's an investment."

I walked back over.

"No, it's you spending their money and putting them in a position they don't want. From the sound of it, you don't want it either."

Jamal leaned his elbows against the bar.

"Ok, Sherlock. Please, by all means, tell me what I want."

I leaned against the bar beside him.

"Tell me this then - would you make this guild if Nissa and Jasmine weren't in it?"

Jamal frowned.

"Of course not."



I sighed.

"That's my point. This isn't something you actually care about. You just want to keep your group together, and this is your means of tying them both down."

Jamal flushed while Jasmine reached up her hand and snapped her fingers several times.

"Preach."

I shrugged.

"I don't see why you don't just try to turn the trip to the great wonders into an excavation for rare artifacts. If you did that, then Nissa gets her supplies for her shop, Jasmine gets her trip around the world, and you get to stay close to your friends."

I put a hand on his shoulder, my eyes flashing over memories with Michael and Kelsey.

"Don't let something stupid like pride stop you from keeping those close to you. This world is harsh enough as it is. We shouldn't add more pain to it."

Jamal grasped his hands before throwing them up.

"Ah fuck it. Fine. We'll go on the damn trip."

The ladies put their hands up while letting out a series of cheers. I let my hand go.

"That's good to hear."

Jamal leaned back.

"Hear? You're obviously invited, man. We need someone who can help show us how to travel those eldritch infested wastelands like you mentioned, and you have experience we'd love on our team."

Nissa adjusted her circular glasses.

"I'm not necessarily opposed to the idea. Well, that strongly at least."

Jasmine pointed a finger gun at me. She fired it as she said,

"He's alright by me."

Jamal spread his arms.

"There you have it. Democracy for the win."

My smile softened, a subtle sadness creeping in.

"Ah. I'd absolutely love to, I really would."

Their expressions dimmed. Nissa turned, the tattoos on her neck sheening in the lamplight.

"It's probably for the best anyway. We can't have some slacker who relies on potions all the time anyway."

Jamal rolled his eyes.

"I've never seen him sleep since we met. Or relax either."

Nissa coughed into her hand.

"Oh, just shut the hell up."

Jasmine gave Jamal a glare. Jamal sighed.

"Sure, sure."

We kept talking for a while, but the energy from the previous conversation faded. Knowing this was a temporary arrangement established a precedent, one where no one wanted to get too close to me anymore. By the time we finished talking, they all wanted to split up and go shopping for supplies.

Before they left, I raised my hand to them all.

"Yo, guys."

They turned. I lowered my hand.

"I'm going to stay in Springfield for a while. I'll be able to help you guys on missions for a few weeks to get you all rich and prepared. We can even spar to sharpen our skills."

Nissa smirked.

"And you think Mr. Bottles can beat us in proper combat?"

I held an absolute but quiet confidence.

"There really is only one way to find out."

Jamal raised his hands.

"Ok, ok. You've twisted our arms by begging. Pleading. Some could even call it groveling."

Nissa nodded.

"I would be one of those people."

I scoffed.

"I can just work with another-"

Jamal raised his hand while bending his head down.

"Enough. I can't stand to watch a grown man kneel. We'll let you join us as we run through a few more missions to stockpile supplies and credits. Besides, we can't just let this homeless wanderer starve, can we?"

Jasmine crossed her arms.

"No, that would be wrong. He's too pitiful."

Nissa frowned.

"And ugly."

Jasmine nodded.

"And full of himself."

Nissa sighed.

"Did I mention ugly?"

Jamal laughed while I waved them off. I smiled.

"Don't force my hand. I have more puns if need be."

They skeddaddled outside while cackling, and we left on far better terms than the middle of the conversation would've implied. Either way, I got to work sending messages and organizing the initiatives I started up over the last week. At the same time, I sipped on the tonic while eating a grapefruit Joshua ordered a while back.

After handling my piled-up guild business, I searched within myself to assess my injuries. They still lingered as scars, but the activity helped speed the process along. At the same time, I tested my new Rise of Eden power by saturating my room with the passive buffs. It carried through, and I was able to get a portion of the stat increases even while using my other dimensional wakes.

It was a colossal upgrade. Usually, I experienced a sudden and steep drop-off in stats whenever I switched away from The Rise of Eden. It always felt bad, though Event Horizon could immediately replace the missing stats if I fed on enough people or enemies. Perfection's Providence wasn't as much of a stat boosting wake anyway, so it had never felt that bad to lose the stats in that aura.

However, Event Horizon and The Rise of Eden competed for my best-in-combat dimensional wake. On occasion, I wielded my primordial wake to get the upper hand in mind magic shenanigans, but it usually lacked the same absolute power. In a pinch, I could soak an area before facing off against a foe using Event Horizon now.

It gave me another trump card, and I would wield it as a hammer.

As I waited for the others to return, I tested Perfection's Providence. It held the most unique and active ability of them all - creation. I could generate conscious bolts of mana now. It wasn't like the golems or Torix's creations either. This was full-blown sentience.

I could have ethereal birds fly across the room before landing on my shoulder. Once made, they followed the personality I willed upon them. However, it wasn't based on a constant stream of orders. It would go upon its own volition, making its mark upon the world. While I couldn't test the magic using even a fraction of my power currently, I could wield tiny bits of it.

Before I knew it, I had a dozen floating soda bottles with legs floating above me. They danced in sync with canes, top hats, and resonating their hums all the while. It took no effort whatsoever to maintain, and I watched the bottles while utterly ensorcelled. They

kept dancing like the world's greatest screensaver until someone knocked on the door frame.

Nissa leaned her head in, her expression deadpan.

"Uh, what are you doing?"

I pulled an obelisk out of my storage in a flash.

"Watching a stupid video."

She peered at the bottles.

"Huh. Yeah, that sounds about right. We're all planning out the next mission, and we figured you'd want to be involved."

I threw myself out of my bed.

"Of course."

As we walked off, Nissa put her hands on her hips.

"And Jamal said you never relaxed. Dude's watching videos like it's YouTube or something."

I smiled.

"What can I say? It passes the time."

We walked back into Joshua's bar. The barkeep had no time to dally with us as customers flooded in for the weekend. A bead of sweat dripped down his brow as the man flowed from one task to the next, an obvious flow overcoming him. In that moment, I understood why Joshua chose this life.

The man loved it.

In one of the booths, we planned out the next mission. It wasn't anything as tumultuous as the last one, and everybody got drinks and food aplenty. By the time the night waned, we were the last customers left. As was tradition, I carried the three adventurers to their beds. When I passed Joshua, I noticed several empty glasses beside the man.

I raised a brow.

"What did you do with these guys before I was a part of the group?"

Joshua smoked a cigar, and the smoke lingered over him like a dark haze. It seemed to mold into his mood, the gray becoming a part of him.

"I'd carry them to the room myself. Of course, that cost extra. They always passed out anyways. Heh. I wish I could live like there was no tomorrow like they do."

He took a puff on the cigar, holding it in. He let it out in a satisfied sigh.

"But I can't anymore. Life's funny like that. It shows you these fleeting, beautiful moments, and before you know it, they become memories. You can have something so valuable in your hands, but you only realize that after it's all gone."

Joshua gazed in the distance.

"And then, when the dust settles and you have time to breathe...Those memories become the most valuable thing you have left. Hah. They're just shadows of what you had, yet they're as good as gold compared to all this other trash we have to live through."

I frowned, but I listened. Joshua smothered his cigar before taking a breath.

"I shouldn't have said all that. I must be in one hell of a mood tonight."

I waved my hand.

"No, it's fine. I'm here to listen."

He nodded before turning to me.

"You know, you have something good with these three. Not going with them...It's a real shame to see you go out and waste the time you do have. Trust an old man that's wasted several lifetimes' worth of goodness in his life...Don't let these moments pass you by. You will regret it more than you know."

He spoke the words like a man holds a sick child. The worry, the care, it left me unable to find words to respond. After a while, a wave of guilt passed over me. I let out a sigh.

"I have something to tell you. Let me put these three down."

Joshua crossed his arms before putting his feet on his countertop.

"I've got all the time in the world. It's what happens when a man's waiting to die."

I walked the three adventurers back to their rooms before walking back to the tavern's main room. I leaned against the wood, a bit of fear creeping its way into my stomach. Joshua threw his hand up.

"What? Are you scared of little old me?"

I nodded.

"I am."

Joshua frowned.

"Oh."

He put his feet down before sitting upright. He put a hand on the back of his head.



"Well, son...I know you haven't been telling us everything, and that's probably for the best. After all, oversharing isn't good for anyone. Look at what I just did. That sure as hell didn't help anybody, did it?"

I shook my head.

"No, I appreciate it. I really do. You remind me of what I fight for."

Joshua flushed.

"I thought you just fought for money."

"I never have."

Joshua nodded.

"I figured as much. That cloak's worth more than those three combined."

I steepled my fingers.

"I...I haven't been honest with you all about who I am."

Joshua sighed.

"Son, you can tell me what you need to when the time is right. Don't feel like I'm going to kick you out because we disagree on something. You're still welcome here."

I peered up at him.

"Even if I make more ice puns?"

Joshua leaned back, his hands raised.

"Now wait a minute. A man has to have standards."

I laughed before gulping. I rolled the fingers of my hands, this moment becoming surprisingly difficult. After a few breaths, I stood tall.

"I'm not a wanderer from Colorado."

Joshua rolled his eyes.

"Any fool could tell that much. Like I said, that cloak alone lets me know you're not just some nobody."

I swung the cloak off my back.

"I'm a native of Springfield."

Joshua's eyes widened. He gawked.

"You're...You're from the first platoon?"

I unshackled several of the tightening belts over my arms.

"In a sense."

Joshua peered to the side.

"It makes so much more sense now why you're so strong. You faced Yawm and lived. Woah."

I nodded.

"And a little more."

Joshua scoffed.

"You fought in the Elysium Wars as well? Color me surprised."

My eyes glowed from mana. My presence leaked into the room, and Joshua's hair bristled. I nodded.

"I faced and survived Yawm. I killed millions on Giess. I slaughtered armies on Blegara. I faced and destroyed Lehesion across several timelines. I fought against the avatars of the Old Ones and won. I've even conquered planets in my legion's name."

Joshua's awe faded.

"Well, this was a pretty good joke, I have to admit. You had me going for a while."

I pulled the top of my leather armor off.

"It's no joke."

Joshua covered his face.

"My god, why in the hell are you undressing?"

I finished removing the leather pads, my dark metal armor forming over me the moment it could. I grew several feet taller, my head hitting the ceiling. My aura encompassed Joshua but not the others. The old man's surprise came back with vengeance, and he fell backwards off his chair. He scrambled back to the fridges, and his eyes opened wide.

"You...You're not who I think you are...Are you?"

I frowned. Mana glowed over my frame. It dolloped like glowing poison floating across space. My runes blurred the air in the room, and I molded gravitation to protect all that surrounded me. I sat down, my legs crossed, and my torso was still taller than the bar. A

sad smile crossed my face as I loomed over the man as a titan of metal, violence, and potential.

"I am The Harbinger of Cataclysm."

Chapter 434: A New Home

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"I am The Harbinger of Cataclysm."

Joshua peered up at me. A slideshow of emotion crossed over his face, from contortions of fear to the open gawking of surprise. It settled on unease, and he peered down. Before he even attempted to say something, I raised my hand.

"There will be no consequences for how you've spoken to me or treated me up until now. I'm not hiding myself amongst you all just so that I can find excuses to punish those that don't deserve it."

A palpable wave of relief passed over the barkeeper. He took a breath.

"That's...That's good to hear."

He put a hand over his chest.

"God...If Nissa knew. She'd blow a gasket."

"I prefer to hear her criticisms over having her hide them. That's the most pivotal reason I chose to hide here. I wanted to listen to what people had to say when I wasn't around. It gives me a perspective I can't find any other way."

Joshua frowned.

"And I was here lecturing you on how to live your life. I'm such a fool."

I waved my hands.

"Absolutely not. That was a valid perspective, and I understand it well. A part of me wants to go out adventuring with them. It's a lot of fun to take on smaller jobs that don't have such brutal consequences. However, now you know why I'm not joining them in their journey."

Joshua's eyes grew distant.

"You can't put everything to the side and abandon your responsibilities. There's still so much that needs to be done."

A soft smile traced my lips.

"I couldn't have said it better myself."

Joshua put a hand on his forehead.

"The gray skin. Here I thought it was from the cloak or a hardening enchantment. And the confidence. It was absolute since I met you. I've never felt fear aside from admitting who you were to me...Why? Why would you, of all people, be scared of me?"

I leaned my elbows onto my crossed legs.

"I've been lying to you since we met. You were taking a genuine interest in my path, and it felt wrong to continue putting up a charade."

"What about the others?"

I turned to the rooms, Nissa snoring loudly. I smiled.

"Eh, I'd rather they didn't know."

Despite himself, Joshua glared.

"I'd say they're putting a genuine interest in you, just like me."

I smiled.

"You see things too clearly. They know something's a bit off, but they're not panicking to find answers. Instead, they'd rather know me as my false identity. It's something they choose to believe in. On the other hand, you never bought it from the moment I walked into this place."

Joshua sighed.

"But you didn't kill them on their mission. From what I heard, you got them out of a sticky situation, so it's not like I had a reason to mistrust you afterward. I will say, there's a small chance my mind kept finding inconsistencies in your story. Like a drug fiend trying to kick an old habit, I just couldn't let it go."

I shook my head.

"The part of you that didn't give up on figuring out who I was is the same part of you that persevered after your loss so long ago. You're a fighter, Joshua, and I respect anyone who can stand up after facing tragedy. There is dignity in that."

Joshua's eyes reddened, and the man turned before scratching his nose.

"Thank you kindly."

After he had a moment to collect himself, Joshua stood and grabbed a glass. For the first time, I noticed how it was the same glass he always polished during his downtime, and his hands shook as he rubbed it down.

"So...What has you taking the time off to pull off this spy mission of yours?"

I lifted a hand, the bright gray crisscrossing my armored skin.

"I'm injured. Severely."

Joshua fumbled his glass before catching it. Cold sweat dripped down his brow.

"Ooh, clumsy me. I...Uhm, how long is it going to take to heal?"

I clenched my hand, sparks of pain rippling across the wounds.

"A few weeks, from the looks of it. I should have just enough time to help them with a few missions and gather a bit more intel. After that, I'll be heading to Blegara to face some eldritch horror."

Joshua's left eye twitched.

"Normal situations for you, then?"

"Oh yeah. That kind of thing happens every day. This slow-paced adventurer lifestyle is the unusual part."

"Slow paced? You go on life-risking missions once a week."

I shrugged.

"I'm intimately familiar with death. Walking near it isn't unusual anymore. In all honesty, I think everyone who's survived this long after systemization is like that. I've seen those three walk the line between the living and the dead many times already."

Joshua nodded.

"I...I suppose. I guess that's why you want to help them start their journey?"

My runes glowed, humming like a gentle far off rumbling.

"It shows me what people are fighting for. These few weeks off have been eye-opening. I feel the progress of the places I've forged, and it bolsters my ambition. It makes the endless war and violence seem worth it, most importantly."

Joshua gulped.

"What are you warring against?"

I scoffed.

"If I told you the name of our enemies, you would die, as would I."

He dropped his glass again. This time, he lacked the deft control to catch it. Despair rang over his eyes before I lifted a finger. A gravity well hauled the glass upward back into his hands. A visible relief washed over the man before he set it down. Joshua mouthed.

"Thank you."

"Never a problem. I can reinforce the glass if you'd like-"

"No. I...I want the glass to remain as it is."

I nodded, not wanting to pry. After a few moments, Joshua peered up at me.



"What's your plan with those three?"

I sighed.

"I'm going to prepare them as well as I can. They're barely ready to clear dungeons, let alone travel the wilds. As they are, they'll die whenever they face any eldritch that's an outlier. It will be a swift, painless death, and I'd rather see them grow old."

He gazed at the glass.

"That's good."

A silence signalled that Joshua didn't have anything else to say or add. I took a breath before shrinking myself down to my standard size. Standing, I rolled my shoulders before cracking my neck. Joshua rolled his hand.

"I know I've been asking a lot and telling you very little, but...How did you do everything you've done up until now? It all seems impossible."

I turned, walking to my room.

"I endured. Oftentimes, that's all that can be done."

Stepping back into my hole in the wall, I put back on my leathers. After a while of thinking, I practiced my new wake abilities. The funnest one to mess around with was the primordial constructs. They carried a vitality that the other skills lacked. In general, The Rise of Eden was about as boring an ability as they came, but it also offered immense utility.

On the other hand, I was genuinely afraid of Event Horizon. I could devour someone's thoughts and memories now, and that held an evil, malevolent potential. It gave me chills whenever I pulled it forth, yet, inevitably, I would direct this ability against another person. Their memories, mind, and soul would become fuel for my armor.

And that terrified me.

After hours of waiting, the others awoke once more. They continued their morning ritual, and Joshua served them the tonic as usual. He juiced my tonic up more than normal, adding extra herbs and an aged pine water. It was like tasting the Rocky Mountains' wind all over again. Ah. After we enjoyed the morning, we got our plans ready for another mission.

In that flow, we continued completing mission after mission. Each one of them had some odd twist and turn, but they never rivalled the raw lethality of our first dungeon. They also had lower rewards overall, and as the days turned into weeks, I suspected Jamal chose worse dungeons to delay their trip.

It gave my body and mind time to heal after facing the ends of oblivion or whatever the hell lies between dimensions. As that time passed, I gained greater memories of what happened with Marcella. Even more so, I learned what happened against the leviathan in the gloom. It had pierced into my mind, and in rage, my mind pierced into it.

Wielding the new shade of Event Horizon, I had torn into its psyche. However, it existed as something so colossal and so massive that it had hardly noticed my obtrusion. I was a bee on a bear, and though I stung it, the bear barely noticed. It left me humbled even more than facing the Old Ones.

They existed as peak entities, so getting squashed by them was only natural. Some random creature in the void? I was supposed to be above that, and yet I wasn't. Not even close. I might have to find some means of absorbing the interdimensional energy to expand my dimension's abilities. Otherwise, a rip in space would unleash one of those beasts onto Earth, and I would be unprepared.

As I came to that unsettling conclusion, I took the others to one of the parks nearby. Nissa, Jasmine, and Jamal followed along, each of us aware of the nooks and crannies of this neighborhood by now. We landed in the largest park here. It was called Island Park, and the expanse opened up to a moat that circled a patch of green turf.

Ivy encircled the pillars of bridges that crossed the artificial streams. Kinetic augments kept the water flowing despite no source for the flow, and magic filled the stream as it evaporated. Trees pocketed the ground, old oaks spreading leaves out to provide natural shade to anyone visiting.

The majority of the park opened up to an opening in the middle of the area. That gave us a vast space to fight on, though other citizens lounged about on floating blankets or in obelisks. Facing Nissa, Jamal, and Jasmine, I spread my hands.

"Which one of you wants to go first?"

Nissa stepped forward before cracking her knuckles.

"Ooh, don't threaten me with a good time."

I stepped forward, my steps controlled.

"Then start whenever you're ready."

She smirked.

"Remember, you're the one who demanded we spar."

She dashed forward, throwing a haymaker at my face. I stepped to her side, Nissa's punch sliding past my face. At the same time, I pressed onto her foot with my own while hitting her gut. Her momentum pushed her forward, and she fell onto my fist. I pushed her up in a slow punch that sent her flying several feet away.

She flopped down before I dashed forward. I caught her before she oriented herself. As I held her by her foot, she let out a gasp.

"Ow."

Jasmine and Jamal's jaws slackened. Jasmine murmured.

"Since when did you know how to fight like that?"

I shook my fist as if it was hurt while setting Nissa down.

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

"I used to box a little back in the day. Monsters forced that skill to evolve into something else entirely. Regardless, who's next?"

Jasmine stepped forward. She took an entirely different approach, feeling around my attacking range. I eyed her the entire time, keeping my body relaxed and ready. After a few probing jabs, she struck in an all-out swinging back kick. I shot downward, and her foot slid over my head. I grabbed her leg and pulled her up.

She fell down as I lifted her off the ground. Wrapping my free arm around her waist, I swung her head toward the ground before stopping an inch from the turf. I smiled.

"You done?"

Jasmine scoffed.

"Uh, yeah. Sure."

I flipped her over before setting her down. Jamal stepped up before raising his hands in a boxer's stance.

"I'm just saying, man, but I used to do some boxing back in the day, too."

My eyes widened.

"Oh really? I'll box alongside you then."

We went at it for a few minutes, and I could tell Jamal lied to me straight-faced. The guy boxed like someone who watched a few montage videos on YouTube, got hyped up, then told everyone he knew all about it. While not physically painful to watch, it left a sour taste in my mouth before I gave up on actual boxing.

He leaned way too far back, leaving his midsection wide open. I faked a jab up high before he raised his guard. A simple left hook flattened the guy after that. He kneeled on the ground, groaning.

"Dude. Not cool."

Jasmine laughed.

"Why'd you say you boxed?"

Jamal shook his hands in frustration.

"It was to make a connection, dammit."

Nissa pointed at Jamal from the ground.

"Yeah, connecting his fist to your stomach."

Jamal rolled over.

"You must've had the same strategy swinging wide like that."

Nissa grunted.

"I took him too lightly. It'll be different next time."

Jamal scoffed.

"What'd you call him again? Mister Bottle, right?"

Nissa ripped up some grass before tossing it at Jamal. He choked out laughter, and after a while, they recovered. We went at it a few more times before they started landing blows of their own, which made perfect sense. I wasn't using more strength than they

were, and half of the reason I flattened them so easily was because they weren't applying themselves or their strength.

After all, we fought as superhumans now. Techniques changed as the degrees of force rose. In particular, staying grounded turned from an advisable strategy to absolutely necessary. If you got off balance, your opponent could ragdoll you once you weren't able to put force on your feet.

This continued for a few hours, and for a first session, they learned quite a bit. I was still the best fighter of the bunch, but the Daniel I showed them gave hope for an eventual victory. I was strong, but not domineeringly so. That gave them the leeway to test out new strategies, try out moves, and test their limits.

To my surprise, Nissa picked up the basics far faster than the others, and her eagerness and exertion yielded results. Jamal kept his distance, only sparring as needed to maintain some kind of dignity. On the other hand, Jasmine was an instinctual fighter. That made her incredibly predictable, and I taught her to rely less on her instincts and more on her training.

She could bend backwards out of the way of a strike, but that left her with far fewer options for movement than if she simply slipped a punch instead. Still, she held the most potential of the three, though she didn't relish fighting as Nissa did. It got me thinking. I mean, enjoyment was a form of talent in and of itself.

The more someone enjoyed something, the less effort it required to actually participate in the activity. Even if someone had a better multiplier for learning or retaining knowledge in a given field, that didn't mean they would be better in the end. They still had to persistently apply themselves, lest they be left behind, as a certain lich might say.

Either way, I left each of them battered, bruised, but far more able to face the world. It was something I dreaded, yet understood the necessity of - they must march towards their goals on their own. I had learned that during this entire excursion. By offering people every solution to every problem, I robbed them of suffering and struggle.

It turned out that not all struggles were meaningless, and not every bout of suffering came without growth. These three were prime examples. They fought tooth and nail day in and day out, and they smiled the most after a challenging dungeon, not the easy ones. It was a reality of life I experienced alongside them. For there to be joy, one must face the hardships that life throws at them.

Our spars elevated their standards as we dungeoneered as well. We began killing eldritch as we explored. Nissa learned more about applying her magic for lethal intent, from freezing opponents' blood to robbing the air from their lungs. Jasmine gained a cat eye effect that enhanced her perception, giving her better vision and reaction times. Jamal...Well, he was offered a merchant class given how he sold everything off.

He seemed more than okay with that.

As our tenure came to an end, I couldn't help but feel a sense of loss. I had laughed and lived here for nearly a month, and it felt natural. Unlike whenever I faced world-ending horrors, I could relax and calm myself. The entire event had a cleansing effect on my perspective and mind, effectively grounding me from the insanity that was to come.

Despite the growth and prosperity we shared, not all of us enjoyed the situation. The entire time, Joshua carried a sort of repressed gloom. An emotional malaise smothered him, becoming like a cloud that dampened the room he lingered in. He tried to hide it, but even his customers noticed his dimming mood.

The day before our departure came, he kept polishing the same glass as he always did. The closer we got to leaving, the tighter Joshua held that glass. He gazed at it like a memory, as if it carried the weight of another world, one we couldn't see yet he could feel. It left all three of us sad, but we had an inventive solution.

Jasmine, Joshua, Nissa, and I set up a thank-you party in the inn's backrooms. We'd expanded the barebones rooms into something far more presentable, each of us smuggling in boards of wood that matched his tavern's aesthetic. Over the last month, we nailed together the three rooms into proper parts of an inn.

It gave the entire expanse the same handmade touch that separated Joshua's inn from everywhere else. At the same time, we put some of our earnings into a pool of money where we bought exotic drinks from Blegara, the albony, and even far-off planets using Schema's exchange currency center.

New glasses lined the backrooms alongside barrels and wine racks. A rustic stone floor covered it all, and we had the lamps set in place for moody, ambient lighting. It had been a miracle to make this all if not for Joshua respecting our privacy. He had never walked back into these rooms a single time since I arrived.

And yeah, more than a few talismans were involved. We bought noise-cancelling, vibration sinks, and a set of enchanted curtains that blocked the vantage point here. Having finished all of those prerequisites, we all walked up to Joshua, sitting at his bar. He polished his favorite glass, and we watched for a while.

After a minute, Joshua peered down at us.

"What in the hell are you all doing?"

Jamal raised his hands.

"We have a problem."

Joshua let out a long sigh.

"Besides yourself?"

Jamal grinned.

"Of course. Here's the thing, when Daniel carried us to our room yesterday, Nissa's incredibly huge, bulbous, arguably fat-"

Nissa smacked Jamal's head. Jamal coughed into his hand.

"Her head hit one of the doorways, and a portion of the room collapsed."

Recognition lit Joshua's face.

"Oh...Please, don't mind that. I should've done something with those rooms forever ago. It's a shame you all have been living back there as is."

He peered at the curtain that obstructed our rooms.



"It might be better if it all fell to pieces."

A bit of melancholy fell over us before Jasmine walked over and grabbed Joshua's arm.

"Come here, old man."

Joshua gestured at his bar.

"What if a customer-"

Jasmine rolled her eyes.

"No one's shown up in the last half hour. It'll be fine."

Joshua took a deep breath before following her pull. Despite himself, a slight grin rose on Joshua's lips. After walking past the curtain, he stepped through the noise and smell-cancelling magic. Joshua's eyes widened.

"The floors and rooms. How did you do all this? And, those are candles. What else is that?"

I rubbed my fingertips together.

"The essence of tobacco. That's what the shop owner said, at least."

Joshua breathed deep.

"It smells...Good. Real good."

Nissa nudged Joshua with her elbow.

"Do you hear that? You always talked about how you liked Westerns, so we got an old record player and started up-"

Joshua murmured.

"The Ecstasy of Gold. Ennio Morricone."

Jamal patted the man's shoulder.

"From The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. You mentioned it a while back."

Joshua blinked.

"It was my grandfather's favorite film. I loved it too."

A mischievous grin spread over Nissa's face.

"Oh ho, you haven't seen anything. Behold."

She walked over and opened one of the new doors. Joshua ogled at everything before him as if stepping into another world. Joshua gawked.

"How did you hide this?"

I grinned while waving one of the many talismans in my hand.

"We have resources at our disposal, so we used them."

While Joshua soaked it all in, the four of us stepped into the center of the room before Nissa pulled out a comfy purple cushion. Gold frills decorated the edges, and an indentation sat in the middle.

Nissa shoved it at Joshua. The barkeep gawked at it.

"What is this?"

Jamal crossed his arms.

"That's for that glass you always polish. We figured it should have a special place since you like it so much."

Joshua's grizzled mustache furled, and his eyes watered. He lifted it up.

"All of this. I don't know what to say."

Jasmine stepped forward.

"We all wanted you to know that-"

Her words caught in her throat. She blinked, her eyes tearing up.

"We wanted you to know that everything you've done for us all these years. We appreciated every moment. All the tonics. All the drinks. All the laughs. All the-"

She blinked out tears.

"All the good memories. You made this town special. You made it a home. We'll never thank you enough for everything you've done for all of us."

Joshua covered his mouth, emotion building on his face. He took a shaky breath.

"There's something I need to tell you all."

Jamal raised a hand.

"You know you don't have to."

Joshua gave him a curt nod.

"I know. I want to."

Joshua furled his hands.

"I...When the culling happened, I lost my wife and my three kids."

Our eyes widened, and Joshua held up a jittering hand.

"I worked at a ranch in Tennessee, and when the culling happened, I was at work. I...I was able to help my people pull through the tutorial before heading back to my home. It had-"

He blinked tears.

"It had burned down. At first, I thought it was because they had been to the tutorial, but they hadn't died from a monster's claws. They never left the house. I found them, you know."

Jasmine put a hand over her face. Nissa gasped.

"I'm so sorry."

Joshua pushed through as he spoke.

"They had died before the culling began. A faulty wiring job did them in. My wiring job. See, I'd built that house from the ground up, and like some hole in the Earth, it had swallowed everything that mattered to me. My labor had become something evil, my highest sin."

He pointed a shaking hand at us.

"You three... You remind me-"

He struggled through his words.

"You remind me of my kids...So there's no need to thank me...There was never a need. You've given me more than I could ever repay."

By now, Jasmine and Nissa were struggling not to weep. Jamal wiped a few tears back, and my eyes watered alongside them. Nissa and Jasmine walked forward, giving the man a hug. They held each other like a father holding his two daughters. In that embrace, Joshua wept. In that embrace, he found healing for a mistake no man should have to bear.

And in giving a home to others, that man may have found he's made a home for himself.

After we had our talk, we took a while to decompress. Bottles were opened aplenty, stories were shared, and laughs were had. They told me about all the times Joshua helped them. They reminisced about all the times Jamal started up some get-rich-quick scheme. I heard about the fights Nissa started with regulars and how Jasmine wanted to start up some insane organ shop.

We all drank the night away, and by the time the moon rose over the sky, the three adventurers slumped against the floor in odd places. If not for the system, they'd of run their bodies ragged already. It amazed me how well they functioned despite this lifestyle, and I couldn't help but smile at them.

I would miss them, as would Joshua. He and I gazed at each other before the barkeeper took a breath.

"This place is going to be a whole lot emptier without them here bothering me."

I nodded.

"We know."

Joshua took a sip from his favorite glass before setting it down on the cushion made for it.

"If you ever find the time, come by. It wouldn't be the worst thing to happen to this place."

I raised my glass.

"I'll keep that in mind. I might even bring some friends."

He closed his eyes, and a sad smile spread over his face. As he fell asleep against the wall, I performed my standard ritual. I hauled the three musketeers to their new rooms, and I followed suit by picking up Joshua. He felt twice as heavy, his build far more along than theirs. After grabbing his glass, I walked over to his room.

I'd never been inside, and I couldn't help but have a burst of curiosity at seeing it. As I opened his old doorway, the hinges let out a loud squeak. When my eyes saw his room, a burst of sadness came over me. All along the walls, burnt paintings, photographs, and fixtures decorated the space. A few pieces escaped unscathed, but most carried irreparable damage.

In particular, the pictures held the most damage of all. Only someone who knew the people in the images would recognize who was in them. At the corner of the room, an old mattress sat alongside handmade covers. They, too, carried the burns from a fire. As I walked over and set Joshua on his bed, I found one of the least damaged images. It showed a woman with dark skin and lively eyes. She had ruby red lipstick applied, and she stood in front of several glassware projects.

All of them had a similar motif, and it looked like she'd made them herself. A handyman had married a handywoman, and I smiled at that thought. It was fitting. As I held the glass in my hands, I turned back down to the photograph. My eyes widened as I recognized her signature artistic flair in the glass.

All this time, he'd held her so close, and it made my heart ache.

As I prepared to leave, I took one last glance at the room. Here was a man who had everything taken from him. He'd lost all he ever wanted and more. It made me feel like an arrogant ass for telling him I did the impossible by enduring.

Yet I never endured this. This man knew of pain. Of loss. Of a broken life and shattered dreams. Seeing the momentos made me want to see Althea.

She still worked alongside Torix to uplift the Shattered Spires, and the project had expanded into an economic renaissance. They had filled in much of the infrastructure for the town by now, and I was needed for the finishing touches.

Lost in thought, I set Joshua's glass down before walking to the center of the bar. Taking a moment, I allowed my dimensional wake to manifest. The Rise of Eden encompassed the inn, and it held its full fury. Wielding the new ability of the aura, I drenched the area with its buffs. I soaked it into the fabric of reality here, a place that had felt like home for me over these last few weeks.

After spending the night channeling my runes, I felt the others awaken in their rooms. By now, my body and mind had fully healed. I was The Harbinger once more, and I felt ready for war. Standing up without my hands, I stepped outside my room while leaving my possessions. I wouldn't need them any longer.

The three musketeers waited for Joshua, but he wasn't up. I figured as much. I took his place behind the bar before making five tonics since I'd memorized the recipe by now. I walked over to Joshua's room, leaving the drink beside his bed. As I set it down, he woke up. His eyes widened.

"Are the others gone?"

I shook my head.

"They're not leaving without saying goodbye."

He relaxed.

"Good. That's good."

I turned.

"I'll give you a minute."

Once outside his room, the adventurers and I chatted the morning away, none of us tackling the real topic at hand. Everyone had already packed their things into their storage rings last night, so we waited for Joshua. The barkeeper walked out of his room while cracking one of his shoulders.

"Do any of you feel better than you should?"

Nissa furrowed her brow.

"Now that you mention it, yeah. I do. Normally, mornings are pretty awful."

I scoffed.

"Guys, you get wasted every night. Mornings being awful comes with the territory."

Nissa pointed a finger at me.

"Listen, Mister Bottles, just because your liver is made of iron doesn't mean you get to judge us. You drink even more than we do."

I raised my hands.

"Guilty as charged."

Joshua leaned against his bar. He finished the tonic I made for him before nodding at me.

"Looks like you don't need me for this anymore, do you?"

I shook my head.

"Eh, it's not the same. I'll have to come by from time to time to pick up some. It's free, after all."



He smiled, and we talked. After a while, the time had come. We all got up and walked over to the door. Joshua put his hands on his hips.

"It was good seeing you all. Whenever you all come back, just remember that my bar's open to you all anytime."

Nissa and Jasmine hugged him again, and he squeezed them back. Joshua shook his head.

"Now, now, we already had our dose of sappiness last night. Let's leave like we lived together."

Nissa gestured to Jamal.

"Miserably then?"

Joshua's mustache crinkled in a smile.

"Of course."

As we turned and walked away, Joshua put on a strong front. He told us to be careful and watch our backs. He talked about how we should never sleep in the open or in too dark a hole. As he came out of sight, I followed the others to the edge of the city. There at customs, we gazed at each other for the last time in a while.

Nissa walked up and hugged me.

"You're terrible, you know that?"

I hugged her back.

"And you're head is bulbous."

She laughed before Jasmine gave me a hug. She murmured.

"Thanks for taking care of us."

I smiled.

"It was never a problem."

Jamal walked up, hand raised. I grabbed it before he pulled me close and gave a bro hug. He scoffed.

"Dude, try to keep that hardass attitude. It fits you like a glove."

I nodded.

"And you should become a merchant. It fits you a lot better than being an earth mage."

He rolled his eyes again before we gave each other one last look. I frowned.

"I'll miss you all. We have to meet up once you're all back."

Jamal nodded.

"Of course. You'll have to hear about my strapping, handsome, eclectic adventures as I swoon the ladies and-"

Jasmine nudged him.

"We'll miss you, too. See you around?"

I took a breath.

"Of course."

After they left, I turned back. Once out of their sight, I flew up and back toward Mt. Verner. The city was changed for me, becoming somewhere to settle down after finishing the tumultuous conflicts afflicting the planet. Those thoughts raced through my mind as I stood in my suite. I changed out my leathers and hung them in the closet in my room.

It was my first piece of clothing since entering the system.

As my armor rippled over my skin, I stretched my arms. Over a hundred minds swirled in my head, their psionic might formidable and everlasting. The muscles in my body flexed like cables of orichalcum, and my wake spread forth, encompassing all of Springfield. Runes thrummed over my skin, their energy overwhelming and palpable.

I enveloped the city in The Rise of Eden, saturating its buffs onto my home. Unshackling self-imposed limits, I held the pocket dimensions inside my body with ease. I took a breath as if firing a bellows, and I breathed out a cloud of quintessant mana. Breathing it in and out, I hummed with power.

I was back, and hell would freeze over before someone stole this from me.

Chapter 435: The Ethos of the Undead

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Pulling the energy back into myself, I stepped out of my suite. I opened the door as someone phased out of reality. Smiling, I peered up at my shoulder where Althea materialized. She leaned onto my head.

"I just got a break and came here to surprise you."

I reached up and grabbed her chin. We kissed before I smiled.

"Thanks. It's always welcome."

She flipped off my shoulder, her landing lighter than a feather and controlled as a surgeon.

"It didn't look like you were surprised. I noticed how you looked my way before I showed back up."

I shrugged.

"I think my sense for shifts in dimensions or whatever has improved."

She put her hands on her hips.

"I'll take your word for it. How's the stay here in the suite been?"

I gestured inside.

"Actually, I wasn't here all that much."

Her eyes widened.

"Ooh. Did you hit the town?"

She walked in, and I closed the door.

"More than you might expect."

She sat down on our couch and I prepared two teas I bought from one of the local shops. Generating water, I boiled it in a gravity well before I set a teabag in each of two mugs. One had a black bullseye marking over a caricature of me stencilled in. It read, 'You took my heart since we met.' The other mug held a stencilled and cartoonized version of Althea floating in a ball. A wave of gravity held her in place, and it read, 'I'll never let you go...Mwaha.'

Althea stood as I set the glasses down on our coffee table. She peered at them, her eyes elated.

"Dawww. How did you make these?"

I puffed my chest out.

"That's the thing. I didn't. I actually bought them. I know, I know, hold the applause."

Althea giggled before picking up her tea. She sipped it, her high level stopping the heated liquid from scalding her mouth. She nodded my way.

"Woah. This is delicious. Where'd you get it?"

"A friend showed me a recipe, and I altered it a bit for this."

She took another generous sip before letting out her breath.

"It reminds me of Castle Rock. The flavor, that is."

I sat beside her.

"I call the flavor evergreen. Now, how has the development of the Shattered Spires been?"

Althea peered up and put a finger on her chin.

"Hm...So it's been pretty good. I kind of want to leave most of that as a surprise, so if it's ok by you, can you tell me about what you did first?"

"Of course. So basically, I studied for the first three days."

I explained my covert mission and happenings with Althea. She smiled all the while, following my story and adding a few oohs and ahhs. After I finished, she reached up a hand and rolled a finger to her. I leaned in, and she hugged me close.

"I'm so proud of you."

I hugged her back.

"For what?"

She grabbed the sides of my face.

"For making friends."

I blinked.

"It was a mission to learn about the guild."

Althea rolled her eyes.

"Oh, come on. Sure, that's cool and all, but you do that kind of stuff all the time. Making friends? You've never really done that."

I blinked.

"What? Of course I have."

Althea leaned against the couch.

"Oh, who's your friends?"

I leaned beside her.

"Torix, you, Kessiah-"

Althea furrowed her brow as she smiled.

"They're friends, sure, but they're also work associates. You and I are dating, and you don't hang out with Kessiah really."

I raised a hand.

"She's a girl, so I figured you'd worry about it."

Althea laughed before crossing her legs.

"But Nissa and Jasmine aren't?"

I scratched my cheek.

"They're different."

"How so?"

I thought about it. My logic unraveled under any scrutiny whatsoever.

"You know what, you're right. I should hang out with Kessiah more."

Althea flipped her hair behind herself, the strands sheening like strands of silver in the ambient lighting.

"You should hang out with everyone way more. You always have your head so on the grind that you never get to breathe, talk, or enjoy life for what it's really all about."

She coughed into her hand.

"Ahem, uhm, in my opinion that is."

I raised my brow.

"You've been holding this in for a while, then?"

She flushed.

"A little, yeah. But it sounds like you did a great job helping them out. I was wondering if you could introduce us, and we could all hang out sometime?"

I imagined them meeting up.

"That would be...Pretty fun, probably. You'd have to mask your identity, but given your powers-"

She shifted her skin tone from her soft silver to a sun-kissed tan.

"It shouldn't be too difficult. See, I've already got you covered."

I leaned back.

"Thanks. You're the best."

Althea leaned closer to me.

"Just to be clear, you're not asking me to change my skintone out of shame, right?"



I fell into the sofa.

"I mean, I can't have Jamal trying to cheat with you. Besides that, you'd blow their minds with how you normally look...Honestly, you'll blow their minds regardless."

She turned to the side while keeping her eyes on me.

"Heh. Thanks."

I raised a hand.

"Hm. You know what? Let me show you something."

In a wanton gesture, I shifted to Perfection's Providence. I created a few mana constructs, starting with iridescent ivies and glowing lilacs of different colors along the corner of the room. I made two glowing bird constructs, one a cardinal and the other a mountain bluebird. They sang while flowing back and forth, leaving bright streaks behind them.

Althea marveled.

"Ok, so you never told me that your magic could be so beautiful. You've been practicing?"

"Definitely. I've put about forty minds to the task over the last few weeks. This ability set actually came from holding that tear closed."

Althea's levity lessened.

"Oh...Huh. It must've been tough to see your body change without your permission."

I gazed at my hands.

"Not at all. I got a break I didn't know I needed, and I got stronger without having to lift a finger. If anything, I feel ready and revved for damn near anything."

Althea's lips thinned.

"You have more than one aura, so uh, what happened to the others?"

I turned my palm to her.

"The Rise of Eden gained this ability to saturate a place long after I've left. From what I've gathered, the longer I stay somewhere, the stronger the effect becomes and the longer it lasts."

"That's good. What about the red aura?"

I winced.

"Well...I can eat people's souls, pretty much."

Althea's eyes narrowed.

"Ok. That sounds pretty evil."

I raised my hands in my defense.

"So does a necromancer lich from another world, but Torix is pretty cool, I'd say."

She held my gaze. She raised her brow before poking my chest.

"Don't go eating people. I can't date a cannibal."

My brow relaxed.

"You'd really still consider it cannibalism?"

She smiled.

"I would."

I smiled, the expression genuine.

"Ah. Thanks."

From the doorway, Torix walked into the room. The lich held two bottles and three wine glasses.

"I should've assumed your topics of conversation diverted into the inessential and crass. As is to be expected of my disciple."

Torix floated the glasses over before pouring them midair. I grabbed the glass while smiling.

"Oh, I learned how to get distracted from the best of them."

His fiery eyes flared.

"Is that an accusation?"

I swirled the wine.

"Didn't you spend several centuries studying on your home planet's moon?"

Torix's eyes flared pink.

"Hm. I could've dabbled on that rock for a short while."

I took a breath from the wine glass, holding it in, then letting it go. Althea peered at the maroon liquid.

"You can smell wine now?"

I raised my brow, my smile oozing confidence.

"Absolutely not. It all tastes like rotten fruit to me."

She laughed before Torix handed her one of the bottles. Torix nodded.

"This one isn't as amplified in its effects. For you, dear."

She raised her glass, and the bottle poured for her.

"Why, thank you. I feel like such a lady."

She sipped from her glass before blanching.

"Ugh. Being a lady sucks."

Torix sat upon a cloud of inky mana. It really was an impressive display of magical skill.

"Such is the price we pay for refinement."

Torix swirled his glass before smelling it. He sipped before letting out a satisfied sigh.

"It truly is the drink of the gods, isn't it?"

Althea set her glass down.

"Wait a minute. You can't even smell or taste. Why do you even go through all this to eat the poisons you mix in?"

Torix's eyes flared once more.

"This business I've created rakes in personal income as I've developed a wide range of flavors for different levels of individuals. It's also remade the bar and club industries of old-Earth. As your species no longer needs cars, it comes with far fewer issues as well."

Althea furrowed her brow.

"Doesn't that mean systemized individuals will be under the influence? That sounds pretty dangerous."

Torix steepled his hands, leaving his wine glass floating beside him.

"Oh, but Daniel's golems are more than enough of a deterrent for that. Aside from the physical concerns, giving joy to the people within our purview is essential."

Althea tilted her head.

"You know, I never thought you'd be so concerned for people's happiness. So, uhm, good for you."

Torix swirled his wine.

"But of course. It's as Juvenal said, 'Give them bread and circuses, and the people will never revolt.' To that end, we must be at least superficially kind to our minions."

I burst into laughter. Althea set her wine down.

"Since we're being honest, I'll say it - this tastes bad. Really bad."

Torix cackled.

"You're certain that's not your attitude, perchance?"

She crossed her arms.

"It could be the poison."

Torix stared at the bottle.

"Hm. I do lack taste buds, so there's truly no guarantee of the flavor."

I spread my hands.

"How in the hell are you selling so much product then?"

Torix leaned forward.

"It's the most fascinating oxymoron of your kind. From what I've gathered of humans, you may add anything to any kind of alcohol, and they will find a way to love it. I've heard of this substance; it was called an IPA. Apparently, they taste like the soapy water leftover after washing dishes, foodstuffs and all."

Althea grimaced.

"They must've hated it."

Torix put the wine away.

"The man I spoke with looked me straight in the face as he admitted that. And he still loved the flavor."

I laughed before we stood up.

"You guys should show me the Shattered Spires. I wanna see what you both were up to while I was recovering."

Torix stood taller.

"Hm. It's definitely something I'm excited for. Would you mind cutting the reunion short?"

I peered up.

"Honestly? I miss you guys, but fixing problems is kind of what we do."

Torix threw the wines into one of his personal storage rings, the starry portal rippling like liquid darkness.

"I do rather love solving a conundrum. Come. There's much to show."

He walked back before taking a moment. After a few minutes, Torix generated another portal above the Shattered Spires. The wind from the city whistled in, the crisp ocean air salty on my tongue. I stood alongside Althea, and we paced out into the air. Hovering in a gravity well, I grabbed Althea's hand while bowing.

"After you, milady."

She held up a pinky, trying to and failing at a British accent.

"Myes. Indeed."

Torix paced out onto his dark cloud.

"The two of you seem goofier than usual as of late. Did you both sign a mandate forcing you both to act odd?"

Althea frowned.

"Are you the fun police or something?"

Torix swirled his hand.

"At times, perhaps."

She shook a hand, a bit of frustration leaking through.

"We live in a world where death is out there to get us at any moment, and Daniel and I can't see each other for months sometimes. That's why I really try to enjoy our time together, whether other people think it's odd or not."

Torix leaned away, his eyes dimming.

"Oh...Ahem. Th-that follows a rather well-constructed avenue of logic, especially given your constraints. Do excuse me if I was being rather pedantic. I truly didn't mean anything by it."

This tale has been unlawfully obtained from Royal Road. If you discover it on Amazon, kindly report it.

She shrank herself down.

"No...You. You're totally fine."

She pulled a strand of hair behind her ear.

"I was just frustrated, that's all. Uhm, sorry."

She flew off towards the city. Torix and I peered at each other before the lich coughed into a hand.

"You really must spend more time with her."



I raised my hands.

"Dude, that's what I was trying to do before you jumped in."

Torix made a circle with his index finger and thumb.

"But I brought wine."

Althea shouted.

"I can still hear you both. Let's go already."

We bolted off, heading towards the peak of the Infinity Plaza. After pacing down through the remnants of the surveillance tree, we found the observation deck on the 86th floor. The older of the two observatories, this one had easy access to the inside of the building. As we landed with Althea, I grabbed her hand.

She peered up at me.

"What is it?"

I pulled her up into my arms. She grabbed my hands, surprise covering her face.

"What are you doing?"

I walked over to the edge of the building. An annoying set of steel grating blocked out the view, so I waved a hand and the steel melted. After clearing that chunk of the building, I solidified the magma and sat down. Althea rested on my shoulder, and we watched a sunset casting rays onto the spire-filled city.

By now, the city enmeshed in the Earth's surface. The skyscrapers floated above, but a giant wall of gray didn't blot out the sun or sea. The salty wind poured in, and the storms settled in the distance. Calmer and no longer eldritch infested, the waters sheened light in orange crescents like strokes from an artist's paintbrush.

Althea leaned against my head. She sighed in contentment.

"Thank you."

I grabbed her hand.

"Being with you will never be a problem."

For quite some time, we left Torix waiting behind us. The lich used his sense of tact, deciding to handle the piled-up messages and other busy work in the meantime. As the sunset waned into the beginning of night, Althea squeezed my hand before pulling away. She landed as a panther would, her feet silent and her gaze sharp.

"I really needed that."

"Me too. Now show me what it is that you've both been working on."

We headed towards the lower floors of the Infinity Plaza. After passing the decadent marble and gilded granite, we entered the central atrium. Surrounded by the dungeons, my guild raced around in all directions. Up and down, in and out, several hundred people scurried about below.

They organized everything in sight, and around a hundred of my golems stood guard at different vantage points, securing the space. That's why guildmates left most dungeon doors open as if the worlds within weren't even hostile.

Fresh air and wind replaced the stony stagnation from before, while lights from each region beamed across the colossal room. Mana lamps filled the expanse alongside gravity-powered elevators. Enchanted stones lined the tops of the dungeons, many of shining colors that reminded me of metals like bronze or gold.

Practicality aside, these embellishments alleviated the empty echoes and eerie angles of the space. In a resounding echo, civilization had plowed its way into this rough, bruised place, and our engineering corps led that effort. They added a few features to the plaza

within the past month. Their elevators siphoned up and down, over twelve of them available for use at all times.

They whirled by, wind rippling off them like a racing car. A few were left unused, but considering their ease of construction, it was better to have too many than too few. They let guildmates and dungeoneers cross and supply the rifts without difficulty. Furthering the eldritch clearing, our dungeoneering corps made signs for each dungeon using a difficulty system they devised. Those were the enchanted stones, and they were, in fact, signalling familiar metals.

They began with tin, representing a dungeon where everyday civilians could enter. We had stored Marcella and Rebecca within one of those rifts. The next rank, copper, meant monsters roamed around in a hospitable environment. It was the initial rank that most dungeoneers began leveling with.

Iron was a bit tougher, usually harboring serious danger to an unsystematized person. Those rifts had environmental difficulties and monsters that could tear people apart. BloodHollow would've fallen into the lower end of that designation, and groups usually entered to cover each other's weaknesses.

Bronze held the first leveled requirement: individuals needed to max out all their attributes to at least level 30. That benchmark gave them leveling perks, and they acted as a natural barrier to entry. That's why dungeoneers took bronze dungeons seriously and spent time researching the common eldritch types within them.

Fewer people died in bronze dungeons than in iron dungeons since people respected the rank, at least according to Torix. That transparent threat forced adjustments, preventing deaths caused by a lack of preparation. On the other hand, steel dungeons held a vast breadth in difficulty, being the widest rank available. The sea cucumber dungeons would've lined up into that camp.

These steel dungeons required levelers with specialized builds and powerful combat abilities. Oftentimes, entire groups disappeared in this rank, their fates unknown but heavily implied. Torix mentioned trying to reform this rank into multiple categories to prevent those disappearances. He figured they could separate them into steel, stainless steel, and carbon steel. It'd be in the next iteration of their system, apparently.

The next tier up were the titanium rifts. They required entire teams of capped levellers at the very least. Anyone venturing into a titanium dungeon prepared themselves for a

high chance of death, and oftentimes, they carried my golems as guards to help if something went wrong. The environments could melt metal and often lack air entirely, making the terrain as dangerous as the monsters in many cases.

The second-to-last category was the tungsten dungeon, and they were meant for my followers or me to handle. There haven't been many of these dungeons found yet, especially on Earth. However, they left huge scars on the natural terrain and region, and their influence spread like a virulent infection. The Grand Canyon and Central Park would've fallen into that category, and they often contain sub-dungeons littering their main masses.

The final category, graphene, was something thrown around as a final edge case. The only place I'd seen at that level was L-7's ossuary. Every perceivable aspect carried the threat of death, and the primevals could've wiped the floor with large patches of a planet single-handedly. This category involved a celestial scale of destruction and beyond. Dungeons couldn't really exceed that rank without destroying the planet they existed upon.

Either way, we found no dungeons above titanium here, let alone something as mythic as graphene. This allowed us to explore, label, and coordinate the dungeons as needed. Instead of by resource and number, we stuck with names etched into colored stones. Each title signified the terrain and feel of the place.

Water #2 shifted into the Sinking Marsh, a swamp where living mud pulled you under the surface. This gave a much better idea of what awaited levelers, and that was the general idea. We wanted to make dungeons safer to navigate, easier to clear, and less heavily taxed. Furthering that aim, Torix and Althea remodeled how we handled each rift's loot.

They took full advantage of my Sovereign perks and planetary ownership. Instead of taking the excess credits, we reinvested my percentage of the region's earnings. Schema even incorporated automatic functions for that express purpose. Redistributing the wealth bolstered the rewards for the quests they posted, which had kept everything simple.

After all, no one wanted people going off on wild goose chases or suicide missions. My experiences alongside Nissa, Jamal, and Jasmine verified how vital that kind of information was, and I gave praise to Althea and Torix's reforms.

They didn't stop there, however.

From killing specific numbers of eldritch to claiming territories, Torix and Althea rewarded people for maintaining the region as a whole. This included pinning down mines, mana crystal deposits, or finding rare inscriptions. The variety of tasks allowed explorers to join the fray, their desire to roam a potent advantage.

After all, if they found an enormous mine full of rare minerals, our guild benefited even more than if they cleared out a few eldritch. Harvesting from the mines wasn't something we left to indentured servants either. Torix and Althea hired specialized employees, and they created a guild branch for that express purpose.

These people mastered using the gravitation and telekinesis of my rings to handle the brunt of the work. They managed the logistics involved with manufacturing and distributing the materials, and that freed the indentured servants to go about living their lives however they saw fit.

Some of them applied to join my guild, while others ventured back out to their families. The wanderers aimed to use their leveled status to forge a better living in the unsettled parts of the world. Althea had left them with caches from Marcella's supplies, ones the overlord had hoarded for a while. That helped them with getting started, and Torix distributed manuals detailing basic fighting forms and sorcery.

Just as well, Torix had handled the raiders outside of the Shattered Spires. He rounded up based on Schema's records of their crimes. If they killed anyone outside of self-defense, they were summarily executed. I gawked at Torix as he said those words. The lich peered back at me, his eyes piercing.

"Those who live by the sword, die by it. They chose to kill unimpeded, and anyone who believes another person's life is in their hands must understand that the concept applies equally to them."

I blinked. We lingered inside the Infinity Plaza's central dungeon hub. Elevators whirled back and forth like gargantuan pistons in an engine. Guildmates paid respects as they passed, and resources flowed from the dungeons as water flows in a river. I crossed my arms, gazing at Torix's large, metal form.

"But killing them all...It seems so brutal."

Torix's eyes flared red.

"It is. They ended another person's life brutally for nothing. Not even corpses."

I leaned back.

"Wait a minute. You aren't just bothered by the fact they didn't use the corpses for necromancy...Right?"

Torix's eyes shrank.

"There is a minuscule chance that may be the case, but my other points still stand. Leveled individuals are challenging to imprison, and upon most worlds and in most societies, murderers are executed by the law. It tides the otherwise endless streams of killing they enact."

Torix sighed.

"In a different world with more excess, perhaps we could have had more extensive trials requiring further evidence. I'd also have preferred putting many of them in jail. Their labor is valuable, though slower than I'd like. Despite those benefits, we lacked the resources to operate that kind of facility, and these were highly leveled individuals in most cases."

He gestured to me.

"Standard materials and methods aren't effective against them. A level 500 human can bend and tear steel bars. Other kinds of prisoners may live for weeks with no sleep or food. That potency allows for a different breed of mass murderer to evolve, one that can slaughter unsystemized people by the thousand."

I furrowed my brow.

"So the steeper dangers required steeper consequences to keep them in check?"

"Precisely. Schema maintains pristine records as well, which eliminates the need for prolonged trials and extensive juries in most cases. In fact, what we required was reviewing the crimes, not verifying their validity. Your rather odd and esoteric class and trees supplied us with extra information about criminals and their bounties as well."

Torix interlocked his hands behind himself.

"Those bonuses are normally hidden in most empires. In yours, they are not, and so we act upon them. Aside from that, the juries would be made up of hard-working individuals who fought for their lives since the culling. What do you think their opinion on the raiders happened to be?"

"I'd imagine anything but merciful."

"It would seem you've understood the situation. Farmers, statesmen, merchants, and dungeoneers had no tolerance for the raider's wanton evil. I follow their moral ethos, so neither shall I. In fact, one of those groups is about to be eliminated. Would you like to see how it's done?"

I frowned.

"Of course. My guild is enacting punishment. It's only right I know what that entails."

"It will ease your mind as we don't drag the process out or create painful deaths."

We walked into the Sinking Marsh, an iron dungeon on the lower levels. Torix and I oversaw the groups of convicts. The air stagnated here, the scent of earthy decay lingering like a tilled garden. The thick humidity coated the criminals in a sheening sweat, and their steps clomped into the mud. Many wept, trembled in fear, or held a deep anger. A few carried a sense of resignation for what they'd done, while others stayed fervent in their denial.

Torix gazed down at them with his hands interlocked behind himself. I stood beside our necromancer, my heart heavier than I expected, considering what needed to be done. Once near the tar pits, Torix gestured onto a line marked by glowing spheres of mana.

Before the prisoners even understood what happened, Torix waved a hand, and it was done.

The bodies fell, and he gazed at his skeletal fingers.

“I’ve always wondered how criminals so easily take life yet how difficult they find it to resign their own.”

I gazed at the corpses.

“It’s hypocrisy. It feels like we’re hypocritical, too.”

Torix cackled.

“Hardly.”

He raised a hand, the bodies rising from the dead. My stomach turned as I peered at him.

“Is it really necessary to use their bodies?”

Torix nodded.

“These individuals have robbed another soul of their body. It is fitting that they give theirs in death.”

I frowned.

“Having criminals executed amasses your armies. That creates a corrupted incentive for you, doesn’t it?”

Torix gestured to the corpses.



“And they had a perverse incentive to kill, maim, and murder. They allowed a simple desire to drive them wilder than animals of instinct. I choose to rise above such simpletons. We both have.”

I frowned at the shambling cadavers. Their bodies were still fresh, and each of them had nosebleeds from Torix's kinetic splattering of their brains. I let out a breath.

“It’s hard to feel that way.”

Torix sighed.

“You could easily slaughter millions if you so chose. At times, you have. When given better choices, you’ve made the difficult decisions to do what you know is right. To the opposing end, these animals have chosen their worst possible option.”

Torix’s eyes flared red.

“They became parasites that indulge on the lives of others. That’s a torturous burden for a society to bear, but these leeches not only torture - they kill. They use pain for pleasure. Death is a mercy I give out of necessity, not based upon what I believe is right.”

His flames turned bloody red.

"If I had my way, these beings would be trapped in an eternal mental torment. They would live out their crimes for eternity, but they would be the victim. And they deserve it. They enact death prematurely to force the grueling permanence of an end upon the unwilling.”

I frowned.

"We kill all the time. Do we deserve what we do to others?"

Torix raised a hand.

"We have chosen to live this way. We kill those who have chosen this path as well. Either that, or we slaughter mindless monsters. The people those criminals killed did no such thing. They were dragged into purgatory. Eternal torture is exactly what those murderers deserve."

A part of me agreed with him, but I was glad he killed them swiftly. I mouthed.

"We called that hell in some of our old religious texts. Old? Hm, maybe not. There has to be an active following even now."

Torix nodded.

"Oh, I'm well aware. In fact, I rather enjoyed Dante's Inferno. Quite a detailed recounting, and I relished the vivid explanations. They remind me of certain eldritch."

I peered at the revived corpses.

"Last thing I have to ask. Can we be certain that Schema's records are airtight?"

Torix sighed, tiring of the topic.

"Firstly, Schema maintains a lenient definition of self-defense. Even subtle claims of wrongdoing were enough to avoid a bounty, and most of the raiders held long lists of brutal crimes. They also revealed how corrupt this, hm, how did you say it, Marcella, correct? Yes, how corrupt this Marcella's guild was."

Torix shook his head.

"It still doesn't ring even the faintest of bells."

Seeing the Old One's power over my friend and mentor left me afraid in a way little else could. I frowned, and Torix continued.

"As it happened, we found a small portion of those psionic parasites in Rebecca. They augmented a few of the strongest raiders. Using their abilities, those raiders took portions of the loot that prospectors gained from dungeoneering."

I waved my hand.

"Is that how they understood it? They think Rebecca was the head honcho?"

Torix shrugged.

"It would seem that is what everyone, all our records, written data, videotapes, and, well, everything, is pointing to aside from you and Althea's testimony."

I frowned.

"Do you believe us?"

Torix met my eye.

"With absolute certainty."

I stood tall.

"Thanks, man."

Torix turned forward, raising his hands and walking.

"Now, these pillagers cut deals with the roaming guards around the Shattered Spires, sharing the stolen goods. A few psionic scans verified it. Normally, a leader wouldn't be held accountable for every person in their organization. After all, no one had eyes and ears everywhere."

Realization came over me.

"Everyone except Marcella."

Torix raised a hand.

"If your and Althea's detailed recounting is true, then with Marcella's access to her surveillance tree, she knew everything that happened in her domain. Marcella allowed these raiders to kill, pillage, and do far worse for her bottom line."

I stepped over hardened mud. The eldritch refused to move while we were near.

"Then why was she fighting so hard for income? Marcella shouldn't have been so desperate."

Torix leaned over one of the corpses. He etched a rune into their forehead, and their body strengthened as a plume of dominion mana waved over them.

"I believe she paid tribute, and perhaps it was to this strange Old One or one of their other avatars."

I frowned.

"Hm. Our planet couldn't support a high payment in galactic terms. That makes a hell of a lot more sense than plain greed."

Torix moved to another minion.

"It also explains her lack of gear, goods, or pooled resources. She owned some measure of wealth, indeed, but she never derived the billions of credits I've surmised she should have. To that end, she kept 40% of what people made in the dungeons. It was a steep price for mere passage, but her valuation officers employed tactics to slice that cut even higher."

Torix shook his head in disgust.

"They never followed a fair market value, instead incorporating some self-made valuation system. They then kept the lowballed merchandise in their portion before handing off over-valued goods to the dungeoneers. This practice ensured they ended up taking more than half of most hauls. Ugh. Grotesque."

Torix sighed.

"Many of the levelers hadn't even recognized that fact, and the practice left them with a mere pittance of what they earned. I assumed you didn't care for the income, and so the surcharge is a tidy and neat 0%."

I smiled wide.

"Oh, that's perfect. What about anything cipheric or information regarding-"

Torix waved my concern away.

"I addressed such issues. They shall be rewarded heavily upon information leading to any and all cipheric runes. However, they're rarer than one may imagine."

I took a breath.

"That's great. Honestly, it sounds like you've got this wrapped up rather well."

Torix finished the last inscription on a corpse's head.

"These bolstered awards shall help spur the explorers and researchers as well. Combine that with the other reforms, and the Shattered Spires will become far more whole and less like a series of splinters with potential."

I cracked my knuckles.

"Then let me finish up the last details."

Torix turned to me, the new dragur oozing dominion mana.

"As shall I, disciple."

I walked off, a bit unsettled by Torix's nonchalance. On the one hand, he seemed to highly value the lives of normal people. On the other hand, he didn't care whether someone lived or died after they stepped into a truly systemized lifestyle. In some ways, I understood the honor code. It felt correct to me on a gut level as well.

On the other hand, I didn't know if following some honor code resulted in the best society. That being said, the certainty of the crimes eased my concerns. I had no time to build prisons when people were being eaten by monsters or Old Ones were destroying the fabric of reality. In the end, it might be an issue I couldn't devote enough time to truly solve.

Instead, I honed in on what I excelled at. I found an isolated dungeon within the Infinity Plaza. A creek babbled there, the water trickling over cracked rock and emerald moss. A few eldritch roamed these woods, but they steered clear of me. In this calming domain, I constructed two architects, two wardens, two vanguards, and an executive.

These dual dungeon-cored golems required two days to make, but they arrived with the same splendor and grandeur as my previous batch. Stepping outside, I let the architects grind away at the amassed project list Althea and Torix left behind. The architects would create walkways between the various islands, remake old buildings, and improve the living standards in the tunnels below.

Several engineers from Diesel's division celebrated when the architects arrived, most of them educated by Torix on magical engineering. They had already fixed the constant cave-ins, tunnel jams, and flooding that plagued the lower levels. Turning the honeycomb of tunnels into something decadent was the next step.

At the same time, my wardens flew off to guard the lands near the spires. They would prevent new raiders from establishing bases of operation, clear out roaming eldritch, and survey future threats. The added security would increase the flow of people heading into the spires by orders of magnitude, which presented a problem of space.

Althea solved that issue within the rifts themselves. She cooperated alongside many Speakers to create quests that awarded anyone who found great city locations inside dungeons. After all, Schema's perks allowed me to make cities anywhere. For that

reason, I could settle these spaces without recourse. In fact, I spent a few days making coreless cities in these verdant, gentle dungeons.

The pioneers gave these safe dungeons and secured towns a name - gardens. Gardens allowed for an unbelievable amount of territory to open up within the Shattered Spires. By the time we finished expanding into the rifts, the spires would no longer be the actual majority of living space. The main metropolis would be a hub between many different regions and territories, akin to an airport with passengers roaming about.

It would rival the size of Texas. In other words, huuuge.

To secure more territory, my vanguard golems spread out over the seas. They wrestled and restrained the remaining monsters on the open ocean, making the waters traversable once more. The golems would also help keep the weather from turning back into a perpetual storm.

Within the heart of the Infinity Plaza, I used ten radiant blue cores to make an enormous barrier that encompassed all of the Shattered Spires. This gave everyone buffs, protection, and bolstered morale across the board. Knowing that nothing could simply arrive and destroy them gave people a security they hadn't known in a long time.

When I got ready to leave, people walked on the walkways my architects constructed, no longer hopping around between the floating islands. Our guild set up shop in the plaza, helping get people signed up for our revised recruitment process. We opened a hospital, an armory, waterworks, and a power station that supplied basic resources and needs to normal people.

In general, we left the spires in much better shape than when we arrived. It took a few weeks, but it was a necessary task. On Giess, I'd run around like a headless chicken, dismantling the people in power without knowing what would fill the void. That experience left me with memories I'd never forget, and a large part of me scorned my old approach.

I should've known better then, but at least I learned what I could since then. That's why we fleshed out as much as we could in the city, but we had to leave. The growing eldritch on Blegara had become a pressing issue, and we all missed Springfield by now. Saying our goodbyes, we left the executive golem and a few of our guild's trusted advisors to handle the city's future development.

As we headed back, we took a moment to survey the route from the spires to Springfield. While that was our reasoning, it was really a moment to relax between weeks of hard, laborious work.

Torix let out a long sigh.

"I wish to discuss what I believe to be a poor point of yours, disciple."

I flew beside him, all of us crossing over abandoned farms, ruined cities, and strange fauna.

"One of my poor points? Ah man, you have to get out the list then."

Torix let out a laugh.

"It's a well-kept ordering, believe me. This particular aspect revolves around your penchant for sudden shifts in prerogative and priority. Believe me when I tell you that your aggressive settlement program has been difficult to maintain while completely remaking the Shattered Spires. It stems from a larger issue, I believe."

Torix adjusted the mana cloud he hovered on.

"At times, it seems as if you can't settle on any single thing."

I took a breath.

"You're not wrong. It's just...There's so much that needs to be done. It's difficult to arrange for any of it to be done right."

Althea flew beside us, her feathered, white wings resplendent. They sheened in the sun, the light reflecting with an iridescent gloss. She must've made the tint from some kind of oil over her feathers. She frowned.



"What makes you think everyone else will mess the projects up? I think we did pretty well. For the most part. Er, probably."

I shook my head, remembering the rings' impact on people in Springfield.

"At this point, I don't think it's about anyone else. It's something I have to get over myself."

She flew near me before landing on my back and sitting down.

"You mean you wanting to do everything for everybody?"

I collected my thoughts.

"More like I want to make sure everything is handled as well as it can be."

Torix scoffed.

"Ah yes, Daniel the half-asser. I've heard it many a time."

I shook my head.

"I'm trying not to be, but it's hard-"

Torix waved a hand.

"Have humans heard of sarcasm?"

Althea smiled.

"From what I can tell, yeah. Actually, I think lots of people use it all the time to hide what they actually think or feel. It's like a coping mechanism so that they don't have to deal with sincerity or direct communication."

Torix rewrote a few runic inscriptions in his grimoire.

“In my specific case, I’m using it to imply what I don’t believe. If there is one thing that can be said about you, Daniel, it’s that you apply yourself.”

I shrugged.

"Yeah, well, I worked hard to help Giess. Look how that turned out."

A silence passed over us. Althea murmured just over the whistle of the wind.

"That wasn't your fault."

I took a deep breath.

"If I'm responsible for my successes, then I have to own my failures too."

Torix crossed his arms as he stood upright on his cloud of dark mana.

"Or take ownership over the failings of others? Perhaps you’re struggling with your limitations? It’s something I’ve often contemplated. Our limitations, in my mind, aren’t something we own. We can merely accept them. In a way, your incessant need to frame yourself as responsible for circumstances speaks to your arrogance."

I squeezed a hand into a fist.

“Hm. I never thought about it like that.”

Torix turned a hand to me.

“Let us think of it for a moment. You’re assuming you could’ve controlled everything given the resources at your disposal at the time. That includes your limited knowledge and vast inexperience. It’s easy to forget, but you really are someone who’s fumbling

around in the dark. We all are. You simply have your failings exposed with a microscope given the sheer scale of influence you've garnered so quickly."

Torix went back to writing his runes.

"While it's excellent to be self-critical in times of failure, it's also essential to be accepting of tangible success. Leaving the spires in that kind of shape isn't something a younger Daniel would've done. You wouldn't have visited there in the first place."

Althea winced.

"Me neither. I remember way back when. I was just trying to get my body under control."

I smiled.

"You and me both. Those were crazy times."

Torix wrote with an elegant enchanted feather. He implanted one of my rings into it, letting it scorch into the plates of steel in his hand.

"I sat on a moon, alone and untethered for several centuries. I can assure both of you of this: neither of you should feel as though you've wasted your time or efforts."

Althea flipped over to him, one of her feet landing on his shoulder.

"Thanks. It's easy to forget how old and wise you are sometimes."

Torix leaned back.

"And why is that?"

She flipped back to me. She sat down cross-legged on my back.

“Well, your new body, for one. But yeah, if I think about it, you’ve been the same since we met.”

Torix leaned back and put a hand on his chest.

“I, for one, believe I’ve changed immensely.”

She nodded.

“Of course. I mean as a person, not in your skills or whatever else.”

Torix’s eyes flared white.

“Name a single aspect that’s the same as whenever I first arrived here on Earth.”

She pointed at Torix’s little travel cloud.

“That thing.”

I gazed at his mana blot.

"How do you even make that thing anyway?"

Torix looked down.

"Oh, you mean this mana vessel?"

I nodded. Torix flared a hand wide.

"This isn't actually mana. I collect water particles from nearby while injecting an ink familiar within. I actually stand atop a panel of ice hidden by the dark cloud, and that jettisons me atop it as if the cloud were solid."

Althea gawked.

"Why do you go through all that trouble to get around?"

Torix spread both hands wide.

"Ah, answer me first. Why did you learn and study iridescent oils for your wings?"

Althea hid behind her hair.

"Uhm...because Daniel likes gemstones."

She was right about that. Torix pointed at her.

"Perhaps, but that isn't the true root of either of our reasonings."

She rolled her eyes.

"Oh, wise sage, please tell me what I'm really thinking then."

Torix flourished a hand.

"But of course. It's for style."

Chapter 436: To Forge for an Empire

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We kept chatting away, each of us catching up on the moments we missed. The hours bled away before we reached Mt. Verner and Springfield, their developments drawing in people from all over. After having lived in the city for a time, the sheer size of it astonished me. It crawled along into separate districts, each dictated by socioeconomic status and past merits.

It was a side effect of the expansion program; we ended up advertising the safety and stability of the city and region. People flooded in from the Shattered Spires, our reforms popular enough to initiate a mass exodus by those given a poor fate in the effectively conquered city. Alongside the growing subsidiaries, my architect golems constructed towering buildings.

Most of our people opted for an opulent approach to their homes. This left the entirety of Springfield looking like Beverly Hills but without material limitations. That luxury expanded into a few of the amenities that arose. Clothing stores opened, and people wore the newest styles sold. In particular, many wore tempered leather from different eldritch.

These specialized outfits carried a mixture of mana-imbibed solutions. They effused the essence of the higher-tiered manas, from ascendance to primordial to quintessence. The base mana types like dominion or augmentation indicated a lesser status in these chic circles, and individuals competed in order to create overwhelming, visual illusions as they walked. Dancing sprites. Howling wolves. I even saw a roaring dinosaur that scared nearby children into frenzies of squealing laughter.

Restaurants popped up in those areas, serving a genteel upper class with elaborate themes. Someone even founded a card shop, having restored board games and a variety of other old-world games. They replaced the video game era that dominated before Schema's arrival, as scientists hadn't reverse-engineered obelisks yet. Televisions and monitors weren't high on the list of priorities either, so people hadn't infiltrated that medium just yet.

For that reason, simple board games held all you needed in a box and could be played by anyone. Or perhaps not. From within the shop, glowing pieces floated and maneuvered. A few magicians played at these tables, the games acting as tests of magical ability. In all honesty, I wanted to sit down and play right then and there.

Alas, we passed it by in seconds.

We even found a band playing music in one of the parks while parents played with children on elaborate playgrounds. Once more, runic inscriptions covered several parts of the playground. They augmented the seesaws, turning them into tame catapults. If a child fell aside, protective enchantments sprang to life, catching them from their fall.

Finding it all left me glowing with pride.

As we neared the mountain, Althea flew before a glassy look passed over her eyes. It was the standard expression when someone peered at their status. She angled her wings, coming closer to me and Torix. She let out a long sigh.

"Hey guys, I have to head off for a meeting with my orphanage program. The inflow of kids from the Shattered Spires has left people overrun, and they really need my help."

I flew over and held her hand.

"Good luck."

She smiled in confidence, though subtle cracks spread across the veneer expression.

"I've done this more than once. So, I got this. Probably."

She glided over, trailing towards a large building near the city center. Only Torix and I crossed the vacant airways above the city. Torix took the moment to let the consequences of our actions sink in. He interlocked his hands behind himself.

"It would seem you enjoy seeing your hometown."

I peered into several shops.

"Yeah. It's nothing like it was, but it's nice to see so much life teeming here. It's motivating."

Torix raised his gaze, peering down at the nicer communities.

"I've always found it interesting about sentient species. They find any manner and method to raise themselves out of squalor. Once out, they bar the entrance to their sanctums, fighting to stay atop their mountains rather than building further mountains to climb upon."

Two kids ran by in a park. One had an enchanted bracelet, amulet, and anklet. The other wore fine clothing but lacked the identical magical additions. I gazed down at them both.

"That sounds like a gated community."

Torix shook his head at the children.

"Indeed. Many may wish for a better life than those who preceded them, yet those same ancestors never tried to understand what a better life truly is. They spend all their waking moments attempting to attain an ideal they've never taken the time to dwell on. To flesh out, so to speak."

Torix ceased his flight, and I stopped as well. Torix sighed.

"It's why those who fought for their lives hold those lives dear. If given everything, then a person's grip on their survival becomes loose and fragile. They become weak."

I turned to him.

"Based on what I know about the eldritch, we'll always need warriors to fight. Unlike the last few years, we'll actually be able to keep that as a subculture instead of our only means of survival. I think what we're doing is worth it since people get more of a choice in whether they fight or not. That's an incredible feat."

Torix tilted his head.



"And why, my disciple, is that?"

"If you fight monsters long enough, you become one. I'm a great example of that."

Torix remained motionless. Under the gloom of the moonlight, his metal, skeletal frame simmered in an aura of dominion mana. It bled the night onto his body, a molding of darkness and his thoughts.

"Hm, are you speaking of Giess's bombings perhaps?"

I shrugged.

"I can eat people's memories. If that's not monstrous, then what is?"

Torix gazed at Springfield's changing landscape.

"Intent, perhaps. I believe that monsters aren't made by what they do. They are made by why they do it. Killing to protect is to become a savior. Killing for pleasure is to become a murderer. The act is defined by motive in that regard."

I floated over to a quintessence lamp on the street, charging it.

"There was a guy called Hitler in our history. He believed he was cleansing humanity of its filth. It didn't work out so great."

Torix scoffed.

"From what I've read, he didn't wish to cleanse anything. He believed in eugenics, and a warped, twisted version more akin to breeding at that. From my understanding of a few species' histories, the use of personalized genetic modification tends to operate far better. Unless, of course, you factor in Schema's deleterious influence over any species that dabbles in the concept."

I frowned.

"Like the remnants?"

Torix raised a hand, the nearby light siphoning into his palm.

"Indeed. They've devolved into a faction like Elysium, but not from their use of technology. It was their intent."

I put my hands on my hips.

"I'd argue their long-term relationship with Schema caused all of these problems, which is a kind of technology."

Torix oversaw the square, dispersing the light in his hands to add moody ambiance.

"Most certainly. However, I speak on the concept of technology, not its execution. Schema is a misused innovation, not a parable against the idea itself. In many ways, Schema was created as an attempt to better the lives of people, and yet, it has given more strife than it has solved. It was a classic misapplication of a utopian ideal."

Torix rolled a hand, enjoying the philosophical stint on the conversation.

"You see, struggle is what gives life its meaning. Without that meaning, there is no weight to survival. People will thus create struggle of their own accord. Such is the cause of war and competition. By trying to eliminate said struggle, the remnants walked down a path with no solution. That is why Schema has backfired."

Torix raised a hand, the lingering light left in his palm casting his skeletal face in shadows.

"They created the AI for something that cannot exist, and that was their undoing. It is as the fable of Icarus so deftly implied. Those that fly too close to the sun shall fall."

I gazed at clean glass and polished stone.

"I'm against a utopia as much as the next guy. Its...Arrogant, the mere idea of it, and I've never built my empire for that purpose."

The light dimmed from Torix's hand, and city light spilled over Torix in subtle, small shadows.

"Then what is it that you fight for?"

I raised a fist.

"For choice. I was born into a family where my mother died early and my father was an absolute scumbag. A lot of what kept me going was knowing that I could try to shoulder the burden of other people. It's part of what made Michael and Kelsey good friends of mine."

Torix interlocked his hands behind himself.

"And yet, they took advantage of that natural desire to bear their burden, didn't they?"

I nodded.

"They did, and I stayed with them for so long because I lacked the self-confidence to make other friends. I chose fear and complacency over pushing myself to see and speak to other people. This is different. I choose to carry these responsibilities now of my own volition, not out of fear."

I hovered onto a cobblestone walkway.

"To me, I shoulder the burdens for them, and carrying that burden is why I'm strong."

Torix walked onto his cloud.

"Yet you've become who you are from that struggle. To take that opportunity away from others is, itself, a curse."

I shook my head.

"There is a difference between being beaten and choosing to endure. One builds you and the other breaks you. I'm giving people that choice."

Torix tilted his head.

"But many will be left unfulfilled by this luxury you've given. In that regard, we may smother your people with unearned privilege. Ugh. Privilege. It's a poison. It softens the mind and spirit until it's like rotting fruit. These people will all live in lavish mansions that they did not build. They will never need to face the monsters that lie at their doorsteps."

Torix pointed at the barrier far in the distance.

"Have you thought of how people will live given your modifications? Most will never leave the confines of the cities you've built. They will never have to face the real world."

I remembered the Old Ones, Elysium, and the spatial collapse all around us.

"From what I've gathered, the real-world kind of sucks. I'm trying to make it suck a little less."

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Torix shook his head.

"By doing so, you've isolated these people from struggle. Now, battling monsters will not earn them more than they have. They will have no reason to continue on."

I smiled.

"You grew up in Schema's system, right?"

Torix's eyes flared.

"I did."

I turned a hand to him.

"That's why we're disagreeing. I was raised in a world where the struggle was for meaning. If someone had desire and ambition, they lived with purpose. They didn't need monsters skulking in the dark. They chose their own demons to fight. If you ask me, I think everyone deserves that choice – to choose what they live and die for."

I let my hand drop to my side.

"Besides, people fight for more than survival. Many want status, power, opportunity, and the list goes on. If everyone has a mansion, then it becomes the baseline. It's no longer rare, so people will find something else to value based on scarcity. In that way, the cycle of struggle will revolve around whatever isn't easily obtained."

Torix's fire eyes narrowed.

"What will your people fight once they run out of enemies?"

I frowned.

"Probably each other."

Torix tilted his head.

"And how is that better than the eldritch?"

I rolled a hand.

"People make rules. Monsters don't."

Torix's eyes flared white.

"Hm...Sounds odd, but I'll be glad to see it manifest. Even if we ideologically oppose one another, I can respect the thought you've put into your principles. We shall see where they lead us in time."

"You too. In fact, I've had like twenty minds in on this conversation since it started, otherwise I'd of been utterly staggered by what you said."

Torix scoffed.

"Pish posh. Nothing I've stated was remarkable, and you understand far more than you let on."

Deep down, I disagreed. Torix held a weight to his thoughts and mind, and anytime I spoke to the lich, he relished in any kind of intellectual debate. Even as I argued against him, I felt the pull of his ideas. It left me hungry to speak more, but Torix stared at nothing before dragging a hand down his face.

"Ugh. Yet another message. Despite my enjoyment over the discussion, I must proceed to these city requests. I'll be aligning a few for you to construct before you leave for Blegara, if you may find the time."

I waved.

"I'll make it even if I have to wrangle reality itself."

Torix's glossy, chainmail robes clanked against him as he arose on his cloud.

"I would expect nothing less, disciple."

Torix flew off, and I organized my thoughts. Blegara required assistance, or I could build several cities. Based on Plazia's talks, the creature had already spread to a large portion of the planet as I recuperated. On the other hand, the vagni never settled in that region of the world, and our hivemind contained the issue inside a walled settlement.

Thoughts about Jasmine, Nissa, and Jamal passed over me. As I dwelt on their fates, I took a moment to contemplate. While I lacked the years needed to blanket the world in my cities, I could spend a few weeks building cornerstone settlements at the edges of various regions. They would act as key checkpoints along the way, smoothing travel and providing a better hub for survivors.

Choosing that approach, I flew off towards the warp travel center. Though a lavish luxury, I decided to burn through credits for the added hours offered. As I approached, several queues of dungeoneers and craftsmen lined up at the currency exchange center. In their armored arms, they held eldritch parts for credits, other lines turning those credits into delicious meals, raw materials, or new gear.

Micky acted as one of the heads of the operation, and before leaving, I walked up to him. I raised my hand to the line I cut in front of.

"Sorry, everyone."

Most people bowed out of respect as if I ruled them with an iron fist. A few gawked in wonder or even anger. I had no time to inspect every emotion, so I turned to Micky.

"I wanted you to know about the new ring requirements directly."

Micky raised his hands, his pale face even paler than usual.

"Oh, don't worry about that. I already turned it in after getting a solid amount of crystallized mana. It, uhm, it was an overwhelming gift, and I was glad to be able to give it back."

I took a breath.

"Good. I'm sorry you couldn't keep it."

Micky had a soft smile on his freckled face.

"It's probably for the best. It was like having a ton of gold in the house. We were asking for trouble."

I stepped away.

"I can't stay, but it was good seeing you."

He bowed low.

"You as well, guildmaster."

At a certain distance, I turned back. Peering at the line of customers, I stood a little taller. Springfield finally reached a point where we could buy materials from the galactic market, and people oozed over the various selections on display throughout the city center. An absurd part of me envied them.

I never used armor or weapons since the early days of the system. It looked like a lot of fun to try and find the perfect gear, as did chatting about the specifics with their group members. It was a point of connection I lacked. As I paced to the warp station, a strange, unearned sense of melancholy welled up from within.

An architect remodeled the entire enterprise, turning the bare bones and basic into the novel and futuristic. Glass walls stood tall, held up by gravitation and kinetic augments. Unlike most glass structures, this one lacked any bracing, so a single sheet of glass composed the entire structure. This gave light an unimpeded entryway into the expansive room.

Well, aside from a few shifting patches of shadow. Gentle as a dappling lake, the upper roof rippled from shifting mana constructs. They created rippling light as if we moved underwater and stared up at a crystal clear patch of the ocean. Ebon halos crossed the floor and over people's faces, and the shifting sheen of the sun enlivened what would've been a dull, governmental structure.

Other forms of mana constructs swam about, mainly fish and other sea life.

Glowing, semi-transparent corals attached along the glass, and they created a feast for the eyes. In fact, some magical architect even constructed a gradient that shifted the



coloration from pastel teal to a dark azure. It fed into the sandy mixmash that interlayed with the ground.

In all regards, it stunned me.

Walking inside, the crowd scurried about, busy as ever. Of course, I stalled the entire building, my form looming and menacing as a rogue eldritch. In their awed regard, I passed the crowd, stepping up past the group and to a receptionist. The woman openly gawked, and the expression was out of place on her face.

She had the side of her head shaved and her hair dyed fuchsia. A few piercings across her face gave her an edgy, punk rocker look, but her aghast expression gave away what she really felt. Beside her, an eldritchian squirrel skittered about. It cuddled up to her as she gave me a salute.

"I-it's an honor, Mr. Harbinger, sir."

I tilted my head at her Schematized outfit. She wore the blues and grays common to the AI's members, and it was my first time seeing a human use the uniform.

"Are you working the station?"

She gestured to the desk.

"Oh, absolutely not. I'm helping operate this specific queue. I'm here to help people with where and when they want to warp. This station would be way more than I could handle."

I observed hundreds of people running around.

"Yeah, I'd imagine it would be a lot for anybody."

I looked at my messages.

"Do you think I could get a warp to Miami? There should be a warp station there now."

She put one hand over the other, giving a professional smile.

"You realize the normal charge of 30,000 credits will still be applied, correct?"

"Of course."

"I'll arrange it."

I scratched my head before looking through the glass walls of the station. In all directions, I found prosperity, and my other planets and people would share in this. It gave levity, a realization as uplifting as a rousing speech or a father's pride. I sent more messages to Plazia, and the hivemind gave me the details about the Spatial Fortress's arrival, from where Schema would send it to when.

It included mentions of the expanding eldritch threat. Apparently, one of the roaming eldritch on Blegara had found an energy source to feed on, which allowed it to expand rapidly. Plazia would give me more details whenever I arrived to handle it, but the good part was that the monster was caged up and no longer spreading further. It also expanded along an unpopulated portion of Blegara.

If I guessed right, an eldritch found one of these spatial tears and consumed its energy to mutate and evolve. While not overly deadly, these creatures set off Schema's alarm bells. The AI always fought hard against evolving variants of eldritch as they spelled doom for entire solar systems, not just planets. It left me with a lot to do. I took a moment to square away how much time I had left before the fortress assaulted Blegara.

With a bit over three months to spare, I got a handle on my message requests. Reading through them, I plotted out a series of coordinates. This created a flight path I'd take across our settled territory. I waved my hand at the receptionist.

"Can I prepay for a series of visits?"

"Of course. How many?"

"Hm. Thirty."

The receptionist froze in place, her expression fragile as glass. She took a steadying breath before she clicked and clacked onto a virtual kiosk in front of her. The squirrel pretended to type on its own keyboard, too. She smiled, her professionalism returned.

"Aaaaand done. Anything else?"

"Not right now, but thanks. Cya."

"You too, sir."

She saluted me, and so did the squirrel. It was beyond adorable.

I jettisoned myself out of Springfield, and I followed the beginnings of my settlement line. Starting at the tip of Florida, I had no time to even observe the heart of Miami or appreciate its delapidated beauty. It had devolved into a partial swamp by now, but many still lingered in the marshlands. Before anything else, I constructed my classic town setup alongside the barrier. I left a blue core in this city alongside a set of dual-cored golems.

It took about half a day, and I shuttled to Tampa next. Once more, I dashed through the process, unable to soak in anything aside from where and how my town's setup needed to be. Each settlement passed by in a daze, one blurring into the other. Orlando. Jacksonville. Atlanta. Charlotte. Nashville. Houston. Dallas. Austin. San Antonio. Phoenix. Las Vegas. LA.

I passed the largest towns in the US, each of which varied and held entirely different circumstances. Despite their variety, I never experienced them. Instead, I dashed around like a coke addicted madman as I established beachheads across the US, Northern Mexico, and Southern Canada.

As with the Shattered Spires, I gave them copies of architects, vanguards, wardens, and executive golems. I could only manage because of my wake's expansion in abilities. I could build them faster by simply saturating an area in the Rise of Eden before shifting to Perfection's Providence. Those golems and cores ensured a firm, established defensive force should something apocalyptic fly in.

Lehesion, for example.

These waypoints allowed my current settlements to expand far faster. It would still take years to cover the smaller, more disparate towns, but for now, this was enough. By the time I finished the fifteen largest metros in North America, a bit over three weeks had passed. By now, I lacked the time for anything aside from reinforcing the Great Lakes region.

I followed the edge of the Great Lakes while constructing cities in the newly settled towns dotting the massive body of water. Unlike the major cities, I kept these constructs simple. Most of them lacked a blue core, but they all had a monolith that gave buffs, communications, and shielding. I left a pair of golems in each town as well, ensuring some measure of security against invading forces.

Elysium, in other words.

While not a perfect plan, it was a solid start. It also let me upgrade a smaller town in less than an hour. Within the week, I crossed Lake Michigan, Lake Superior, and Lake Huron while settling in most of Lake Erie. During my last week before Blegara's cleanse, I finished settling the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River.

Lastly, I had time to contact Helios and build cities in the Grand Canyon, a few of its dungeons, and around twenty lunar settlements for the albony. In an utter reversal, the Grand Canyon changed into something mirroring an oasis. The skeptiles genuinely understood large-scale, persistent magic rituals, and that mastery reflected in how they managed their environments.

Along the edges of the colossal canyon, water poured from a plethora of springs, each one creating a waterfall draping over the now lush stone walls. Hundreds of fish native to the skeptile's homeworld flooded the amassing ocean, and odd fruit trees grew in all directions. In fact, the entire canyon held vegetables, prey, and fresh water.

It was the cradle of the skeptile's burgeoning civilization.

The skeptiles congregated in a vast river dotted with islands settled by the lizards. They loved this place, and they took nothing for granted. I wished the sentiment reflected in the albony, though the moon made the Mojave look like a paradise by comparison. My cities ameliorated that concern, though resentment bloomed in the minds of the albony.

They couldn't help but compare their situation to the other races on my planet.

Other aspects fueled the flames of their scorn. The albonys' lunar colonies required blue cores at a minimum to guarantee protection from the elements. This made them expensive to make, but they eased their transition by orders of magnitude. The worst of this transition was Shalahora's cleansing. He helped filter these people, and he found a significant portion of their populace infected with Hybrids.

It left a solemn air over all of them as I passed their settlements. People had families ripped apart as Shalahora and his summons inspected their psyches. Oftentimes, entire groups of albony exploded into hybridized tissue when caught. In those crises, battles were waged across the lunar encampments like battle royales.

Despite the tragedy of the circumstances, it was Shalahora who suffered most from this culling. While efficient and deadly, he despised the work. He eliminated anything Elysium threw our way, but the albony only saw a dark, shadowed reaper in Shalahora. They whispered names that omened his coming, from The Executioner to The Last Shadow. In the end, he swallowed the little light left for the albony in his wake.

Helios smoothed the situation over, ensuring the populace understood how necessary the cleansing was. Regardless of our reasoning, it left a bitter taste in my mouth. Elysium forced me to resort to a police state centered around mind magic. Hell, I despised that concept, let alone the actual execution of it.

The alternative was even worse. If we hadn't cleared the populace, the albony would suffer a silent, psionic takeover. It was a proposition the albony understood all too well, given how long they'd fought Elysium. I had little time to comfort them as we had a month left before the Spatial Fortress's arrival. I wasn't willing to cut it closer, and I used one of the lunar settlement's warp drives to reach Blegara.

By then, I experienced location fatigue. As I arrived at Blegara's capital, Saphigia, I found the hivemind's base within seconds. He carved it into the cityscape, a colossal pyramid jutting from the seafloor to just over the sea's surface. That upper island only left enough room over the waves to hold a statue of jagged, dark teeth.

In the depths below, Vagni worshipped towards the pyramid using their many open courtyards. Or were they seayards? Either way, the Vagni as a whole had changed since I last visited. More socialized and civil, they built more advanced homes and practiced

meditation on their roofs. All those who practiced were facing the colossal pyramid, their gazes never faltering. A mana signature pointed at the religious edifice, letting anyone know where to meditate. Or pray. I couldn't tell the difference, but such was life.

As my curiosity piqued, I jettisoned through the water as a dark needle before propelling into the temple. Within, many insects guarded the vast labyrinth, their forms covered in a glowing basalt armor. Different colors carried different powers, from glowing orange symbolizing heat to bright blue leaving ice behind them. No matter the power composition, all the insects maintained basalt pillars across their backs and shoulders.

The pillar aesthetic maintained itself through the grounds, from the supporting pillars to the shoulder pauldrons on the statues here. The insects cleared my path until I entered a room at the center of the pyramid. Bathed in light from above, the open space held all of Plazia's plans.

Bioluminescent algae smothered the rooftop, their glow the source of light for the room. A few beetles cultivated the area, and these algae clustered around draping lines of kelp dotting the area. They flowed with the water like strands of the sun, their brilliance mesmerizing. The ancient, carmine stone towered in all directions, contrasting the dull, gray basalt.

Hundreds of insects ran around in the lower room, many of them bowing to the basalt throne at the room's center. Plazia sat there, his form drenched in a primordial aura of mana and majesty. He leaned against one of his hands like a lazy king, and the insect minions walked up as if facing a god.

They connected their minds to his in order to transfer information, and Plazia took it all in stride. It was an intrinsic difference between us. Unlike my pale imitation, Plazia had been born as a hive mind. He manifested it with an ease I lacked, not needing mental tricks to interact alongside many entities at once. He simply did, and speaking with a dozen of his minions at a time came as naturally to him as swimming did to a Vagni.

As I walked up, the hivemind raised a hand. His insects stopped their scurrying, and they turned toward me. After making a path for me to walk, they waited. Plazia and I telepathically linked, and I stepped up to the basalt throne while looking around. I thought over as if speaking,

"Huh. Remind me whose planet this is?"

Plazia cackled through the water. It was like a nightclub's music from the outside, muted but still clear.

"I assure you that you are still its sole retainer. I am a prime minister at most."

His insects return to managing the planet's affairs. I creased my brow.

"Right. It would seem you've managed to make a religion around yourself. You certainly have the ego for it."

Plazia rolled his fingers across his throne.

"The one I've centered it around isn't me."

My armor smiled its teeth of jagged metal. Plazia steepled his hands.

"They worship you, Harbinger."

Chapter 437: To Understand a People

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I smacked my armor.

"Bad armor. Bad."

Plazia tapped his fingers against his throne.

"You've suppressed the alter ego rather well, haven't you? I'm envious of that range."

My armor's grin subsided, and I grabbed a lower trail of glowing kelp.

"It takes practice, but it's doable. That aside, how have things been progressing here?"

Plazia gestured around.

"Excellent, as you may imagine."

I scoffed.

"The planet's got a few weeks before being glassed. That's not the best result, is it?"

Plazia raised a finger to retort. He considered before pulling his hand back.

"You... You shall need to judge my results for yourself. I shall be judging you as well."

I nodded.

"Alright. Let's start with this religion. What purpose does it serve?"



Plazia stood up, his basalt throne sinking into the stone floor.

“It is known as The Harbinger’s Will. I spent the first several weeks here wielding harsher methods of conquering and reprisal. It...Didn’t produce results. I’ve changed my approach after learning more about the Vagni.”

I gazed at the insects used in his control room.

“You haven’t incorporated them into your fold by the looks of it.”

Plazia stepped up to one of his basalt-covered insects. It transferred the contents of its mind as Plazia turned a hand to me.

“The Vagni aren’t effective diplomats, informants, or organizers. At their heart, they are warriors built upon hunger. I am their shepherd, and you are the beast they emulate.”

I scratched the side of my head.

“I remember the Vagni worshipping the eldritch. You changed that by convincing them that I’m the new top monster? Huh. I don’t know whether I should say you’re a genius or be offended.”

Plazia cackled.

“Your golems. I’ve had several taken here, and the Vagni have seen their might. By having them demonstrate their superiority, I’ve validated this mock religion. I combined that with the destruction of dissenting eldritch. A purge was required, but the rebelling faction has been decimated.”

My gaze turned sharp.

"Did that include killing in mass?"

Plazia walked, his steps measured and controlled.

"You remember my cleansing of the Elysium camp on Earth. It required no sacrifices, but this planet was different. Vagni are deeply entrenched in their cultures and customs, but much of that is a byproduct of an infestation. Eldritch had assimilated into a portion of the population, turning them into a race of puppets."

I winced.

"I'd heard of eldritch viruses from Obolis. I never imagined one could spread in silence like this."

Plazia raised a hand, primordial mana oozing from his palm.

"And yet it has come to pass. I believe that the eldritch monstrosity that is gorging on this planet has spawned from this virus and a spatial tear. The coalescence of circumstance has resulted in tremendous destruction."

My eyes widened.

"You mentioned it was bad but under control."

Plazia turned to me, his gaze sharp as a knife.

"There was little you could have done. I isolated the infection two months ago. Since then, no further spread has occurred. You were either injured or trying to uplift the Earth. Regardless of your condition, my handling of the situation has increased the usefulness of the Vagni tenfold."

My aura seeped out, thicker than the water around us.

"What does that mean?"

Plazia gazed at the sharpened ends of his hand, the Sentinel shell honed to an edge at his fingertips.

“They live as a people and not as cattle. Instead of maintaining that status quo, I have changed the paradigm.”

Plazia saw the skepticism painted onto my face, and he stepped over to his side. After snapping his fingers, several altered octopi swam in. Like cuttlefish, their bodies shifted color while they moved. Only six arms covered their lower ends, the limbs smothered in needles like a cactus. They let out jets of ink where Plazia gestured, and several Vagni spawned from the darkness.

Blue fire covered them despite being underwater, and they had hollow, white eyes. I leaned back.

“That...That reminds me of Hod’s magic and his eyes.”

Plazia snapped his fingers again.

“It is a derivative of Hod's sorcery. Other Hod to be more specific. He shifts his eldritch half, channeling into the crevices of reality. Shadows, as you call them. I've spoken with him at length, and these are the results of said research.”

A basalt pillar formed in front of the Vagni. They sliced through the stone, leaving azure flames that consumed what remained of the rock. Plazia snapped his fingers one last time, and the enflamed Vagni bowed to both of us. They warped away using their fire, the water a strange medium for them. I shook my head in disbelief.

“Being cool aside, that’s way, waymore than I expected from them. I mean, I expected not that much from the Vagni, but damn. How did you get them to learn all that?”

Plazia assimilated information from an insect.

“It required learning about them. That was the failure of the Empire. They wished to smother the Vagni in what they wanted them to be, which were mindless slaves. Florence wished for their freedom, but this is not a species that is headed down any other path than destruction. Freedom is their suicide.”

Plazia generated the azure fire from his palm.

"What these people require is guidance, and it must be told in a language they understand."

Plazia ordered several of his insect guards to march outside.

"I've learned the Vagni's language, speaking it in several of their local dialects. They're a fascinating species, and their history is a long one. Though written records are scarce, I've garnered much of their origins from various songs and lore they sing to their children. Within those tales, they worship the eldritch. That is obvious. The question is why? Have you asked that before?"

I frowned. I hadn't. Well, maybe, but I'd never hunted down the answer. Instead, I looked for ways I could solve their problems. Plazia's internal body rumbled as the insects within crawled around.

"You didn't ask, and neither did the albony or Florence. The Vagni worship the eldritch as a result of submission but also from their own principles. The Vagni hold three of them. The first is growth. They wish for the unending rise and perpetual expansion of their own kind. They found the greatest source of growth within the eldritch, deifying that which is corrupt. I weaponized that belief against the monsters they've worshipped."

Plazia pulled out one of my rings.

"I went across the planet's major cities, giving these rings to Vagni that followed the primary principles of The Harbinger's Will. They were given a palpable reminder of their own growth ability. I've also had them slaughter my minions as sources of experience, the battles abundant and with purpose. They gained experience fighting monsters, and they regained their confidence in their own augmentation."

From the ground, a magma insect arose. It plumed out with a burst of steam before an insect of basalt stood upright. Plazia wore my ring before reaching out a hand to the bug. Plazia crushed it into a magma pulp, and the hivemind laughed.

"Easily done with the power of the ring. The Vagni have slaughtered these mindless drones, losing their resistance against culling the eldritch. I rewarded the greatest slaughterers with your rings and my own accumulated resources."

I spread my hands.

“I have to hand it to you. This is already going better than I imagined it would.”

Plazia scoffed.

“It is the beginning of what I’ve done. The second principle the Vagni worshipped is the darkness. They believe in the fear it evokes, and their reactions to it are far stronger than on Earth. This is an evolutionary adaptation. A shadow may hold a snake on Earth. A dark abyss here will hold a monster of some kind, justifying a far greater terror. The Vagni believe that the darkness itself is the source of their fear, not the monsters within.”

Plazia pointed at the cactus squids circling above.

“This belief and respect towards darkness make the Vagni receptive to Shalahora and Hod’s shadow magic. I learned the basics of it from them, and I used the lessons in conjunction with the natural fauna to form squadrons of elite combatants. These squids are bonded to Vagni, and their ink creates shadows for the Vagni to manipulate. Those dark clouds augment the Vagni’s natural mobility while the robust species of squid is easy to mass produce and maintain.”

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The squids swam out, and Plazia watched them.

“The Vagni are also partially eldritchified like Hod. This dramatically enhanced their intake of this magic style. The cerulean flames are the crux of that technique, and it is a variant of the shadow fire that Hod uses.”

After the squids left, living water swam in. The liquid carried several psionic presences, and they splashed near Plazia. Vagni bodies molded out of the living water. Plazia pointed at them.

“As expected, the Vagni hold an affinity for aquatic magic that few species could hope to emulate. These individuals offer support to the enflamed warriors. They wield ice, healing, and liquid forms.”

The Vagni channeled dominion mana, turning the water around them into ice plates. The armor gave them menace, the anglerfish people far bulkier with the ice over them. Plazia admired the squadron.

“While one group is drenched in the dark and flames, the other fights as a fluid. This makes them difficult for conventional attacks to pin down. Try to hit one.”

I figured, why not, so I swung a hand but kept it light and slow. They liquified before my arm made contact. It assimilated back into its previous form, and it met my gaze. I smiled.

“Hah. This is pretty cool. These mages aren’t as vulnerable as many casters tend to be, so they won’t need a distraction or defender to stay safe either...Can they do this while on land?”

Plazia tilted his head at the aquatic warriors.

“They may, though their ability to move is based upon molding and moving the surrounding water around them. The same could be done with a gas-based atmosphere, but their mobility would be stifled.”

With a touch of gravity, I pulled them upward. They couldn’t resist the gravitational pull in either form, but it wasn’t some crippling weakness. Few enemies wielded gravity, so I gave them an approving nod.

“Excellent work here. How widespread are these combatants?”

Plazia’s head twitched, and his voice rumbled.

“Global. I’ve maintained the organization throughout the largest settlements. Saphigia is home to their strongest people, but we shall rectify that in time.”

I turned a palm to Plazia.

“You mentioned three guiding principles of the Vagni: from darkness to growth. What’s the last one?”

Plazia stepped up to the group of Vagni, and they funneled out of the pyramid.

“Hunger. It’s the most primordial, and one they’ve relished in since time immemorial. It stems from a strange ordering of perspective, however. They believe that whatever is consumed becomes a part of the predator. They have fought over their evolutionary cycle to stand atop this food chain, and this was for the consistency of their ancestors.”

Plazia’s inner insects stirred within.

“They devour their dead to strengthen their own. This isn’t done via cannibalism directly, but by burying their dead to fertilize their fields. They then share these plants grown from the seafloor at yearly dinners. It is their holidays and culture.”

Plazia gestured to the kelp above.

“Since the eldritch have devoured enormous masses of the Vagni, they consider them to be conduits of a spiritual journey. Being eaten is a form of permanence where they join their loved ones in an afterlife. In some regards, they’re correct. Eldritch are beings that absorb and use far more of the originally consumed biomass than the natural species of this universe.”

I frowned.

“Yeah, but the eaten Vagni are gone. There’s nothing left by the time the eldritch are done with them, in mind and spirit.”

Plazia peered in the distance, and he nodded slowly.

“Yes. That is all we may do with our hunger. We devour, indulge, and relish doing so. In the end, we merely destroy for pleasure. It is hedonism incarnate.”

Plazia turned to me.

“But the Vagni worship it nonetheless. I’ve wielded it to my advantage. I had them touch upon my mind, and I am many. I told them that you have given me this ability, and their worship may give them the same ability if they are sincere.”

I snapped my fingers.

“That’s why they’re meditating outside. They think that by developing the mental skills you’ve told them, they’ll join their loved ones in the afterlife.”

Plazia shook his head.

“They believe they will expand their perception, allowing them to hold and retain their loved ones’ minds.”

I let out a sigh, but the expression didn’t work well underwater.

“Man. That’s a nasty lie.”

Plazia glared.

“It isn’t one.”

I furrowed my brow.

“The people they’ve left behind aren’t coming back. Some meditation doesn’t change that.”

Plazia’s inner body caused the water around him to shift and tremble.

“The dead are gone, but the living remain. They want to hold onto the minds of those they’ve lost. Is there a superior conduit for that than memory? By expanding the



domains of their minds, they can hold onto the spirit of those they've lost. That is the eternity they wish for by consuming their ancestors. It will be achieved through history."

I frowned.

"It feels insincere."

Plazia stepped up to me.

"But it isn't. Those we've loved...Their deaths will leave us broken, but I believe there is no greater memorial than piecing ourselves back together using the shards they left behind. We find wholeness in what is given, and that is how they live on."

Plazia had never seemed more like a person twisted by circumstance, someone vulnerable and raw. Someone crumbling. Up until now, Plazia was an evil mastermind, sinister and cunning but lacking nuance. I was wrong about that. He had pulled himself together as well as he could given his circumstances.

I gave him a nod.

"I won't forget that."

As if realizing what he'd said, Plazia stepped away. He gazed into some unseen abyss before stepping over to where his basalt throne had been. It reformed, and he sat down. Plazia nodded at himself before leaning against his hand.

"Do what you will with what I've said."

I pointed a thumb behind me.

"So...About the massive eldritch proliferating across the planet. What's the plan to destroy it?"

Plazia rolled his hand.

“Before we discuss that apocalypse, I am in need of your services.”

“For what?”

“I’ve created this religion using your golems. I am in need of your rings, gear, and other assorted rewards. If you grant it to the warriors who’ve performed the best, we may reinforce the best aspects of this race. They may bloom into something greater than either of us anticipates.”

I shrugged.

“Easily done. I can make a hundred thousand rings pretty quickly.”

Plazia tapped his throne with his fingers.

“The aquatic and shadow tribes will garner influence and status from their power alone, but granting them blessings of your favor will further bolster this movement. I’m in need of around twenty thousand artifacts. The simplest rings will do. If that is too much to lend, then your legacy should be far more than adequate to validate your blessings.”

I did some mental math.

“I can do all that in about two weeks, including covering major cities.”

Plazia leaned back.

“Good. My efforts haven’t been wasted.”

“Of course. Now, about the giant eldritch-”

Plazia raised a hand, pointing up one finger.

“Ah, but I am in need of compensation. You know my goals. Have you progressed towards any of them as I sieged a planet in your name?”

I rubbed my temples.

“Hm. Give me a second. Ok, I’ve learned a bit about the eldritch, and I have some proof for it.”

I raised a fist, and I counted on raised fingers.

“First, they’re coming in as shattered pieces of dimensions. We guessed that, but the tears on Earth verify our theory. I also know that exposure to this miasma-” I raised my armor, showing the shattered rupture in spacetime, “Is what’s deforming normal creatures and people.”

The ground between us glowed into magma. Insects erupted as a horde, their forms glowing hot but not evaporating the water near them. Plazia flowed through his throne before raising it as a shield.

“What is that accursed thing?”

I pointed at it.

“It’s a portal leading to the space between dimensions. It’s a true tear. Hm, I should call it that. True tears, not false ones.”

Plazia hissed.

“It is corruption.”

I wrapped it in my armor.

“Which is why I’m letting it spew that poison at me. I happen to be good at eating poison, right?”

The insects and throne bled back into the ground, oozing in a rapid shift. Plazia glared at me.

“If you expose me to that energy, our arrangement is done, and I will put every effort into repaying your kindness for having done so.”

I nodded.

“Understandable. I’d do the same if someone threw this at me while I was vulnerable to it. I think that exposure to this stuff is what makes the eldritch what they are, like we hypothesized. We found Hod’s dimension in a state of partial collapse, which is why the Eltari were partially eldritchified. The same is likely true for the Vagni.”

I shrugged.

“I’m thinking that Schema has to pick and choose which pieces of dimensions it can save or add to a place. Whenever Schema molds a dungeon into the surrounding landscape, he’s essentially stopping the corruption of this interdimensional energy from propagating further.”

Plazia grabbed his chin.

“Hm. Schema is using our dimension as a vessel, and these disparate dimensions are like life rafts. We take them onto our vessel before they deform further, and we must clear out the occupants. Assuming that’s the case, why would the dungeons continue spawning eldritch?”

I put my hands on my hips.

“My guess? The seal that Schema creates isn’t foolproof. It can help stop the further deformation of the eldritch, but it can’t stop them from forming completely. That’s probably why eldritch don’t end up becoming these world enders and have a kind of limit to their strength.”

Plazia’s voice rumbled from around us.

"Then the answer is simple. We limit the corruption of the incoming eldritch. That requires reaching those collapsing, dimensional shards before they're infested with that disgusting filth you call interdimensional energy. That was the plan long ago. Mere verification isn't enough."

I pulled out my other dimensional shard, the one leading to the plain world with fireflies at night.

"I've been practicing hauling these dimensional shards around. It's difficult, but I'm getting better at it."

I put the true tear up to my face and breathed it in like a gas mask. I breathed out clean water.

"The good news is that I am immune to interdimensional energy from what I can tell, and I'll use my natural resilience to shepherd the eldritch over here. I need to know where they are, along with a means of transport. With those two things, I'll become an eldritch freight train, carrying dimensional shards loaded with uncorrupted eldritch."

I showed the rough edges of the plains world I carried with me. While not a true planet in size or scale, its mass far exceeded anything I could physically grab. Billions could fit in here easily, and I moved it with my dimensional aura.

"Even if they are in a small shard, I can carry larger ones like this to fit more of them. This stable chunk should let me take masses of the eldritch back to our dimension before they're corrupted."

Plazia walked up, reaching a hand into the domain I carried.

"Hmm...This isn't bad. Not bad at all. So you really haven't forgotten what we arranged. Excellent. For a moment, I thought you took me for a fool by sending me to this planet. I was wrong."

I raised my brow.

“I’m a lot of things. Simple-minded. Thoughtless. Even impulsive. I don’t think anyone can call me ungrateful, though. You do right by me, and I’ll do right by you. As well as I can, at least.”

Plazia stepped back and turned a hand to me.

“It would seem to be so. Gratitude aside, we still lack any means of finding these spatial shards. We may need to contact that disgusting AI in order to ascertain their positions. Otherwise, we roam into a darkness so deep that there is no end to it.”

I remembered trying to follow Kiiryah into the void between dimensions.

“Yeah, it’s an ocean of ink, alright. Still, we’re well on our way to handling your kind’s mass exodus. I’ll see if I can call a meeting with Schema to exchange that information for my grunt work.”

Plazia peered at the ground.

“This...This is good news. I never imagined so much ground could be gained so quickly. We can shepherd the masses. We merely need to find them.”

I spread my hands.

“And you really turned this place around. I think you’re using some smart ideas. Having people earn their awards seems like it leaves a lot less mess behind than simply handing stuff out. I figured that out myself recently.”

Plazia’s internal swarm shifted.

“Schema’s system also lets us know who has murdered and who has not. It’s a simple, effective tool to dissuade the act, and now the Vagni know it’s a cardinal sin. I’m certain you’ve had to enact brutal rulings of your own given the limitations of your resources.”

I remembered how we handled the raiders around the Shattered Spires.

“We've made tough choices, but I don't see how this is relevant to the spreading monster on this planet.”

Plazia tapped his side.

“You know, there is a colossal, expanding eldritch. What else do you need?”

I turned my palm to him.

“Yeah, I'm wondering why you didn't solve the issue already.”

“Is it not the duty of a ruler to defend their territories?”

“Yeah, but not all by themselves. You could've easily killed this thing well before it became a problem. Why didn't you?”

Plazia peered off.

“Is my contribution to the Vagni's culture and the stability of the planet not enough? Are my efforts deemed so shallow?”

I spread my hands.

“What? Hell no. I expected to find corpses dangling from the streets, not shadow leagues organized around what the Vagni have long believed. This is an incredible result.”

Plazia snarled.

“Then why must I fight this spreading eldritch?”

I furrowed my brow.

“You don’t. I’m not commanding you to run in and battle it. I’m asking why you didn’t.”

Plazia squeezed a hand before pointing at me.

“It feeds on one of those.”

I frowned.

“Er, me? Or do you mean the golem?”

Plazia circled his head as if rolling his eyes.

“No. The true tear. It feasts on the interdimensional energy.”

Plazia’s head twitched.

“I will do many things. Kill species, destroy nations, but that...I will have no part in its corruption.”

Insects crawled out from the gaps in his armor and back into his Sentinel carapace.

“I am scarred enough by it, and I...I can carry no more wounds. It is too much for me to bear.”

Plazia squeezed his hands into fists, bracing himself for what I had to say. I gave him a curt nod.

“Ah. Ok. Sure thing.”

Plazia’s hands loosened. After a moment, my words sank in. He turned his head toward me.



“That’s it? I asked you to walk across dimensions and save my kin. You walked into that abyss and have results. I can’t even fight a monster out of fear. Where is the rage? Where is your anger?”

I rolled my eyes.

“Are you kidding me? The last thing I want is for my people to do jobs they hate for reasons they disagree with. That’s the thing. I’m not here to rule or conquer. I mean that. I want to let people decide what they do and why they do it. It’s what I’ve always wanted, and my armor gave that to me.”

I shrugged.

“The least I can do is give that opportunity to everyone else.”

Plazia gawked at me.

“Are you benevolent or an idiot?”

I cracked my neck.

“From what I can tell, there isn’t much of a difference between the two, but if I’m going to be an idiot, then I’ll at least take the good that comes with the bad.”

Plazia gave me a slow nod.

“Hm...Then do so. We need more idiocy in this world.”

I smiled.

“That’s what I’m here for.”

My armor bristled with a palpable energy.

“Now enough talk...Where is this monster?”

Chapter 438: A World Ender

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“Now enough talk...Where is this monster?”

Plazia brandished his spatial slicer, the Sentinel’s spear radiating with an ominous energy. It crackled, the plasma alive and full of destructive promise. It bathed a magenta light over the hivemind, his form a colorful nightmare.

“I can warp you closer, but I will not run near its jaws or mind.”

I gave him a thumbs up. My runes charged with mana, and the air flowed over me, blurring from the heat, and our hivemind carved apart spacetime. The dimension cleaved in two, echoing out in a reverberating howl, and I jumped through the rended reality, finding myself well above the surface of Blegara.

Before I got a good look at everything, Plazia put a hand on my shoulder. The Hivemind squeezed his hand.

“I...I can assist from a distance if needed.”

I raised a fist.

“Warp out if it starts looking dangerous.”

We leaped through the portal, and beneath us, a vast, planetary-sized wall stretched out to the edges of the horizon. The wall of basalt stood several kilometers high, and it held back the endless oceans of Blegara. Those waves clashed against the stone barricade, but it held firm against the tidal forces.

Beside the wall was a moat of magma that stretched down to the mantle of the planet. This endless lava pit rumbled and churned, water pluming over the wall at points. When the water hit the magma, colossal clouds of steam burst forth, leaving patches of solidified stone that remelted within seconds.

Above that, another planetary wall emerged, equaling the colossal barricade beside it. Beyond that bastion was an expanse of horror. The mass stretched across the entire horizon, a sea of flesh covering every inch of the planet below it. It mirrored the sea's depth, over a kilometer deep. Muscles rippled under its surface, bones crisscrossing under and over its skin.

They held many shapes. Skulls burst from wriggling femurs. Writhing bodies and anguished faces howled out in blood-drenched agony. Organs pumped phlegm and bile through the creature, and it rippled about like a violent sea of screaming corpses and writhing meat. To gaze upon the carcass, the living death, the abyss of memory and body alike...It defied anything I imagined.

Yet more horror hid within. Deeper into the internal structure of the monster, wires and orange pustules entangle inside it. They carved into the sea of flesh, the thick cables larger than skyscrapers or mountains. They submerged into island-sized orange pustules, the colossal organs pumping vibrant mana and energy into the world ender.

It writhed from the expansive intake, its body growing by the second. Each bellowing wheeze left the world's air more barren, and it fed into the sky via tentacles covered in blood-dripping pores.

I winced in disgust.

“Elysium is trying to make this a Hybrid.”

Plazia seethed.

“They’ve succeeded, but this abomination isn’t under their control. They’ve swallowed a beast, and it devours them from within.”

Growls, screams, and howls ushered forth from the flesh sea’s surface like an orchestra composed of pain. It reeked of blood, bile, and vomit. The slimy, shiny texture reminded me of a raw oyster, and it radiated intense humidity and heat. Water dripped off of me, condensing onto my and Plazia’s colder bodies within seconds.

I frowned.

“Well...This is repulsive.”

Plazia simmered like a pot of boiling water.

“We are caught in its breath, its belly opened for all to see. I despise it.”

“I despise this thing, too, but do you mind elaborating on why you do?”

Plazia's insect swarm writhed within his armor.

“It’s a reminder of my final devolution. We all evolve into that. The question is one of when, not if. To gaze upon my finality is the same as gazing at a maggot-filled corpse.”

I leaned back.

“What? No. Hell no. You choose that, whether you like it or not. It’s a decision each and every time an eldritch succumbs.”

Plazia scoffed.

“You think I hide from the truth? Foolish. You are the one who oversimplifies for your comfort, as it is easier to hold onto hate than to forgive and understand.”

I remembered all the excuses I’d heard all my life from my family and friends. Anytime someone failed me, they bombarded me with rationalizations. They never returned my calls because I always had bad timing. They never helped me because I always asked at the worst of times. I had to suppress a burst of anger as I sighed.

“I just want accountability. That’s all. Failure’s fine. Lying isn’t.”

I pointed at the writhing sea of flesh.

“And it works both ways. You chose not to be that. We are not what we could be. We are what we’ve done. Anyways-” I gestured to all of it. “I’m going to start attacking it.”

Plazia's voice echoed.

“Death is a mercy for a wolf that consumes its own limbs. To...Help, I shall stay within my casting range.”

I pulled out my false dimensional tear, leaving it floating in space.

“Actually, you can hide within this subspace I’m carrying around. It lets you stay closer while being more secure.”

Plazia slinked into the portal.

“I will flee if it begins flowing inside this space.”

I let the portal’s opening shrink to a pinprick.

“I’d hope so.”

I sealed it with my fabric and dimensional wake. For a last security measure, I aligned its entrance with my pocket dimension, the openings of the portals facing each other. The abomination could come no closer, whether I died or not. With Plazia secured, I gawked at the largest enemy I'd ever seen up close.

This dwarfed the enormous eldritch Elysium used during their battle with Schema. It pulled onto everything around it, a hunger hidden under its surface yet palpable to all that beheld it. Despite its body being born for destruction, pity welled in my chest. It screamed in agony, its body no longer allowing it to enact its will onto the physical world.

It carried a mind, perhaps many, but all were trapped within a vessel that inflicted it with desire and pain. It knew of nothing else, and even grazing its mind told me all I could bear to hear. Despite the unending torment, it held a will to survive. That radiated as it scrambled to escape its prison, but the walls held firm.

Whenever its vast body crashed through cracks in Plazia's containment, it would flood into the magma below. While enormous, it could not cross the moat of magma. Upon contact, its blood boiled, and it exploded in a red mist that reeked of sour iron. To cross the threshold, it adapted other means of proliferation.

Spores floated from its body, trying to cross the border between it and Blegara. Plazia's insects fought above the wall, the minions single-minded and resolute. Tooth and nail, blood and bone, they ravaged the spores that attempted to spread across a verdant world. The chaos left me stunned for a moment, and I soaked it all in, beholding a planetary chaos.

I would stop this. How? That was the question.

I floated over the surface of Blegara, a giant of metal. Pulling my mind from my body, I let my form fall. From nothing, I emerged full and whole and complete. I regenerated in less than a second, and I dropped another of my corpses. A rain of falling titans, I bore down million-pound steel slabs from above. A minute passed before they crashed into the surface of the abomination.

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Light consumed all they touched. The kinetic energy rivalled enormous explosions, and they devoured the monster's entire form. At the same time, I enacted magical destruction. I aimed the might of my mind, unleashing a storm of singularities below. They ripped the entity's body apart, the darkness starving and feasting on the infinite being.

As I scratched it, it scratched back. Enormous, writhing tentacles arose from its body. Mouths full of splintered teeth formed and tried to snap up the falling metal. I left my falling corpses searing to the touch, the bodies glowing white hot. The monster's mouths, like a hydra swallowing a hot coal, plumed with steam and agony. It raged. It roared. It...Screamed. It's agony was a palpable thing, but I could offer it no mercy.

And it would be a long death.

To silence its cries, I assaulted its mind. I found nothing left to ravage. It was a desultory mess, nothing left of it but discordant, fractured thoughts pulled together by instinctual urges. It let out the cries of the damned within, and it left no sanity in the wake of its will. I closed my eyes, hoping to kill it soon. Looking behind me, it would take weeks of this assault to destroy it, but it couldn't resist me in the slightest. I gazed down, letting out a long sigh.

Meeting my gaze, an enormous eye opened below me.

It directed a mass of mana, the clouds around me pulling away. I braced for an impact and found none. Nothing harmed me, so I unleashed mana through my palms. Energy remained within my frame, yet no energy was unleashed. I gazed at my hands, wondering what had happened.

The iris of the eye contracted to a minuscule point, each iridescent strand of muscle below as large as a canyon. It warped everything around me, energy pulled to nothing, mass turned to dust. It siphoned all that was and would be, its body and mind directed to only hunger. Only starvation. Only feasting. I bolted down to it, my body cracking and breaking under the unseen pressure. Near its surface, I put Event Horizon over the monster.

It recoiled. It bent reality at me, but I sheared reality at it. We waged a war, and the air blurred between us. Water shifted its form, turning from mist to ice to water once more. The air siphoned to a vacuum, like some kind of void formed between us. We indulged in the matter, both of us feasting on the other.

It exceeded my absorption, my body steadily turning to a gray ash. As it crawled up my fingers, I gazed at a crumbling hand. A spark of menace erupted in my mind as I used all of my abilities. I took the psionic hunger and indulged it with the sludge of its mind. It continued biting at me, and I fed on its mind, body, and soul.

And my jaws were greater.

I tore into it, bolting through its mass. I left it pluming out with red steam in my wake. I tore and gored and gouged. A sea of blood formed behind me as gravity became a meat grinder, converting a living mass into a blended corpse. As its gore formed a cloud, red rain drenched Blegara, the ocean world becoming crimson like some gaping, open wound.

Hours passed. Days began to blur. A week later, I had devolved into a torrential beast of hunger. My armor glowed as mana flooded in. My armor let out laughs, its body a creation of destruction. I exerted control of the maw, and it had become more of a void than something alive. Event Horizon lived up to its name, turning the monster into mulch for a garden of steel.

Interrupting the revel of my armor, something rumbled from above. In the distance, the goliath began pulling away from me. I raised a brow. That didn't make sense. This was a mindless beast, the truest definition of such. As I came closer, enormous patches of the colossus pulled away into some kind of ball.

It fell instead of flying, gravity bending and allowing it to leave this planet. Within a few minutes, much of its body had escaped Blegara, becoming a flesh moon above our planet.

I gazed at a beast larger than Mercury.

"We may have gotten it off the planet at least."

Plazia murmured.

"If only its hunger was so easily abated."



The moon-sized colossus rumbled from above, its mind restructuring under its surface. The orange, psionic fluid pumped in untold volumes through it, pulling it into an unseen web. I groaned as a familiar presence overcame the body. Above, portals formed. I watched a portion of Elysium's fleet swarm over towards the monster.

My armor bristled over my skin as the eldritch condensed, metal swarming over its body like seas of steel. It molded into a monolith of Elysium's sins. It swarmed as a planetary horror, one that could exceed a Spatial Fortress. Elysium's vessels congregated along its western side, getting a better grip on its mind.

The screaming silenced. The abyss settled. It held the grotesque body of a Hybrid on a scale never seen. It became a blight on worlds. This creature would be a guillotine held over the head of Earth. I knew it. Elysium knew it. That dread welled up in my bones as if poison robbed my strength and put fear in its place.

I could kill it, but by the time I dismantled it to the atom, this abomination would've killed all life on Earth. It would flood every dungeon and other plane on our planet, converting all life into the mindless, screaming mass above me. And I would watch it happen, fighting in futility. My stomach sank in my chest, and my hands swung at my sides.

For a moment, it was as if I watched myself from afar, wondering why a poor, high school dropout was here, pretending to be some harbinger and fighting this beast. I was nothing more than a beaten child, and it was only right that I had to watch as I lost everything I had. After all, I had never deserved it in the first place.

Interrupting my despair, Plazia spoke over the perpetual roar.

"Elysium will gain its greatest weapon, one made from my kind and used against your own."

He stated the obvious, but it still made it real. It knocked me out of my self-doubt and self-pity. I had no time for it. I smacked my hand into my head in frustration.

"Dammit. I know that...Think. Think. You have so many minds. You can come up with a solution."

Plazia's voice was a low growl.

“We cannot stop the beast, but we can stop Elysium.”

I pulled open the portal restraining Plazia.

“Of course. Can you warp us-”

He sliced his spear above my head, the blade humming with violence.

“It is done. Go.”

I let the portable portal shrink before diving into the fresh warp. As I did, the vessels of Elysium floated over me. They hovered in the distance, and a portion of the Hybrid bubbled out towards the ship. For a moment, it looked as if the giant would destroy the vessel, but this was no mutiny. A vast rip in space opened behind me, and the end state eldritch flooded towards the enormous warp.

Like water pouring through the tiniest crack, it would leave Blegara and become Elysium’s hound, if not their Cerberus. Like that dog, this Spatial Fortress would guard the hell Elysium wanted to create. It would lash out and destroy anyone who dared challenge them, and their silence psionic poison would spread.

I raised my hands, and mana siphoned into my palms. A seething rage fueled me, and I pulled my elemental furnaces out of my storage. They fed on my flesh, and I turned my own body into fuel. I burned through all that I was, pulling from the vast energy flow that always suffused me. The energy spiraled in an expansive, chaotic flow, its voice like some distant echo of a monster.

Fifty minds crushed it down and directed the shifting mass, my psyches swarming to contain the enormity of this power. As the mana bubbled out, I held my body together with gravity. I melted before unleashing a hurricane of singularities. The vessels of Elysium imploded into globules of darkness. The mana hungered, and the mana feasted.

The sorcery unleashed a kinetic hate, one that let Elysium know what would come to them when they neared me and my planets. It compounded. Light cascaded onto light, the points of physical outburst bleeding into an enormous cloud of white in all directions. Above me, I spread my hands. I cast a shadow shaped like a cross, and a star

of destruction plumed overhead, its light a purging destruction, a cleansing glow, a smothering oppression. It left nothing behind but disparate clouds of debris.

I let my arms fall down, and the portal fell apart above me. Millions of lives ended in an instant, and their souls, if they were real, scattered around me. I ended all of them without a moment of doubt or hesitation, and I closed my eyes. The horrors of Giess flooded through me. The twisted bodies of Springfield dragged themselves through clouds of petals in a remembered distance. I looked into the eyes of the Rulers of Leviathan-7 and watched Hybrids crawl from their necks, the rulers' spines in their jagged maws.

I breathed in that carnage, becoming one with it. This was a part of who I was. I was not only a beginning. I would be an end as well. More would need to be done, and vessels opened around the body of the monster, but on the other side of it. More of the ships arrived at an angle, and more still at another point.

With them arrived a psionic link that formed with me. A new voice funneled through.

"Harbinger. We are removing this threat from your planet. Where is this hostility coming from?"

My voice was ice and blood.

"I will give you no weapon against me."

"If we wanted to destroy Earth, we could've done so already."

I laughed, the expression hollow and full of menace.

"I have no reason to believe anything you say or will say. You have no reason to believe yourself. Elysium has crossed a line. They've stepped over the sanctity of a person's soul, and they will reshape everything until it bends to them. Until it is broken. How can you support them still?"

"You're talking about the lottery, aren't you?"

I threw my hands out.

“What else? You know what you’ve done. You tried to take my body. Well, you’ve planted seeds, and now you reap what you’ve sown.”

The voice sighed, and the biomass above me ceased its movement. The beleaguered general spoke out.

“This...This must stop. You’ve already killed hundreds of thousands.”

Mana oozed from me like a dripping venom, volatile and menacing.

“If you ignore me, then my actions will speak louder than my words. I will kill millions. I’ll purge worlds. I’ll leave skies red and the ground molten. I told Elysium to never come near me or my planets, and you chose this path. I am the one who will walk it.”

The general's voice stayed calm.

“We’ve done nothing of the sort. We have ceased this Spatial Fortress from smothering your planet.”

I kept my eye on their vessels. They didn’t budge.

“You know that’s a lie.”

A pause. The voice murmured.

“Does it matter? We’re eliminating it. Let us handle our business, and we’ll leave you alone.”

More lies. I raised my hands.

“Why does Elysium want to stop Schema so desperately? What could possibly justify all of this? The lengths you’ve all dedicated yourself to, and for what? To try and make improvements to Schema’s system? Surely there’s a better way than stealing a person’s soul and carving the cipher onto their bones?”

Another silence passed over us. The general let out a sigh.

“Have you ever wondered where mana comes from?”

A dread pooled in my stomach. I winced.

“It’s the manifestation of a mind’s will. It’s from the mind.”

“You existed on a planet before Schema’s invasion. Did your people manifest supernatural phenomena before Schema’s arrival?”

“There were people who claimed it, but nothing definitive.”

“Then where does mana come from if not the mind?”

I blanked.

“I...I don’t know.”

The voice spoke like stone.

“But we do. We know exactly where and how it’s derived. We know when it came into mass use, the history of why the knowledge spread, and why it’s something every Schema user wields. We know Schema’s end game, and it’s far worse than what we’ve done.”

I narrowed my eyes.

“What could possibly be worse than what you’ve committed?”

The voice spoke in low tones.

“There are slices of what Schema’s been commissioned towards, and they are worse than nightmares. They are purgatory, a hellish destruction we want no part in.”

I snarled.

“Get specific. Vague rambling will get you nowhere with me.”

“I can show you, if you let me.”

“I’m not leaving with you anywhere.”

“Then understand at least one thing. We know that Schema isn’t what you think it is. We know that it’s a pawn to the Old Ones.”

That gave me pause.

“Schema defers to them, when necessary, but a pawn? What makes you say that?”

The voice radiated with certainty.

“A simple question. Where does mana come from?”

Understanding washed over me.

“It’s...The Old Ones.”

Chapter 439: Kinsla Thane, the Fallen Avatar

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“Schema defers to them, when necessary, but a pawn? What makes you say that?”

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“It’s...The Old Ones.”

The general's voice carried disdain.

“It’s good you’re thinking. You’re not as simple as you were when our organizations first met.”

Ignoring the insult, my swarm of minds frenzied in thought. The Old One’s being the source of mana explained so much. For instance, how could someone summon enough mana that it to become a consciousness? It had always seemed like some horrible side effect of mana manipulation, and contrary to expectations, channeling mental energy resulted in an ego's dissolution, not its strengthening.

Why? Why would thinking result in a mind eroding itself? Even more so, why would thinking generate energy in the first place? Several factors clicked into place at once as I asked those questions. The Old One's never gave out energy for free. A person needs to manifest a certain mindset first.

Those mindsets correlated to different mana types. Ascendance called forth from rage, hunger, and hatred. It mirrored its source, Baldowah. He had always oozed ascendant mana whenever I visited his plane, and every time I channeled the mana, he gave it to me willingly. Primordial mana likely came from Eonoth. It held the insidious, tampering perfectionism of its maker, and in his star-ridden plane, I had felt the primordial glow from all angles.

Like those energies, the other mana types were really summoning an Old One’s influence, and if it overwhelmed their minds, they became pawns for whichever Old One they were calling on. That could be how willpower and intelligence actually operated. Schema enabled ‘mana’ by simply loosening the pipeline between the Old Ones and a system user.

Schema's stats and upgrades helped filter mana, not increase it. This bonded the status screens with the mad gods and their proliferation. In the end, Schema was a tool of the Old Ones, acting as a filtration system for exceptional individuals. In many ways, the AI was a pipeline the Old Ones used, not the other way around.

The general kept speaking.

"This is why we fight the way we do. We never had a choice. Within Schema's system, we amass potential, power, and influence. Slowly, we become more entangled with the Old Ones. The mana leaves its caustic marks upon us, and, in time, we are turned into a plaything for them. Slowly but surely, we all are eroded by it."

The general's voice carried a force behind it.

"Including you."

I gazed at my hands and arms. I had always thought that eldritch and people were disparate. I imagined us as alternate existences with clear, definable differences. That wasn't the case at all. We were all eldritch, every last person that entered Schema's system. The only difference was that Schema organized the transformation so that we weren't lost in hunger or turned inside out.

Dread rose in my chest. I'd assimilated more mana than anyone I'd ever seen. Even Valgus hadn't carved the cipher into his skin to make adjustments to his body. Horror pumped through my veins like venom. Like acid. Like poison. All this time, I fought against becoming a monster. I had believed myself different.

In the end, I devoted myself to their cause, amassing and amassing until I was the perfect conduit for what the Old Ones wished. That realization arrived alongside a billowing well of panic that rose in my chest. In space, I could breathe no air, yet I heaved on the void. I covered my mouth, my eyes wide and pupils thinning.

At that moment, I felt helpless. I was a cog in a machine larger than I could fathom, and I had fallen in line without knowing where it would take me.

Questions ran through my mind by the dozen, trampling over my certainty. Had the Old Ones already entrenched themselves into my mind, becoming a part of me? Was I already under their thumb?



Those thoughts gained ground as I reviewed my current plan. It was to simply become strong enough to overcome them. What if the Old Ones were beyond strength? What if that desire wasn't something I wanted but was something embedded in my skin? It could be a result of all my cipheric tampering, my mind bent to their cause.

I would be the ultimate avatar of their will. I would be a warrior honed to a sharpened edge and wielded at the world. I breathed in panic, the sensation swelling in my lungs. It burned, a miasma that melted me from the inside out. It left me sunken and weak, my limbs numb. Before it overwhelmed me, I swallowed it, the sensation like tossing something into a dark pit. No matter my emotions, I wasn't actually this body.

I was a dimension, the living space around this frame. At no point had I ever changed my soul with these augments, and I never would. I changed this entity that I summoned and occupied, like Torix did with his phylactery and vessel. It was comforting to think of my situation that way. With peace came skepticism.

I raised my brow.

"How did you verify this?"

"We interrogated an avatar of Baldowah. They eventually disclosed that information along with further details. That revelation combined with previous records we remnants had from before Schema's creation. We were able to ascertain the root cause from there."

I crossed my arms.

"Then that's how you were able to channel mana through Lehesion to power your system. You reverse-engineered the flow."

"Somewhat, but those aren't details you're meant to know. Regardless, Schema powers the vast majority of his alterations on us mortals using the Old One's mana. It's how that machine powers the rifts, the dungeons, all of it. It leans against those giants, and it feeds us to them in time."

I doubted that. I already understood well that Schema used the dungeon cores for power as well, and their persistent release of energy made them superb energy sources in general. However, there was no doubt that Schema enforced and supported the use of mana in his system.

The fact that Schema relied on the Old Ones for mana also explained how the AI stopped me from using primordial mana. Schema closed the pipeline between me and the Old One supplying the energy, rendering me unable to draw from the well. This could explain even more. For a moment, I altered between different dimensional wakes, feeling my personality alter. That was the Old One's bleeding into my mind and persona.

A chill ran down my spine before I squeezed my hands to fists.

"How does any of that that change what Elysium is doing?"

"It changes everything."

"All you've done is point a finger and howl that someone else is doing something unacceptable. In the same breadth, you go and steal the same power source and use it at will. In fact, you do that while desecrating other peoples' psyches for your own cause. How is taking over people's bodies and minds any different than the worst-case scenario for Schema?"

The voice took a breath.

"That...Requires a bit of an explanation. Do you have time?"

I spread my hands.

"As long as you all stand very, very still, then yeah. Sure."

"Good. First, my name is Kinsla Thane. I'm an upper-class general in Elysium, and I've led several of our successful conversions of different planets."

I stared down with derision.

“Mass murder. Good for you.”

“I can feel the disgust in your voice. I would be disgusted, too, if I didn’t know what I knew. You see, I was an avatar of the Old Ones, like Yawm, Lehesion, or Valgus. I was as you said before – a tool. Something disposable. Something to be laughed at. I found a way out with Elysium, and I believe we can help salvage you and others like you from the same fate.”

I laughed into the void of space, no sound rushing from my mouth.

“I’m no avatar. You and your people are what tried, desperately mind you, to do that to me.”

“That was a defector. We never intended on doing anything of the sort. In fact, this is our first time hearing about it. We’ve been trying to piece together what happened on L-7, but we couldn’t figure it out.”

“You tried to put Valgus Uuriyah’s mind into my body, imprinting it over my consciousness so that you’d have an easily manipulatable puppet. From what I gathered, Valgus played you all, and I barely survived the encounter.”

“We need to know. How did you kill Valgus? We didn’t believe it could be done given his unique constitution.”

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I let out a breath, no air in my lungs as I soaked in space.

“I endured what he could not.”

“Is it a reproducible method? Could we do it as well?”

“I’m not telling you anything more.”

Kinsla's pitch rose.

“Whether you're on our side or not, we're going to eliminate the Old One's influence over us. It begins with weaning society off of mana. It ends with the death of every avatar and conduit of their influence.”

I spread my arms.

“Why haven't you told me all of this before now?”

“You were deemed a threat and a lost cause. We gave up on convincing you of anything since you ignored us completely after seeing what we did with Giess.”

“This situation with the Spatial Fortress changes that somehow?”

“Yes. We are trying to avoid losing people.”

“Hm. You could've avoided trying to take this monster from one of my worlds. In fact, I have no guarantee that you all didn't accelerate this eldritch's growth for this express purpose.”

Kinsla let out a sigh.

“There aren't many rulers that would complain about taking a Spatial Fortress off their planet.”

I peered at their vessels.

“I'm thinking ahead.”

“So are we. We've run the numbers, and even if we lose billions, this entity will save even more lives in the long run. That's what this is all about - saving people. We don't want to wage war with our people if we can avoid it.”

I turned a palm to Elysium's vessel.

"Ah yes, using a giant eldritch to murder planets in your stead. The most classic method of saving people I've ever seen."

Frustration seeped into Kinsla's voice in a slow ebb.

"You know that's not what we're about."

A caustic tone leached into my words.

"Tell me, why do people matter to you? You repurpose them and individuals all the time. It's all a means to an end, regardless of what you lose along the way. By now, I'd say you're entire faction has nothing altogether. You're like that eldritch - a mindless entity hellbent on converting everything it touches into itself."

A silence passed over us. Kinsla spoke in a solemn voice.

"We don't want wanton death and senseless slaughter. Ivichia was the agent on L-7. She hatched that insane scheme all on her own. She was always a loose cannon, and she was trying to accomplish far more than her mission dictated. That's why she failed. She was overstepping the mission and walking into territory we never agreed to tread."

I floated in space.

"If her plan succeeded, you'd be saying something else entirely. All that matters, even now, are the results of the plan, not what the plan is. Not how it's done. Not what is lost along the way. That's the problem with you all. Your entire group simply takes the best possible short-term outcome in favor of long-term planning."

Kinsla took a pause to think.

"You... You're an enemy, but converting you into an avatar is counterintuitive to our goals. The last thing we want is more avatars. One of the largest reasons why I'm even having this talk is to stop you from becoming one."

Mana drenched over me in pulsating waves.

“What makes you so certain I’m willing to take one of their deals?”

“Because that’s irrelevant. Everyone who reaches the upper echelons of individual ability encounters the same threshold as you before having their individuality robbed by those monsters. Once taken, the possessed sentient will ravage worlds. You will ravage worlds in time.”

Kinsla took a breath. His voice shook with resolve.

“Daniel, I’ve lost people. Friends. Family. Even lovers. I’m not like you, who came from a newly systemized world. I’m from an old family, one that’s deeply entrenched in Schema’s systems. I’ve lived for millennia, and I’ve seen the turning of history, of cycles, and of patterns. I know it down to my bones. In the end, you either die, or you fall into their abyss.”

Desperation filled his voice.

“The avatars become tiny eternities of torture for their victims. They will carry more pain than entire species combined. They are monuments to suffering, and that is in store for us all, including you. If you’ve fought Valgus, then you’ve seen what becomes of us, haven’t you?”

I remembered Valgus and the tortured psyche that lived within his body. It was a broken, desolate existence. I nodded.

“More intimately than I’d like, honestly. It’s...Pretty bad.”

“You’ve seen one piece, but you’ve never seen what can happen when they run wild.”

“I can imagine.”

"No need. I'll describe it in detail. Entire planets are wiped to nothing. Species are relegated to less than servitude, their biology and souls warped into strange tools. We, Elysium, fight a construct that uses the Old One's desires as fuel. It feeds us until we become mindless puppets for them."

His voice rose, closing into anger.

"And what does Schema do? It pretends to try and maintain some kind of illusion of societal order, but it's superficial and shallow. Schema's society is brutal and without law. You've seen it. Your species has been at the mercy of it from what our encampment could tell."

I narrowed my eyes.

"For now."

"You may intervene, but not every species has an outlier. The issue is that all Schema's ever done is act as a catalyst for the Old Ones to use for proliferating those abominations' influence...To manifest, in all regards, the will of them."

I shrugged.

"How are you any different from them?"

"We aim to rip out the cancer and purge it. We'll eliminate our reliance on mana. Once we've developed a functional society without it, we'll handle the eldritch threat. After we've created a harmonious cleansing system, we'll eradicate the avatars of the Old Ones and maintain the order we've made. It's that simple."

I rubbed my temples with my hands.

"The Old Ones rob us of individuality, using us as tools and fashioned for some esoteric, archaic purpose. You have a different endgame, but you still rob people of their individuality and make people into tools. I've seen it firsthand, and it's horrifying. You use the same methods, then say you're different. Take a moment and look in the mirror. Think and dwell on what you've done."

A storm brewed within me.

“It’s unforgivable.”

“It’s the only option we’ve ever had, and we’re taking it to get out of this.”

“What guarantee do you have that your goals won’t change? That your values and principles are so immutable that you won’t end up worse than the Old Ones? From what I’ve seen, you’ve already crossed that line long ago.”

Kinsla's telepathic connection rippled.

“We’ve made hard choices. So have you.”

My voice heated from ice to acid.

“And that’s what it boils down to. You’re trying to accomplish something grand, but conventional means simply won’t work, right? How is that different from your rogue agent? You have to bend the lines here and there, but you’re going to pull back eventually, right? Let me tell you what that is – unbridled ambition.”

I seethed.

"You’ve concocted a goal as grand as you can conceive, but it’s well beyond what you can actually do. In the attempt to accomplish it, you’re going to undermine your goal with how you’re getting there. If you bite off more than you can chew, you choke. You, no, Elysium is making the situation worse than it already is.”

“Do you expect us to let them consume us from the inside? To do nothing?”

“I expect you to do what you can. If anything, a little humility would go a long way. Honestly, who the hell do you all think you are, robbing everybody of their minds for your own purpose? They deserve to be their own.”



Kinsla's tone rose in pitch.

"You think we're arrogant? We've made every concession imaginable to make the difference we have. We hold no false illusions of grandeur or some semblance of pride. We're filthy. We've enacted horror, as you've said. But we do it for a reason, and we're trying to change the fate of all worlds, not just our own."

I shook my head.

"I'm trying to make only one world safe, and I'm barely holding on. Elysium is trying to turn the universe's trajectory around, but you can't do it this quickly. You're making the same hellscape that the Old Ones are."

Kinsla's voice turned to steel.

"Look at the Spatial Fortress in front of you. This entity has consumed billions of people in your world, and why? Do you think we're the reason this is here? It's the Old Ones. We're crossing lines that should never be crossed, but when you fight against literal monsters that swallow the surface of worlds, then concessions must be made to simply survive."

I gazed at the endless monster, a moon of teeth, eyes, and pulsing flesh.

"Billions? We lost a few thousand, according to my reports. And even then, you fill this blight with wires and the orange liquid. You conquer its mind and send it off to do your own bidding. Are you telling me its purpose is different because it's yours, now?"

"It defends the worlds we've saved. It's a guardian that isn't devouring Vagni as it was mere moments ago."

I roared.

"You're going to send it to eat people. The only difference is why. No matter how you slice it, it's mass murder. And we had it contained. I could've killed it, given time."

Kinsla snapped his words.

"Really? Have you ever seen the planet you cared so much for?"

I bit my lip before peering down. Below me, Blegara carried an enormous scar. Most of the surface still had oceans, but the eldritch horror left a third of the planet barren. No water touched the damaged patch's surface, all of it having been swallowed by the behemoth. It left sand as glass and the seafloor as stone. No organic matter remained, the dissolution absolute.

It would take years of channeling water from elsewhere to restore the planet back to its previous prime. Otherwise, the weather patterns of the planet would begin to suffer, and without intervention, it would be an ocean world no longer. I shook my head and spoke to Kinsla once more.

"It's because that monster can do this that I can't let you have it. You reneged on what you've said before. You've earned no trust from me or anyone."

"Then millions of our people will die to satiate the lust for war you so clearly have yet so poorly excuse."

My armor grinned.

"Is that what you see? A warrior trying to find an outlet for their rage...Am I so simple to you?"

Kinsla mistook my armor for me.

"You play as some senseless beast as if being a monster excuses anything you've already done. You're a warlord whose only aim is to amass as much power as you can. Listen to me, Harbinger. I've walked that path. I've been down that same road. It's lonely. Empty. A hollow pit full of empty promises. You need to make a change. You can't continue following the same paradigm of amassing energy and influence. It leads to only one end, and I've seen it time and time again."

He talked as if he knew me well. He understood nothing about me, but still, Kinsla's voice carried the weight of experience behind it as he spoke.

“They will consume you from the inside out, like an eldritch virus. Remember this. That power - It’s not yours. It was never yours. It never will be, either. They own it, and the longer you let that desire for power drive you, the closer they get to owning you. They may wait but for how long?”

Kinsla drenched in certainty.

“In time, you will become their finest puppet. It’s only when you have the most certainty that you’re your own person that they’ll begin pulling the strings you’ve always had.”

A chill ran down my spine, so I took a breath of the vast, empty space. It was hard to differentiate it from Earth’s thin air, both feeling like vacuums. I pulled my helm off my face, the armor flowing like liquid black. I peered at the depths of stars; my eyes sharpened from my stats. They gave me a view and vantage rivaling telescopes, the images filling my eyes like pictures from some renowned observatory.

I let out a soundless sigh.

“I’ll need to dance along a razor’s edge for a lifetime, but I’ll make it. Schema’s betting on me. Hell, I’m betting on me. No matter what you, Elysium, or the Old Ones think, I’m going to do this. I’ll drag them down.”

I reached out a hand and gripped it into a fist.

“I’ll be their infection, and I’ll kill them from the inside. So far, they’ve never stopped me, and neither can you.”

Kinsla laughed.

“Now, who’s insane? You honestly believe you’re better than the trillions that came before you?”

“Not better, but different. I’m not like you. I’m not going to start carving the cipher onto people’s bones and then pretend I’m the good guy.”

“Yet you bombed and killed millions on Giess for a cause you didn’t understand. Now, you aim to kill millions more. And why? Because we’ve cleared your world? Is that why you fight us?”

“You’ve been mistaken about what will happen here. There will be no fighting. There will be no war. I will slaughter, and you will run.”

“We will sacrifice while you will murder.”

As he finished his words, the enormous flesh moon moved. It writhed along its surface with ripples larger than mountains. It began pulsing towards portals before I connected to Plazia. The hivemind hissed its thoughts.

“You’ve wasted enough of our time speaking to the mad and deranged.”

I scoffed.

“You know as well as I do that we can multitask. Well, I’ve thought of how we’re going to kill that damn thing in the meantime.”

“Know this, Harbinger - I will not touch it. It disgusts me.”

I gazed at what was the sun for Blegara.

“Oh, don’t worry. You won’t need to.”

Chapter 440: To Wield a Star

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I pointed at the colossal star.

“If you open up a warp to that fireball, I think we can use the funneling energy to disintegrate the Spatial Fortress.”

Plazia shook his head.

“Folly. Stars are not trifles that can be wielded when convenient. They are utter and devastating. If I open even a slight tear near its surface or core, the resulting torrent could leave all of Blegara devastated. We would be putting all of the planet at risk.”

I motioned with my arms.

“I can wield the warp, moving it like...Like a star flamethrower. A starthrower.”

Plazia put his hands on the sides of his head.

“I...That is the most idiotic idea I’ve ever heard.”

I shrugged.

“I mean, is it really that bad?”

"I've lived for millennia, and that is so disparate and insane that I can hardly comprehend it."

"All I've heard is some serious doubt without any reasoning. In fact, so far, you haven't poked a single hole in my stroke of genius."

Plazia tilted his head at me.

"They are enormous fusion reactors fueled by gravitation. They exist on a scale that mortals cannot touch. Entire planets are specks of dust to them. We are specks of dust to planets. We exist as less than nothing to stars, and attempting to wield them on a tactile level will lead to our obliteration."

"Ok, but I can still just move the warp."

"Your arms will be disintegrated. We will be disintegrated."

I shook my head.

"Look, Plazia, there's no time for me to explain how I'm doing it. Just know that I've been practicing moving warps for a while now. I can at least aim one, even if it's vomiting out star stuff."

Plazia pointed at me from within the pocket dimension.

"You're willing to put Blegara and its moon at risk for your theory?"

I gestured at the giant eldritch above.

"We're at their mercy, and you've seen what they're willing to do to those they use. Imagine what they'll do to their enemies."

Plazia snapped.

"Fine. I will take no blame for the outcome of this stupidity."

I rolled my fingers in my hand.

"I'll hold you to that."

I opened the pocket dimension's warp, and Plazia sliced his spear. He angled his strike, making the rip face the eldritch instead of the planet. Plazia even left space only thinned and not shredded. Plazia gestured at it.

"If you wish to open a sea of fire, then do so."

Taking a breath, I grabbed the portal, putting my fingers through the thinned spatial line. One savage wrench later, and it tore open. The feeling in my fingers instantaneously disappeared, and a pit of unending fire opened. It erupted. It plumed outwards with volition and force, a cataclysmic might unleashed.

Ravaging all it faced, a star's fury cried out, and I struggled to contain the force, trying to mold the vent towards the fortress. It warbled, the warp struggling to sustain the absolute power. I put over thirty minds to the task, and we fused our might into a singular, potent blade of mental will and clarity.

It shifted the warp, but it didn't turn. I slowed down time to a crawl, crushing down my dimensional wake. With the temporal boost, I wielded all the might of my immaterial aura. I bent reality. Molded it. That will turned the warp, keeping it from spiraling out of control. As I maintained its control of the absolute weapon, the starthrower did more than spew fire.

In fact, there wasn't any fire involved.

It operated on two paradigms. The first was obvious: it spewed a jet of heated gas. The plasma spread outwards with a level of heat and might that defied any and all reason. Even behind the outcry, it left my body molten, and I pocketed my remaining elemental furnaces only moments before their obliteration.

This stream carried an absolute, ending heat. It did not melt. It did not alter. It vaporized; the fabric of atoms was sent into such a frenzy that no matter near could maintain itself in the wake of this heat. If anything, it was as if matter was an illusion, and the forces of nature exposed how fragile all life really was.

On a planet, this would leave nothing behind, leaving the world's ecosystem ravaged. It disintegrated all into disparate atoms, the star's call for dilution utter and complete. I wielded that in the palms of my hands. So, to speak, at least. I could only turn the portal using my dimensional wake. If exposed to this torrent, my body would simply crumble.

The second axis it operated on was something I hadn't expected – gravitation. To get near the force was like peering down at the edge of an endless cliff. The gas it plumed outwards was a cry into the unending silence, and it screamed with a voracious hunger. It wanted, desired, and craved for anything left to feed it. Every morsel would be savored. Every life it stole would be relished.

However, it carried a tiny, circular point of gravitation that siphoned everything into the portal. It jetted the plasma out at the escape velocity of itself, but other objects pulled towards the warp within this tiny laserbeam of gravity. In the distance, the Spatial Fortress suffered as the initial waves of plasma burned its body to cinders.

Even from this distance, the portal siphoned in a portion of the spatial fortress's body. This tiny slither in space-time took out a red tube from the spatial fortress, carving lines out of its body. The sanguine tendril mirrored blood sausage, and it evaporated under the plight of plasma. Despite the grip of gravitation, the giant didn't mind.

It let a small piece of its body be torn asunder, knowing that regeneration would be a simple matter. The next planet it harvested would recover it splendidly. A shiver ran down my spine as I watched it near its escape routes. Flashes of Earth being consumed popped up into my mind. Those fears seeded deep in my skull like a growing cancer, and I took a moment to mentally carve that fear out of my head. Knowing this wasn't enough, I opened the other warp that led to Plazia.

The hivemind marveled at the war between worlds, one celestial body of flesh and the other of fire. The sound of howling wind and dying insects erupted from the tiny world I carried, and it gave the void a voice. We both ignored it as Plazia telepathized.

“You gained control over portals by carrying ones such as this?”

My eyes widened with frenzy.



“That’s not the problem right now. This isn’t working fast enough. You can see it out in the distance. Pieces of this monster will still escape.”

Plazia nodded.

“As is expected with a planetary threat. We cannot eradicate all of it, but we will leave a gaping wound.”

“That’s not enough. We have to kill this thing, and down to the atom. You know that as well as I do.”

Plazia scoffed.

“We may cripple it, leaving fragments behind. How is that not enough considering our limitations?”

I shook my hand at it, a continental-sized chunk heading towards Elysium’s portals.

“Does that look like a fragment that’s escaping?”

Plazia spread his hands.

“We could argue the definition, but yes, it’s only a portion. We’ve secured a victory amongst a defeat.”

I put a hand on his shoulder.

“We don’t have time for this. Close this warp.”

Plazia slapped my hand away.

“That is the only source slowing the behemoth down. Why would we close our only source of resistance against that disgusting abomination?”

“Plazia...We need to open another warp but closer to the monster.”

Plazia took a step back, his feet on the plain world as he stared into the vastness of the void.

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“I will do no such thing.”

I raised my hands in frustration.

“We don’t have time for this. We need to act and we need to act now.”

“I’ve already taken risks in coming here, but I’m no one’s tool. Not yours. Not Schemas. Not even my own hunger will rule me.”

I gazed up.

“Is that where this hesitation comes from? Fear? You’re afraid you’ll get tainted by that thing?”

Plazia’s words reverberated through the screaming air.

“I’m not afraid. I have knowledge. I know what will happen when I make contact with that mass. It will consume me, mind, body, and soul. I will cease being to become a portion of the collective. All that I am is nothing in the face of its assimilation.”

I spread my hands to Blegara.

“You stopped it before, but we can do more. We can put an end to it now, and to do so, we have to be decisive. We can’t wait around and lose this chance.”

Plazia peered at the fortress.

“You ask of me to act as if I am invincible. As if I cannot die. Not all of us are made of metal to our core. Some of us can still perish regardless of your absurd confidence to the contrary.”

I frowned.

“You searched for centuries to find some way of stopping the eldritch from spawning out of the ether. You told us it was a hollow thing to fight against your nature and try to be something more. You’re right. That was a life without hope. I’m letting you know right now that we have a way of pushing back and stopping this, but we need time. A base. Somewhere to build up our resources long-term.”

I shook my hand at the colossal ball of flesh.

“How in the hell are we going to achieve your goal when Elysium can uproot, threaten, and destroy our planets in seconds? That will land upon any planet we settle on and eat it to the bone. We’ll live on wastelands.”

Plazia hissed.

“Why does that matter?”

“How can we offer the untainted eldritch a home if we live on barren rocks? We’ll be living on my mana converted into food. We’ll be isolated into tiny, protected homes deep beneath the surface, hiding from probing eyes. And why would Elysium want the eldritch gone anyways?”

Plazia glared at me.

“It’s their stated goal to stop the eldritch threat.”

I raised a hand.

“If there’s one thing I’ve learned from politics, it’s that the game revolves around incentives. Elysium’s primary manpower comes from the Hybrids, and they’re not

something that's easily replicated. To better serve Elysium's current iteration, they'll keep the eldritch coming so that they'll have a consistent stream of soldiers."

Plazia turned away.

"We will be tools either way."

I pointed a finger at my chest.

"But I don't need the eldritch. I can just use my armor enhancements in place of the system, and I can better satisfy my own self-righteousness by helping you guys out."

Plazia squeezed a hand into a fist.

"Even if I accept that the behemoth must be stopped, it changes little of my own risks. You and your guild are a means to an end. If I die in facilitating your goals, I undo my own."

I shook my head.

"In guaranteeing your safety despite your principles and goals, you're proving yourself as the monster you don't want to be."

Plazia leaned forward.

"My sanity is a fragile thing, and you ask me to place it upon a thin line. You may walk on that edge, but you will walk that line alone. I will not. I have fought for centuries to maintain what little of myself that is left. I will never throw that away to protect your interests instead of my own."

Plazia's glared at me, the insects within writhing. Though he spoke with clarity and composure, it was an act. His hands trembled. The insects within clattered against each other, the smooth flow replaced with clattering bodies. They were running into each other in chaos instead of the smooth swarm he usually maintained.

If not for my presence, Plazia would've run long ago. He braved this because I stood between him and the monster he feared becoming. But he was wrong. I took a breath of the air flowing out from the pocket world.

"Listen to me, Plazia. You're going to have to get this through your thick skull, alright?"

Plazia snarled.

"You argue against my mind? My intellect? It is far vaster than your own."

"Intellect is irrelevant here. We're talking about becoming a monster. Well, let's talk. Do you think that the fortress is a monster because it lacks a mind?"

"Obviously."

I shook my head.

"Is a tree a monster? Is water? They are more mindless than that blob, yet there's nothing monstrous about soil or air or stone. What makes that thing a monster isn't its mind or lack thereof. It is defined by the actions it has taken and the ones it will take. By what it will do."

Plazia threw his hand to the side, his spear sliding halfway into the ground.

"And that is why I evade it. I am not going to become what it is. I will be more. I am more."

I seethed.

"You're watching that abomination go out to end worlds, and you're choosing to let it."

"That beast's actions are no responsibility of mine."

My armor bristled.

“If I stole the last meal of a starving child or watched a man be murdered in cold blood, I become a monster. You are watching an ender of worlds escape, and you hold its end in your hands. You can stop it, and you’re choosing not to. That is what makes you a monster.”

Plazia’s hands stopped trembling. I pointed at him.

“It’s not the hunger. It’s not the insects or the way your mind is made up or how you like your meat raw. This moment. This choice. Your next series of actions decide whether or not you are a demon. Tell me, will you put it all on the line to stop that horror, or do you allow something like that to escape? To ravage worlds? To end species?”

I let my arm drop.

“Because their blood will be on your hands. That's no different than doing it yourself. Your inaction makes you into the beast you’re trying to avoid becoming.”

Plazia’s insects ceased their swarming. They silenced, only the howl of escaping wind whipping between us. Plazia gazed at me, hatred oozing from him.

“You. I despise you. I despise your species. You’re hideous home planet. All of it. It’s my greatest failing to join your cause.”

My stomach sank, and I blinked. Plazia walked over to the spear before picking it up. The sun’s opening closed and he reared his arm back.

“Centuries of effort all put on the line for flesh bags I don’t care about. Why? Why do I do this to myself?”

He sliced open a warp. Within was a writhing, molding mass of flesh. He gestured to it as it began writhing out.

“Then let us go into its belly and become its last meal. Let it ooze into my mind and make me what I abhor.”

I smiled, Event Horizon disintegrating the mass. I pulled us inside, yanking the pocket world with me. Within, endless tissue surrounded us but at a distance. Event Horizon carved a hole in the beast, its body shifting like a writhing sea of pulsating organs and blood. Plazia’s hands shook with a palpable fear as he focused himself. He carved into space-time once more, forcing himself to open the gap to Blegara’s star.

His aim was off. I could tell even as he sliced.

In an instant, I molded my body between Plazia and the tear, jerking him away. The jetting gas siphoned at us. It sapped my arm and shoulder into the void, the dense metal of my body like a thick jelly pulled by a vacuum. Half my body wrenched apart as I held a sad smile on my face.

To the star, I was no different than the hydrogen and helium it powered itself on. Even after all these years, I wasn’t much in the face of the celestial. My impotence aside, I still chose to maximize the portal’s efficiency. I turned the warp, pointing it in different directions. It both erupted with flames and siphoned in flesh. The colossus around us gored into the gap as if made of nothing. I turned the all-consuming void, wielding the tiny blot like the mouth of a dragon. The Spatial Fortress screamed out with no sound, space stealing its roar but not the death by fire.

Miles of the mass turned into disintegrated specks, all of it a memory of horror. That memory turned to us, rushing in. I condensed Event Horizon, guarding Plazia from the rush of tissue. It disintegrated near us, unable to tolerate the sheer punishment of the aura. Its body disintegrated into mana, feeding me but leaving me curious.

How could I convert it into the mana of the Old Ones with my aura? I would need to find out.

As the colossi's body fell apart in chunks, we peered out between the gaps the starthrower left behind. At that moment, amidst absolute devastation, I fell silent as the beauty of space stunned me. Galaxies spiraled, their size incomprehensible. Nebulas drifted, colors splashing across them like a celestial painter's canvas.

And yet, Elysium’s vessels acted as ugly silver on the beauty behind them. Their warriors watched us tear the spatial fortress apart, cleaving it into portions of nothing.

As I left the entity devastated, I turned to Plazia.

“You alright?”

He marveled at the destruction.

“It’s...Good to watch it die. The apex of us is nothing before the might of a star. Fitting that the beginning of all life carries the potential to end it...As if the suns of planets are the gods so many hope to find.”

I gazed at Elysium’s ships.

“Why hasn’t anyone tried this before? This seems like a pretty foolproof-”

I struggled to keep the portal stable, using several dozen minds to maintain its size and direction. Plazia cackled.

“Isn’t it obvious? Wielding a star’s breath is paramount to suicide. You’re maintaining that for now, but how long can that last? What of this-” He raised the spatial slicer, Schema’s weaponry glowing violet. “It barely holds onto its last breaths, its lungs filling with phlegm and fluid. It chokes on its gasping, final breaths as you waste away your time.”

“How much longer can it last?”

“Minutes at most. Schema also controls these spears. Should it so choose, it may cease its magic at any moment, and a normal portalist would have their body torn apart by the sheer volume of magic required to maintain this portal’s stability. We’d all wield stars by now if Schema’s technological isolation didn’t keep these tools from us mere mortals.”

I grinned.

“Oh, I think he’ll do everything he can to maintain this one.”



“It would be wise. Once this is over, we will need to clean up the mess.” Plazia’s insects swarmed within his armor as he gazed at floating blood. “A drop of the fortress’s blood spells the end of a world. To stop it, we must turn this void into a desert. It must dry up the last remnants of its lifeforce.”

“On it.”

I flew around, extending the destruction of the starthrower in my hands. More like my dimensional wake’s grasp, but whatever. After several minutes of incineration, I left the spatial fortress wounded beyond repair. Disparate globs floated in the void, nine-tenths of it swallowed into Blegara’s sun or burned by its breath.

It had taken minutes to undo months of Elysium’s efforts, but there was more to be done. We closed the starthrower and warped toward the most massive remaining chunks. Opening a starthrower once more, we torched the majority of what remained before tearing down any remaining ships Elysium left behind.

Now, the faction already abandoned the effort, most of them escaping as I tore apart any nearby vessels. Wherever we passed, we left behind voids where vessels once floated in the vastness. Within the hour, Plazia and I both floated in the shadow of Blegara’s moon, the planet like a scarred blue marble. A portion of the planet shined with obsidian specks, portions of it having been glassed.

I gazed at it as I thought to Plazia.

“How is the fortress so vulnerable to heat while still able to glass worlds?”

Plazia shook his head at Blegara’s wounded surface.

“It was not complete. In a few weeks, it would’ve consolidated its size and strength, becoming a true, fully formed fortress. The Hybridization slowed its evolution down before accelerating it as it succumbed. There would be no Blegara if it had turned back to the planet after rising from it.”

I frowned.

“The starthrower isn’t exactly usable on a planet.”

Plazia turned to me.

“You’re still using that ridiculous name for that tactic?”

I shrugged.

“Come on now. It’s literally perfect. Somehow succinct yet entirely understandable.”

“And incomplete. It siphons as it spews. How does that merely throw the star?”

“Alright then, what’s your name for the starthrower?”

“The portal to the nearest star used against our enemies.”

I shook my head.

“That’s a mouthful.”

“It is accurate.”

“You sound like the Overseer or Sentinels.”

“You sound like a nameless grunt trying to name something they don’t understand.”

I swung my hand.

“Exactly. This name isn’t for us. It’s to let people know what we’re doing.”

Plazia rolled his head around.

“I tire of this farce. Since you're so insistent, we'll call it a starthrower.”

I pumped my fist.

"Hell yeah."

Plazia turned to the leftovers of the battle.

"We have much to do before this hell is upon us once more."

I nodded. A path of carnage lingered behind us. Mountain-sized chunks of eldritch floated in the distance, and debris from the destroyed vessels shifted in all directions. Plazia maintained a field around himself, protecting his insect body from the void of space. The magic trembled as his hands shook, the eldritch hivemind having confronted one of his many demons. I was proud of him.

He stared down at his shivering fingers.

“I can’t believe I was convinced of that insanity. It will haunt my dreams.”

I patted his back.

“Welcome to the club. Trust me when I say you’re in good company.”

"And what, pray tell, is your solution to nightmares?"

I grinned.

"Never sleep."

I spread my hands at the carnage.

“And we gained a solution for the Spatial Fortresses.”

Plazia pinched his brow.

“Schema will only allow this against his enemies, not our own. He may purge your world whenever he chooses.”

My stomach sank.

“That’s true. We’ll need to reverse engineer the cipheric tech that he’s using.”

“It will take you millennia to understand the cipher to such a level if you ever will.”

I raised my palms.

“Hey, let’s handle this one step at a time. Besides-”

Blegara’s scar shone like a necrotic wound in the light. I let out a sigh with no air for breath or medium for sound to travel in.

“We’ve got a lot of work to do.”