

New World 441

Chapter 441: Monster and Machine

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.”

Plazia telekinetically rumbled within his shell.

“It’s a bold assumption that Elysium will let us clean this carnage after we culled their forces.”

I shrugged.

“Anytime Elysium engages with me, they haven’t gotten anything positive out of the exchange. At this point, I’m hoping they just assume we’re a burned bridge that’s best left avoided.”

Plazia glared at Blegara.

“I’ve tried convincing fellow eldritch of a new purpose. The more force behind my message, the more they fought against me. To them, their hunger is something worthy of worship. That it is a path to perfection. The same may be said of Elysium and their

ideology, and to convince zealots is an exhausting path. It drips with glistening blood and sour bile.”

Dollops of partially frozen blood floated around us, and Blegara's sun in the distance seemed so small. I couldn't gaze at it without remembering the unreal force it carried.

"Sounds like we'll need a mop then. Come on, let's get started."

Using our vantage point, Plazia and I spent several hours assessing the damage done to Blegara's surface. After mapping the patterns out, we marked larger pockets of tissue left behind by the fortress and brainstormed the resulting blowback from Elysium. We found that the vast majority of the Spatial Fortress disintegrated, but a few disparate, enormous chunks still floated near the moon and closer to Blegara.

I commandeered a few of my golems to help destroy the most significant bits, but we couldn't be certain that all of it was gone. A quick call to other guild members helped us gather a force of around ten thousand volunteers for the initiative, many of them gialgathens. The loss of their homeworld gave them a surprising empathy for the Vagni and the near loss of their oceanic haven.

It took several weeks to expunge the surrounding space of its floating debris, but we cleansed the remaining 99% of what lingered behind. At this point, far less than a tenth of a percent dwelt in the darkness of space. Any falling orbital bits would burn up in the atmosphere, keeping Blegara safe. As for the planet's torched surface, restoring the ocean world presented a massive challenge.

The most pressing concern stemmed from the environment – a third of the world was a ravaged hellscape. The fortress swallowed much of the vast seas, leaving a parched, glassed section of the planet in its wake. To restore its previous vibrance, we needed water and a lot of it. Fortunately, I knew just the place.

Plazia and I headed back towards an open dungeon on Blegara, one I marked long ago. It was an enormous rift leading to another ocean world, one that may have converted Blegara into its current water-laden state. Upon that silent plane, I remembered the dim stars and endless quiet of that other world. It was as if all life had given up trying to rage against the silence of death and the dying of all light.

It instilled fear in me, but it carried opportunity within its quiet. Plazia and I arrived before gazing at the colossal chasm as it flooded out with water. I put my hands on my hips.

“There it is. Told you it was big.”

Several of the runes across Plazia’s Sentinel’s armor glowed, each reverberating like machines of mana. They let him float.

“It is large to a regional standard. This will not quench the thirst of a planet. Obviously.”

I spread my hands.

“But get this. What if we open it wider, eh? Eh?”

Plazia stared into the sky.

“You are a creature with jaws, and every problem is solved with a bite.”

I gestured to the giant chasm.

"And look what it did to the Spatial Fortress."

Plazia dragged a hand down his face.

"Hm. Then let us continue down this spiral of insanity, the depths of which few may understand and fewer still will choose to tread."

We took several hours inspecting the limits of the dungeon. From what I gathered, it expanded further than the plain world I carried with me. At the same time, the sheer size of the dimensional rip made moving it impossible. To help the issue, I sent a message to an old friend.

From the ether, the Overseer walked out of a cubic portal. The pauldron I made him rested on his right shoulder, wires lacing the slab of dimensional fabric. The runes glowed, energy flowing from it and into different pieces of machinery. Converters prevented the rampant energy from changing his thoughts, and all the mechanisms touched became sterile, contained energy.

The Overseer turned to me with a curt nod.

“Harbinger.”

I returned the gesture.

“Overseer.”

The Overseer turned to Plazia, and Schema’s worker squeezed a hand into a fist.

“I see you associate with their ilk now. A shame, though using them for this purpose is as productive as these monsters may be.”

Plazia cackled.

“Oh, the irony. You warp from world to world, handling administrative duties. I’ve saved a planet as you did your paperwork. Now you criticize me? Hah. As short-sighted as your maker, aren't you?”

The Overseer turned a hand to the eldritch.

“Ah, so sharp of you to notice. It’s amazing what a monster can do when it wears the shell of something sentient. Tell me, what did you have to save that planet from? Was it a rogue Overseer? A criminalized Sentinel, perhaps?”

Plazia tilted his head.

“It was a Hybridized fortress.”

The Overseer put a hand over where his mouth lay under his armor.

“Ah, so it was a variation of you. Daniel, have you ever wondered how many of your guild will be eaten alive whenever this abomination loses control? I expect 30-40% of humanity, but remember that I prefer positive estimations.”

Before I could answer, Plazia snapped his words like a stinging whip.

“I’m the abomination now? You know that the same energy that deforms my kin also powers the machinery you have embedded under your skin. The only difference between you and me is that my changes were enacted by rogue circumstances. You are the byproduct of a meddling machine, one that carries goals as sinister as any eldritch.”

The Overseer turned to me.

“What is the overtalkative bug prattling on about?”

I raised a hand.

“Elysium told us that mana is derived from the Old Ones.”

The Overseer waved a hand like he was throwing away garbage.

“The rebels lie about everything they can. When have they told you the truth? During their treaty? Or was it the lottery? My memory fails me.”

Seeing Plazia put the Overseer in a sour mood instantly. Plazia murmured,

“They tell the truth whenever it is convenient. Aside from the trustworthiness of the source, we know of compelling evidence to support Elysium’s conclusions.”

The Overseer leaned towards Plazia.

“Like what? You're desire for you and me to be the same?”

I frowned.

“I’ve visited several of the manifested dimensions of the Old Ones. Baldowah’s plane oozes ascendant mana. Eonoth’s is all about primordial mana. Even Etorhma has some kind of energy oozing from him, and his avatar used it just like normal mana as well.”

The Overseer lifted his hands.

“They are cosmic beings. They struggle to manifest in this dimension, so using characteristics of our dimension is how they bridge the endless gap between us. Aside from that, why would the Old Ones give away their energy for free?”

I spread my hands.

"To make us into the tools that allow them to manifest in our dimension."

Plazia’s internal body swarmed.

“Aside from that inconvenient truth, other questions arise. For instance, if mana is so intrinsic to this dimension, why doesn’t it manifest without Schema’s intervention?”

The Overseer scoffed.

“You’re an insect who’s lived in an empty world for centuries out of fear. What do you know of the workings of the wider world? Of Schema’s universe?”

“More than the dog that laps at the scraps of its master.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“The point is, Elysium believes that as a fact, so they’re fighting tooth and nail to stop that dependence.”

The Overseer sighed.

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

“Even assuming they’re correct, they’ve done nothing but breed the problem they attempt to neuter. By using the Hybrids and disrupting the inner workings of Schema’s system, they’re causing Schema to rely more on mana than ever before. Our protector has always used it, but now Schema’s wielding specialized, higher-leveled versions of us. You’ve seen the preliminary ascendant forms as an example.”

I raised a brow.

“Yeah, and they’re nowhere near as stable.”

The Overseer gazed at the abyss that belched water below.

“We had the eldritch threat contained and handled. Now we must fight in a pointless, bloody civil war so that the fairy tales of a cult can be entertained.”

Plazia’s swarm rumbled within his shell.

“Those fairy tales are told because your ruler won’t unveil the secrets it hordes. Instead, it lives upon a throne of lies and half-truths, only giving out tantalizing pieces of its treasure to manipulate whoever it so pleases. That is why Elysium exists – the failings of a false master.”

The Overseer’s giant gauntlets glowed with blue mana.

“Elysium exists because the remnants want to dominate the universe and by any means necessary.”

The runes across the scarred Sentinel armor glowed over Plazia’s body.

“Perhaps they wish to cast aside the current tyrant who rests easy on his throne. Hasn’t his crown seemed heavy as of late? His rulings are certainly aged and addled. Perhaps someone should take that from him.”

The Overseer stepped up, his body humming as mechanisms whirred to action.

"You will rest that earned power from dead hands, cretin."

I wielded Event Horizon as a weapon, bearing it down on them both.

“Or perhaps you’re two children who can’t take a moment to look past yourselves and work towards a larger picture?”

They glared at each other, but Event Horizon’s oppression settled into their minds as time passed. They lost the will to battle for nothing, and I removed my aura. Plazia turned to the gaping dimension below us.

“I’ll tolerate this mechanized hypocrite if it is demanded of me.”

The Overseer rolled his shoulders.

“Another time, insect.”

“Anytime you wish to die, little dog who bites upon heels.”

I snapped my fingers, and a singularity erupted in the ocean. The sound and shockwave drew their attention. I pointed at the water.

“Can you make the dimensional opening smaller?”

The Overseer leaned back.

“Yes, but what will that accomplish?”

I put my hands in front of me.

“I know it sounds crazy, but I’m going to push Bikini-Bottom somewhere else.”

The Overseer and Plazia stayed silent for a moment. They spoke in tandem.

“Bikini-Bottom?”

I waved my hands in a circle.

“I just made an incredibly complex and layered metaphor. I derived it from my old world and one of its most profound works of literature and culture. Truly, I attained that knowledge from only the finest of masterpieces, and yet it's lost upon you both. For shame, but the point is, I’m going to move that dimension somewhere else.”

The Overseer looked at the sky.

“This again. Insanity.”

Plazia crossed his arms.

“I doubted his ability, but he carries the weight of worlds well. I hid within one when we fought the fortress.”

The Overseer kept staring.

“It’s a star...A Hybrid Star. That’s Schema’s working classification.”

I shook my head.

“Damn, dude. That’s so much better than our name.”

The Overseer shook his head.

“It’s not a Spatial Fortress by any measure. Those are specialized end-state eldritch designed by Schema. They are the actual guard dogs of Schema’s universe.”

Plazia’s head twitched.

“You are no different. All you may do is bark and bite at what your master commands. You have no mind for yourself.”

The Overseer glared down at Plazia.

“We will have to agree to disagree. Is there anything else that needs to be done here before I leave?”

His gauntlets glowed.

“Perhaps an infestation cleared?”

I frowned.

“Don’t you have a kill switch?”

The Overseer laughed.

“It’s been loosened in the wake of the war. It gives me the liberty to do some cleaning from time to time.”

I pointed at Blegara’s moon.

“Speaking of, we need some way of tracking pieces of the Hybrid Star. Otherwise, we’ll never know if it’s actually killed.”

The Overseer opened his red status screen, and he filed forms until a notification popped up in front of my vision.

Quest Received: To Cleanse a World

A colossal Hybrid Star has attached itself to Blegara, a world of oceans and eldritch. It is up to you to clear it from the planet, saving every living thing that calls this place its home.

-Objectives- | Kill the Hybrid Star on Blegara | Clear the remnants lingering from its demise | Bonus Objective: Terraform the surface of Blegara

-Rewards- | Tracking upgrade to system inputs | Terraforming upgrade to system inputs | Three blue cores, thirty red cores, 30 million credits |

I looked at the contract with a conflicted feeling. The system rewards met expectations, while the material gains left a lot to be desired. I chose not to complain since I'd handle these tasks regardless of what Schema awarded me. In that sense, this quest gave me something for a task I'd do without any compensation.

I gave the Overseer a sardonic smile.

"A little low on the rewards for saving a planet, but I'll take what I can get."

The Overseer turned a hand.

"It's what we can spare right now."

Plazia cackled.

"Of course. A rotting corpse is given for saving a planet. It is the way of that AI."

I turned to Plazia with a palm raised.

"Hey now, you heard him. He's doing what he can. This is Schema's limit, and really, it's all we can hope to expect given the war."

The Overseer tapped his red status screen with overbearing thuds, the sounds of each click like a pop of thunder. Another notification beeped into existence.

Other Bonus Objective: Eliminate the disgusting hivemind residing on Blegara.

Reward: seven blue cores, seventy red cores, seventy million credits |

I scoffed.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

The Overseer crossed his arms.

“Do consider the awards. Now, it’s time for me to leave. I’ve spent far too much time here.”

He opened a warp before I waved a hand.

“Wait a minute. I need Schema to help me out with these dimensional tears that keep cropping up on my planets. They’re insane threats to humanity, and, honestly, everything-”

The Overseer put a hand on my shoulder.

“We’re doing what we can, but there’s an entity that’s begun assaulting Schema on the other side of his owned space in the Milky Way. It’s unfortunate, but there’s little that can be done as of yet.”

Plazia whispered like a quake of the earth.

“And yet Schema can still choose to hide so much. The tyranny of silence...It is a quiet thing where little is said, yet all is done.”

The Overseer motioned his head as if rolling his eyes under his featureless helmet. I knew it. Plazia knew it. We all knew it. The Overseer entered a few commands into his status once more, and reality shifted around us. Portions of space turned into cubes, reformatting the terrain and expanse around us with mechanical certainty.

As the sterile mana faded and the chasm turned into a typical warp, the Overseer gave us a nod. He stepped through his own portal before disappearing, and as he did, I turned to Plazia.

“After we finish cleaning up Blegara, do you mind leaving and taking your minions with you?”

He peered at the water with distaste.

“It would be done regardless. I’ve had enough of white beaches and black seas. I prefer moss-laden caves, the smell of rich, wet earth, and the sound of crashing waterfalls should a planet have them.”

I waved a hand.

“Good. We’ll make sure you get a nice base and new carapace after this whole debacle.”

“You’re giving me your flesh in exchange for good works? You’re turning your guild into a cult.”

“In a lot of ways, the only difference between cults and religions is the magnitude of success. Anyways, come on. Let’s get it done.”

Before we got to it, I contemplated the Overseer's words. Either he had been re-indoctrinated recently, or Schema achieved something that reignited his fervor for the system. Perhaps the war with Elysium was faring better than I expected. Either way, I had a notification to read.

System Upgrade: Tracking End-State Eldritch

This system augment grants you the ability to find and parse through the vast wastes of space and a planet's surface to find the remnants of our greatest enemies – end-state eldritch. This newfound minimap allows you to find their pieces within any three-dimensional space, ensuring you can clear an infestation with minimal effort!

After a flash of mana coursed through me, I gained another option in my minimap. It generated a set of red blobs around me with excruciating detail, down to the drops of blood gushing from their wounds. Those crimson blots were semi-transparent, just enough to be easily seen but also ignored in the heat of battle. That utility let me leave the function on even when floating or moving through space, and each piece carried a coordinate floating over it.

I shared the data with Plazia-Ruhl.

“Does this mean anything to you? It's gibberish to me. The coordinates, that is.”

Plazia let out a sigh.

“You're an uneducated imbecile at the strangest of moments. That is the galactic coordinate system Schema uses.”

“And that you use, apparently. Some eldritch you are.”

“If the AI is anything, it's organized. It gives you an idea of where you are in the grand scheme of the universe in a way little else can.”

I waved a hand through the data. My fingers floated through the visuals without disturbing them.

“This looks like it would be incredible for anyone trying to warp anywhere.”

“It would solve all the manual warping issues that technicians deal with. That is how you know it will never be shared.”

I frowned.

“It’s how Schema holds power. One of the ways, at least.”

“It does far more than hold power over you. It is putting a noose around your neck. The only places where you can still walk are where the hangman’s stools are lined up for you.”

I shrugged.

“But at least we know where to go.”

Plazia’s gaze sharpened, many eyes lighting up from within his vessel.

“I’ve known you long enough to know you’re a fool but not utterly naive. Are you lying down like some coward, or does it actually not bother you?”

I nodded.

“Of course it does. It’s honestly ridiculous that Schema isn’t doing everything it can as efficiently as it can. If it was trying to help half as much as it says it does, we’d have moved well beyond the eldritch by now.”

Plazia simmered his words.

“Then why do you not show anger? You’re like some kitten that is scared of its own roar. It’s pathetic.”

I remembered my father raging nearly a decade ago. He’d throw bottles at the wall while cursing diseases like cancer or the people who fired him from his last day job. His anger did nothing but leave dents in the walls and whelps on my head. It also alienated his friends and raised his blood pressure. That was why I left my anger for select moments, and this wasn’t one of them.

I looked down at Plazia.

“A roar does nothing. It’s only a declaration. It carries meaning but lacks substance. Anger is the same. It spurs those who lack the will and conviction to motivate themselves beyond simple, emotional triggers. For me, I can make myself act. It’s actually my preferred language. In time, my actions will speak so loudly that I won’t need anger or roars or declarations. Everyone will know exactly what I never said aloud, even those that haven’t heard my voice or felt my rage.”

I raised my brow.

“And that's because words are undone in moments. Actions echo.”

Plazia soaked in what I said before crossing his arms.

“Then let us go speak to the lingering bits of corruption left behind our battle.”

I smiled.

“Let's.”

Plazia sliced a portal and hopped in. I followed behind, and we found that the tracking system operated on a grand scale, far larger than even a planet in size. The lack of a size restriction contrasted the other search options from Schema's minimap entirely. It could only help us find pieces of a Hybrid Star or Spatial Fortress. In all honesty, the long-term utility of the option relieved and renewed my desire to help Schema.

I had desperately needed this for the rest of my planets. The precise knowledge it garnered allowed me to clear out any infestations long before they grew out of hand. The convenience would save me mountains of effort and time in the long run, and we'd avoid deaths in my future worlds as well.

In this case, it stopped Blegara's moon from becoming infested with the eldritch gunk. Making that happen, we kept warping around and clearing out fragments of the Hybrid Star for several weeks. Having handled all of the major threats to my guild, I had a bit of leeway with how I dealt with this particular task. To me, that meant doing it well.

We kept clearing and scorching this section of space until I gained a notification from Schema.

Second Objective Complete! The lingering remnants of the Hybrid Star are cleansed, ensuring the future of this world and many others. Excellent work, Harbinger.

Reward: Augments to status system revolving around terraforming.

System Upgrade: Terraforming Worlds

This system upgrade allows the user to discern the ratios of various chemicals along a planet's surface, including all baseline elements and a list of over fifty common chemicals, including water. It carries a history of revisions along with knowledge of a planet's general geographical status. It even includes functions for life forms not based on carbon or water!

Even a cursory glance of the options left me floored. Compared to the tracker system, this defied all reason. It gave me a laundry list of different options, premade plans, and color-coded bars for each element on the surface of the planet. The data points included gravity levels, various toxins, and the kind of microbiome that currently existed on a planet.

Those microbes helped change the makeup of the planet's atmosphere and keep it changed, maintaining it over the long term. Another significant but underrated function involved the volcanic activity of a planet. It had diagrams and maps for hotspots along with lines for a planet's tectonic plates. It gave notices for disasters, including the enormous patch of Blegara left destroyed by the Hybrid Star.

These kinds of functions let me dissect and understand a planet's current state and its long-term trajectory, each an essential function for anyone terraforming. Schema even had different links for products sold by a few of his trusted associates. The sheer volume of information left me a little overwhelmed, and As I read through the data, I rubbed my temples.

"This is like...A college course in a niche field. Oh man, my worst enemy."

Plazia gazed at a hand in boredom.

"Even if you were to fail the course, surely fifty of you wouldn't?"

I squinted.

“I wouldn’t be so sure. If there’s one thing I’m a professional at, it’s flunking out of classes.”

Plazia waved a hand through the floating, three-dimensional panorama of Blegara.

“Then retake them as necessary. Academia is often an exercise in effort and diligence, not intelligence or ability.”

“Eh, but book smarts tend to help. Anyways, look at this.”

I shared a few of the collected notes I gathered online with the hivemind, and we gathered a reasonable approach to the problem at hand. I pointed at the warp below that gushed water.

“Are you ready?”

Plazia murmured.

“To push Bikini-Bottom elsewhere? Easily.”

Chapter 442: A Fractured Reality

Plazia waved a hand through the floating, three-dimensional panorama of Blegara.

“Then retake them as necessary. Academia is often an exercise in effort and diligence, not intelligence or ability.”

“Eh, but book smarts tend to help. Anyways, look at this.”

I shared a few of the collected notes I gathered online with the hivemind, and we gathered a reasonable approach to the problem at hand. I pointed at the warp below that gushed water.

“Are you ready?”

Plazia murmured.

“To push Bikini-Bottom elsewhere? Easily.”

Before we dove into the depths, we found the bite-sized warp that the Overseer left of the once seismic opening. It spewed a pressurized stream of water, more like a liquid laser beam than a true warp. The aquatic eruption shot up through the sea and dispersed into a dappling rain from above. Those droplets masked the rays of light coursing in between the clouds.

I transfixed onto a particularly brilliant beam. Even from this distance, Blegara's sun left a mark across this planet, and it was hard not to remember its vastness. It made my entire life seem inconsequential, and yet I found comfort in that feeling. It wasn't futility but wonder, and I soaked it in for a second.

Silencing my mind's wandering, I dove into the abyss and grabbed the edges of the spewing portal. I pulled it onto my back like a backpack before marveling at the difference between this and the star's opening.

Even though this tiny slither spewed thousands of gallons a second, it was nothing compared to the starthrower.

The magnitude of forces left this spectacle as a hollow and unwanted encore to the real demonstration before it. My practice from the starthrower also made containing this warp far simpler. A dam of my dimensional fabric over the entrance stopped the portal's perpetual spray.

Before heading out, I took a moment and hoisted it around for a while.

It held a heft that rivaled all the other dimensional slices put together, and I marveled at its sheer density and volume. It was within my capacity to move, however, and as I had with the other slices, I adjusted to the added mass.

It required an enormous amount of will, and my minds crunched under the strain. Mana soared throughout my frame, my runes charging and fueling my power. Silver blood

pounded through my chest, and my heart roared into action as I dragged myself forward. Even my psyche strained to will the worlds into motion.

And in time, I mastered their maneuvering.

Shalahora's training paid off, letting me shrug off the uncomfortable experience. After several hours, I turned to Plazia. I established a telepathic link.

"I'm ready to go."

"It's been hours of you jogging and moving with that as if it were some weighted vest. Why should you not heave it through a portal and be done with it?"

"I prefer really getting a handle on something before moving on. Otherwise, it feels like I'm building skills and assumptions on something fragile."

Plazia paused before shaking his head.

"Some moments are better passed through than immersed in. That personal desire for punishment wastes time, but...Do as you will." Plazia tilted his head. "But first, your mind is unstable. Why?"

I stepped forward as two minds strained to their limit.

"Er, you could say I'm struggling with this. That's all."

Plazia laughed.

"Your minds are dying? From carrying a boulder? To think the Harbinger was so weak. You speak of fragility as your entire psyche shatters from holding a rock."

I searched for words.

"It's... It's like carrying the heaviest thing you could imagine, but you're only able to move it by breaking your bones. You keep moving and lifting, and the entire time, your body shatters under the stress. Before you know it, your mind isn't the same as it was when you started. It begins to unravel, and so it must be made new."

I blinked.

"That and... It's something deeper to move a reality. It's like you said. It's the weight of worlds, and that takes its toll on someone."

Plazia crossed his arms.

"Or perhaps you struggle to move a large boulder."

I kicked sand in his direction.

"Enough with the banter. Let's get this done."

Plazia turned towards me.

"Putting your psyche through this will not end well. It isn't the nature of living things to be torn apart incessantly. It deforms you over time and in ways you'd never imagine."

I frowned.

"You're feeling awfully critical today. You remind me of Helios when we first met."

"He and I are the only ones among your entourage to give you genuine honesty. All the others are merely ants you enjoy watching."

I pressed him with Event Horizon.

"They are family."

Plazia took a step back.

"There is the growl you've deposed. Good. It's a sad thing to know a wolf that never flashes its fangs."

As I pulled my aura away from him and took a breath.

"Sorry. I overreacted."

Plazia grabbed his wrist.

"I would disagree, but there is much to do, isn't there?"

I nodded, and Plazia sliced through reality, leading us to Blegara's scar. We walked through the veil, Plazia, a collection of many while I was a dimension all my own. When we passed over, we stared at an empty, howling landscape with not a drop of water as far as the eye could view.

The seafloor had emptied, leaving the grooves and trenches of the underwater abysses exposed. Like enormous flood plains, fossils embedded in the walls of rock, the skeletons telling the tale of life here. In some even deeper trenches, the bones lined up to showcase evolution on this planet.

At the bottom of these pits, the fossils were like the early life on Earth. Primitive forms with inefficient shells and skeletons had struggled amidst the primordial waters. Nearer to the top of the trenches, these bodies deformed into more monstrous, hostile entities. The slow, steady eldritchification was apparent even on a geological scale.

It reminded me of what awaited Earth given the flood of mana from the Old Ones.

At the surface of the trenches, the fossils disappeared. The Hybrid Star had swallowed them, but at a certain depth, it hadn't found the fossils appetizing. At least the history of the planet would live on, but still...To see so much of Blegara dry and barren left me humbled. The Hybrid Star desiccated this world within months, and once fully formed, it would've done so in minutes, and this dried husk of a planet could be Earth's future.

I took a sharp breath as if I inhaled broken glass.

"This...I can't believe it's all gone."

Plazia followed me out of the warp. It closed behind him.

"You reap what you've sown, Harbinger."

I turned to him, and Plazia gestured to all of it.

"This is the outcome. Months without action or answers. I had uncovered the outbreak long before this beast grew these claws, but you holed into the sanctum of your mind, honing a new skill, wasn't it? You chose yourself over the world. This destruction is the result of that choice."

A part of me held tremendous guilt and believed Plazia. For a moment, those feelings crippled me, made me smaller than I was. However, another part snarled out. My anger won as I turned to him.

"That's projection. You were my general. I assigned you here to stop this, but you chose to contain the problem rather than solve it out of fear. I'm not responsible for what you chose not to do. I'm simply here to clean up the mess you left behind."

The miles of barren stone blurred in the distance, the hot air masking it like the beginnings of a mirage. Without the ocean to soak up the sun's rays, the heat built into something painful and scorching, as if Blegara cried out in pain. Plazia scoffed over those cries.

"Your assessment is correct. This is my failing."

I threw my hand to the side.

"Then why are you antagonizing me like this?"

"There are times you choose to bear responsibilities that aren't yours. I'm helping you rid yourself of that blight."

I narrowed my eyes.

"Why not just tell me directly?"

An ominous cackle radiated from the crackling earth, Plazia's voice like a planet's rage.

"You've been told before, haven't you?"

"Well, yeah-"

"And yet, it has done nothing. That is because you must do more than think it. You must feel it. Believe it down to your bones and blood. Otherwise, you merely pretend to understand what mere words imply."

I shook my head.

"Ok, but that doesn't mean you have to dig into my insecurities here, man."

Plazia let out an amused laugh.

"You helped me overcome my fear through turmoil and urgency. I am helping you overcome your self-doubt and heedless guilt through conflict. I believe it is the nature of our friendship. We help one another grow, but it is not always a peaceful thing. At times, it grates us, but that is the process of sharpening. It is to find friction until you are honed to a fine edge."

Stolen from Royal Road, this story should be reported if encountered on Amazon.

Plazia sharpened one of his claws against the other.

"I am here to help you hone yourself, not find comfort in my company."

A while passed as I thought over what he said. I shook my head.

"You can't be everything to everyone, so yeah, it's good to have people in your life that challenge you. That being said, you have to know when you're pushing too hard."

Plazia simmered his words in a low boil.

"To hone oneself is to feel pain, Harbinger. You know this as well as I do."

I frowned.

"But there is a difference in meaning. Pain without meaning is torture. Give it a purpose and it becomes a tribulation, something that can build."

Plazia laughed.

"Something that can be endured?"

I smiled.

"Exactly."

Plazia peered at the horizons.

"Tell me...Does it feel good to carry this planet's fate in your hands?"

As charred winds brushed against me, I pulled the portal out from my back.

"It's...Humbling."

Runes sparked to life over Plazia's armor, the energy like liquid power.

"And humility is the source of all strength, arrogance its death."

A sad smile traced my lips.

"One can hope."

From the palms of my hands, water splashed out of the rip in space-time, and it crashed against patches of sheening earth and stone. It rose in waves of heated steam, and I grabbed the edges of the portal. I ripped the warp open one jerk at a time. The volume of falling water magnified with each passing second.

Plazia watched his gaze, sharp and piercing. After a few minutes, he flew up to assess the damage and gather his eldritch minions. By the time I finished ripping the rift open, he had amassed a large army of obsidian insects.

Plazia murmured over the roaring falls,

"I will send them out to scout this domain. What's your plan with that chasm of water?"

I spread my hands.

"Make it bigger."

By the time I finished shearing it open, it dwarfed the size of its previous incarnation. It stretched over many kilometers, and the final task involved dragging the thin line open as if wrenching a laceration open. Grabbing one side, I heaved, and reality wailed. Sparks of lightning erupted, blue sparks striking my hands and heels alike.

I jittered from a strange, growing resonance. Taking a deep breath, I wielded my wake, further peeling it apart. A kind of resistance built, making my movements slow and sluggish. As I pushed through a growing sense of unease, the portal wrenched apart. With a heave of my dimensional wake, I pried it open like pulling a tooth.

Water gushed in, and I raised a fist to celebrate my success. However, other key elements of the terraforming came to light. In order to reconstruct the previous environment, the bacteria and basic life here had to rival Blegara's past iteration. Considering how large the empty wastes were, life could have time to evolve differently here than the rest of the planet.

To help rectify that, Plazia and I gathered different species from the other portion of the world while marking down the accounts of displaced Vagni. They informed us of the kind of life that lived here before they resettled on the other part of the planet. From plants like kelp and algae to fish of a thousand different species, we harvested as many as we could find.

The other issue came from collecting bacteria and other microbes. My armor sterilized itself without my awareness, and I lacked the finesse to control that aspect of myself. This left Plazia diving to the bottom of the ocean and collecting corpses for the germs there to put on the other side of the world.

From hivemind to corpse collector, he wasn't a happy camper.

But that was kind of the norm with Plazia. While he carried a sharp competence and philosophical mind, he lacked joy in almost anything he did. He would take antagonistic approaches to any conversation, determined to cut into whoever he spoke with and bring out a reaction.

Over the years, he'd sharpened that conversational ability to a knife's edge. I would've been fine with it under normal circumstances, but Plazia reminded me of people from my pre-Schema life. In particular, my father. Like Plazia, my dad was also a firestarter, and while he was fun to hang out with on a Friday night, he made for a pisspoor paternal figure.

Plazia brought those experiences of mine back to light with his constant poking and prodding. By the time we restored the first region of the world, a growing resentment built in my chest, and Plazia kept running through my patience like a chainsaw through a sun-dried pine.

Still, I kept patient. Plazia's abilities shined on a global scale like this, and he understood how to use his vast reach well. He enlisted the Vagni in the restoration effort, making sure they helped settle different parts of the planet to restore its natural

beauty. His insect servants always swarmed in the distance, handling different portions of the terraforming, from resettlement to protecting Vagni from the elements.

Despite his obvious goodwill, it still left a bad taste in my mouth, hearing him go on and on about his hunger or prattling off with wolf metaphors. Over the course of our first few weeks on Blegara, that budding resentment evolved into the seeds of contempt, and it threatened to gush out of me like a pipe under pressure.

That was until we began establishing a Vagni village along a newly restored oceanic bed. The currents hadn't settled yet. The flow of water from the colossal rift still affected the entire sea here, and it left a perpetual flow of water in one direction, like an endless, fresh wind. The Vagni called it the Voragnil - the breath of life in their tongue.

We wafted in that, settling and establishing a village among newly implanted reefs. After handling the rations and crop supplies, I flowed through the water and up to the air to head to Plazia. He was tasked with training the Vagni in various anti-eldritch tactics and combat drills, and he leveraged what he learned while managing the planet.

As I neared his training camp, I dove back into the sea, finding him from nearly three kilometers out. That was only possible since my sight had improved by immensities with my attribute increases. From out there, Plazia wasn't aware of me.

The hivemind stood beside two recruits, the Vagni fighting each other. They wielded the water as extensions of their body, solidifying and evaporating it to maximum effect. The younger of the two recruits sliced the other with an ice blade, and the attack sank into the side of the fighter.

That ended the spar in its loss, but there was no shame in it. The wounded member swam off for treatment. As they passed Plazia, a floating cloud of blood dispersed through the water. It reminded me of footage from shark attacks long ago.

As the cloud-covered Plazia, he put a hand onto the Vagni's back. Plazia raised his head, and the blood flowed into the bowels of his armor through its opened slits. The Vagni tilted its head to Plazia, wondering what its benevolent leader wanted.

And Plazia stared at him with a shackled hunger.

The swarm within Plazia's armor writhed like a kicked hornet's nest. The legs of several insects reached outside of Plazia's helmet slit, and their drool dripped down from his facemask, the liquid heavier than the surrounding water. It dappled down into a puddle at their feet, the lime-colored saliva searing into the implanted sand below.

Plazia's hands trembled. His shoulders writhed. He grabbed onto the Vagni, squeezing him to a halt. Plazia lifted a shaking palm, and mana coalesced into it. The runes glowed across his body, and even without a deep understanding of the magic within, I read the runes as glyphs designed to evoke pain.

Immense amounts of it.

Worry erupted in my chest, and I pooled mana into my hands to dash at them. Before I could, Plazia's hand glowed red. Bubbles flowed from the limb, and he slowly pulled it to his face, shaking all the while. He squirmed. He writhed. He shambled as the glowing metal spread over his facemask.

Like a cleansing brand, he burned the insects that tried to escape his armor. He kept holding himself in place, his magic ensuring his agony was no muted thing. His rituals augmented the pain he experienced well beyond a normal burn, and it left him shaking like a beaten child.

After a long moment, Plazia winced and released the Vagni. The local bowed to Plazia, appreciating his release before it swam away. Plazia continued to burn himself, the agony his distraction from the humming of his hunger.

He reached his hand back out of his facemask, and he gazed at his palm. He grabbed the sides of his face before hitting his helmet. He pinned himself in place before twitching for a time. Instead of interrupting him, I gave him a few minutes to collect himself. He deserved that mercy.

So I channeled mana for a bit before flying and diving in nearby. As I landed in the sandy sea, the grains plumed in the water like a tan smoke. Plazia walked out of the cloud, and on his helmet, a new scratch glistened in the underwater light.

He glared.

"Is there something you need to say, or are you simply this apt at wasting time?"

I looked over his armor, finding countless scars, imperfections, and markings. The Sentinel armor reminded me of a used car lot after a hailstorm. I thought of saying something, thought better of it, then left him to his peace. I shrugged.

"We all need breaks sometimes, right?"

He turned, the uplifted sand bending around him.

"As you've said before. Breaks are for the weak."

I smiled.

"And the weary."

We had members of my guild join in the terraforming process after getting parts of the planet stable. They helped us create a better environment, and in particular, that involved the weather. To the surprise of absolutely nobody, taking a third of a planet's oceans resulted in changing weather patterns. Many violent, oppressive changes.

Without Plazia's basalt walls, the oceans would've drained into the missing basin the Hybrid Star left behind, resulting in global climate change within hours. As it was, the water still evaporated on the open seas, and clouds drifted over the dried area.

While faster than we liked, that bought us a few weeks to try and remoisturize the area. In the meantime, the storms of Blegara reached biblical proportions.

The planet had always had absurdly powerful storms. Compared to Earth, the entire planet was an ocean, so any hurricanes that formed could rage on the surface of the world for literal months at a time. They reached sizes that covered entire sides of the world at times, and the shadows they cast weren't measured in distance. The Vagni measured them in how many weeks they took to pass.

Despite this environmental chaos, they left little impact on the locals. The Vagni lived several hundred feet below the surface of the seas, and that barrier absorbed nearly all the impact these storms would've left on them. When we resettled, this was no longer the case. The shallow sea we made wasn't able to swallow those near-global storms.

The hurricanes would cross the basalt walls and crash down onto newer settlements with the wrath of an enraged god. They would ripple and stir the seas until the surface held oceanic wakes well into the hundreds of feet high. Plazia planned for this disturbance, however.

He never enlisted unlevelled Vagni, sticking with systemized and trained individuals for the shallow seas we carved out. Having been Schematized, these Vagni handled the storms without nearly any casualties. It was an incredible boon for us, and I hardly believed it, especially after seeing these tempests firsthand.

One day, I spent a few hours watching one of them. Lightning danced across the sky like a heart pumping energy into the world. Waterspouts coursed and siphoned the sea into the clouds like curving tunnels to the sky. The waves billowed up through the entire horizon, the edge of my sight like some bending illusion.

It exposed how fragile the world was. How fragile a planet could be.

It brought my thoughts and attention back to Earth. My home still had dimensional instability and Elysium to worry about. No matter how much my brain understood Blegara's situational urgency, my heart told me to protect Mt. Verner.

To ease that concern, I organized a quick meetup with my guildmates. Even if I couldn't be there, they needed to know about Elysium's intervention and the proposed origin of mana. I wanted to tell everyone immediately, but I also worried what Schema's reaction might be. It had made teams of engineers into unknowns over knowledge of the cipher, for instance.

I didn't want that to happen again. That's why I took a few weeks to verify how dangerous the information seemed to be. So far, so good, and letting my other guildmates know might lead to some important breakthroughs or understandings at the very least. Blegara could afford to have its terraforming stalled by a few hours in the meantime.

The meeting gave us the opportunity to get more manpower on the project. We had already spent day and night handling the immediate concerns, and the long-term prospects became our primary concern. That meant getting people on board who understood what the hell was going on and could fix it.

Considering the planetary scale of the project, a few more bodies wouldn't hurt either. Sending out the message, we found a time that matched all of our schedules. With the time arriving, Plazia warped us back to Earth. As we had with most of our meetings, we gathered at the top of Mt. Verner, where Chrona made her home.

The crisp, thin air refreshed and revitalized my senses after weeks in the oceanic world. Below us all, the guild erected a growing city and infrastructure with tasteful parks and elegant structures. They replaced the once vast greenery with a thriving metropolis. Mana and my golems powered the entire expanse, lighting homes and offering a functional intranet based on a psionic web.

Therein was the problem. It all hinged on mana, a resource I didn't know if we could keep relying on. As other members of my guild came in, my nervousness over that issue bubbled and churned in my chest. A few late arrivals came in while handling their previous arrangements. After a few fond hellos and quick catchups, I stood with many eyes on me.

I widened my gaze.

"Where's Al-"

Althea landed on my shoulder from the ether.

"Hey, what's up?"

I smiled.

"Well, someone beautiful, by the looks of it."

Torix had new robes, and they covered a portion of his armor body. He reminded me of a dark metal pharaoh.

"It's quite good to see you again, disciple. Now, you've mentioned that there are a few fundamental understandings of the universe we simply must address. Please, do enlighten us."

Before we began the conversation, Plazia finished his isolation runes nearby. I didn't want Schema listening in too closely. I took a breath.

"We destroyed a Hybrid Star, a Hybridized Spatial Fortress. During the battle, I had a conversation with an Elysium general. They told me that mana is derived from the Old Ones."

Torix leaned back.

"That's impossible...It...Well...HMMMM."

Shalahora peered away, unable to meet our gazes. Kessiah dragged her hands down her face, fresh blood staining her combat fatigues. It was hers.

"Blegh. Nothing is ever simple, is it?"

Althea frowned.

"I always had a hunch, especially after coming to Earth. Mana seemed too good to be true after seeing a society live without it."

Shalahora's shadow body writhed as his voice whispered over us all.

"Absolute power corrupts absolutely. It's unfortunate, but mana is power, and its source is...Volatile."

Diesel rubbed the side of his head.

"Does that mean we can't use mana anymore? If so, that puts a wrench in our plans. Actually, it dismantles them outright. We need that power source to accomplish almost

anything these days. Could we use it even if it comes from these, er, Old Ones? Are they really that bad?"

My eyes went distant.

"They're worse than evil."

Hod raised a wing with tremendous confidence.

"Hod think old people not that bad. Hod will say, Hod see old people in dark sometimes. Old people kind of scary, but Hod see their smile the next morning. Hod think them not so bad then."

Hod nodded as if he said something deeply profound. Torix gazed at the sky as if staring at infinity.

"You will survive this, Torix. You must."

Chapter 443: Finding a Path

My eyes went distant.

"They're worse than evil."

Hod raised a wing with tremendous confidence.

"Hod think old people not that bad. Hod will say, Hod see old people in dark sometimes. Old people kind of scary, but Hod see their smile the next morning. Hod think them not so bad then."

Hod nodded as if he said something deeply profound. Torix gazed at the sky as if staring at infinity.

"You will survive this, Torix. You must."

Chrona tilted her head, her amphibious skin glossy in the light.

"The Old Ones. I've heard you speak of them with our guildmates, and yet, I've never seen nor felt their presence. What are they, exactly?"

I spent a few minutes catching everyone up to speed. As I did, I injected details and my perspective, though I tried to keep myself from being biased. That was a difficult proposition, given my mind-scalping experiences, but I did my best. Chrona gave me a wise nod as I finished.

"That's fascinating. Elysium believes that the mana we rely on is derived from those archaic beings, and that reliance is why Schema's society is as degenerate as it is. In essence, we are tools for the Old Ones' amusement, and they wish to break that cycle."

I sighed.

"They wouldn't be the only ones. I want to as well, but I'm not seeing many outs for our current situation."

Torix paced back and forth in a slow trot.

"This is revolutionary, isn't it?"

I frowned.

"That we're they're puppets?"

Torix spread his arms.

"Oh, come now. We're getting closer to the truth of this universe. That isn't something to be afraid of. It's worthy of celebration."

Althea crossed her arms.

"Yeah, but something we rely on for literally everything comes from things we really don't want to be in contact with."

She shivered.

"Trust me. You don't want them to get in you. Anything they do tends to stick, and I think the Old Ones created a problem before giving us a solution that caused another problem. So yeah, we're stuck, and that sucks."

Torix swiped a hand.

"The problem existed whether we were aware of it or not. The difference lies in our awareness, so instead of perusing through a thick darkness, we now traverse a dense fog. Though the differences seem subtle, we can plan and pursue alternatives to our previous arrangements using this information."

Diesel rubbed his temples.

"Like throwing out all of our technology and going back to the Stone Ages?"

Torix brushed his hand as if getting rid of some rubbish.

"What? No, far from it. We're now able to achieve a level of independence from the Old Ones that few within Schema's system can enjoy. It allows us to filter its obstructions and augment our abilities in a real way, assuming the information is reliable."

I leaned back.

"That's true. We've been using mana this entire time. Knowing its source should help us keep it in check."

Plazia's voice rumbled from the ground.

"You've seen what the Old Ones have done to anyone they can impale their claws through. To assume we will be better off from mere information is mere arrogance."

Torix locked his hands behind himself.

"It's arrogance to assume we know the result of these facts until we've verified them and tested their outcomes. Aside from that, advancement is always something that arrives with risk. However, in our situation, it presents a startling opportunity - we can further filter our mana until it lacks the Old Ones' harmful influence. This is a gift we shouldn't take lightly."

Krog lounged in a sunbathing area above us.

"You speak of opportunity. It reminds me of our story. When Schema first arrived on Giess, we believed it would be a boon for us. The espens were augmented into superior beings. They were able to wield magic and fight monsters. We no longer needed to protect them at all times, and they could be given freedom once they were able to defend themselves."

I raised my brow.

"You guys were defending them? That's a positive spin on what was happening, isn't it?"

Krog's eyes turned to slits.

"My point is that you've seen what happened to our homeworld as a result of Schema's gift. We were turned into cattle, and the espens were assimilated into Elysium before they could develop their own culture. In the end, it did us no favors, and I believe we should be cautious of letting this monster into our home."

Hod raised a hand.

"Hod think monsters already here."

Torix stared at Hod in disbelief.

"For once, I concur with the bird."

Hod made a pose with his wings spread wide.

"Dry man know that Hod smarter than dry man. Hod think it long time coming."

Torix shrugged.

"And as quickly as it came, the moment of agreeance has faded into nothing but a memory. C'est la vi."

Althea kicked her feet from my shoulder.

"You've been reading some pre-Schema books?"

Torix brushed one of his robes.

"It's a part of being cultured, of which I make a point in being regardless of where I am."

Amara hissed her words.

"Pointless dribble. How would we uncover the validity of this information, and who will be the tortured people to unravel the Old Ones' secrets? I will be no test subject for these discoveries, and the eldritch we've captured and experimented on don't deserve this either."

Plazia tilted his head.

"Beyond the ethics involved, it's in our nature to consume and convert. If we unleash the latent potential of mana within an eldritch, it will evolve into an evergrowing mass that may consume all that is and will be. It is a risk not worth taking."

Shalahora murmured over all present.

"You all wear shackles, but your prison contains you. It walls off that which encroaches from outside your comfort. To break these chains is to escape, but it comes alongside an omen of greater dangers. That is why you must all proceed with caution."

Plazia glowered at Shalahora.

"Cryptic as always, hm? You sound as though you understood the truth of this from what you've said. Did you enjoy watching us writhe around in our ignorance? Oh, but you'd rather put it as a kind of darkness, wouldn't you? It would suit the magic you so revel in using."

Shalahora's form rippled.

"It isn't something so simply unveiled. I am privy to knowledge that I cannot share. That is not a metaphor or alliteration. I cannot share it."

The shadows around us crawled in different shapes. I raised my hands.

"You guys are fully grown apocalypses. Act like it and calm the hell down. I, for one, think that if there's anything we can test all this on, it would be me."

Several guildmates yelled out in tandem.

"That is simply foolish, disciple."

"Hod not agree."

"Holy moly, this is above my pay grade. Man, I was supposed to be an engineer after college."

I sighed.

"I have carved the cipher into my skin and channeled mana into my body for years. No one here can boast my level of resilience around this stuff, and that's why I can also test the situation without as many consequences."

Torix snapped.

"You are the center of this guild and the light of your world. If you die, your entire species will be washed into obscurity. The future you've promised them will fall into nothing. This makes you the absolute worst possible test subject with the highest risks involved."

I leaned back as he stepped toward me with an accusing hand. Torix simmered his words.

"I've seen the results of someone with talent believing they may shoulder everything. Someone close to me also believed he would overcome the forces of this universe and be above it all. That's how he was turned into the Lord of Worms instead of fully realizing the potential he held."

Althea flipped off of my shoulder, landing light on her feet.

"I'm not exactly a mana scientist, but I agree with Torix. This is just like you to try and take everything on."

I raised a hand, more than one mind coming together in the conversation.

"Every passing moment, I am channeling billions of mana a second into my body. Despite that, I haven't become some slobbering beast. This body, I think Baldag-Ruhl designed it so that it could assimilate energy without affecting his psyche and soul. It was a way of setting aside his eldritch nature."

Plazia's swarm thudded against the walls of his armor.

"Hm. Baldag was trying to rise above the primal outcome of our kind."

I turned a hand to him.

"And that's why I can take far greater risks than a normal person. My armor has been a mana filter."

Althea furrowed her brow.

"Would you like to watch us do this to ourselves?"

I squeezed one of my hands.

"If you had chosen that path, I would walk it with you. Whether I agreed or not, I wouldn't leave you walking it alone."

Althea took a step back. I turned to the others here.

"I'm dealing with levels of mana that are nearly continental in scale. They'll soon be planetary, then celestial. If I'm going to contain that kind of force, I'm going to need more than the mind and perspective of a human. To protect my guild, I'll be changed into something else. That isn't a choice. It is inevitable. To any that have felt what my mind has become, you know I'm far from a normal mortal now."

A sobering weight settled over us. I frowned.

"Whether you all support me or not, I'll need to make the power I have easier to handle. Filtering the mana would make it so much simpler since I wouldn't need to wrestle the Old Ones' influence all the time. I could lean into getting more mana instead of always trying to contain it."

Torix cupped his chin.

"So you'll effectively be trying to gauge whether or not the influence of the Old Ones can be mitigated and by how much, correct?"

My runes glowed white.

"Yes. I know I don't complain about it much, but I'm working with enough mana to flood a human's mind a hundred times over. Even subtle adjustments to make that easier will take most of my perpetual burden away. It lets me be more human than I am now."

Althea took a breath.

"Ok, these tests will be about making mana easier to handle, not getting you more mana?"

I gave her a smile.

"Yes. In the meantime, we won't turn an eldritch into some super monster with a direct line to an Old One, like Lehesion."

Amara raised a palm to us. Her bloodshot eye glared.

"That is not our failing. Even if we wish for something else, our bodies will rob us of our autonomy if we feast for too long. I have stalled my own growth for that reason."

She glared at Plazia.

"It dims our mind to feed."

Plazia cackled.

"For some of us."

As they kept going at each other, I remembered the mind of the Hybrid Star before it was fully Hybridized. A thousand minds screamed for release, yet the body's urge to survive overwhelmed them all. I peered down.

"It's a haunting life. If you can call it that."

Kessiah rolled her eyes.

"Look, eldritch aren't all things worth saving. Some of the time, you just have to put the suckers down. Also I've known Daniel long enough to know that making the mana

easier to manage isn't going to change anything. It just means he'll use more of it until you're right back where you are now."

She pursed her lips.

"No offense."

I raised my palms.

"None taken."

Kessiah threw her hands up and let them slap against her sides.

"Then let me add some stuff to what I said. You tread too close to your edge all the time. One day, you're going to break, and we'll have some immortal, monstrous metal man running around destroying everybody. But you know what's worse? We'll lose a friend. A good one."

My eyes stared into an unseen future.

"That nearly happened on L-7 already, and there's no reason to think someone else isn't going to try and rob me of my body again at some point. It's already happened twice. Well, counting the serious attempts."

A silence passed over the group. Shalahora's voice whispered with force.

"The Old Ones will find a way to claw into Daniel's mind. He is too tantalizing a prospect for many reasons."

Plazia manifested a throne from a pit of magma. He sat with a lazy dominance.

"Such as?"

Shalahora's shadows thrummed in the distance.

"I cannot disclose more than this. Daniel holds mana far too well, and his psyche and will are strong. He will be worn as a puppet, one way or another, should we continue down this path."

Shalahora walked towards the center of the group, his eyes meeting different guildmates.

"Where you all see caution, I see a predestined outcome that leads to a grim demise. There is nowhere we may escape or path to take that avoids our obsequence to them. The Old Ones will find a way to separate the soul and the body, and we will be the ones to suffer."

Shalahora raised an oversized hand.

"We will all live for millennia. How many times will we escape them? Escape Elysium? Even Schema has plans for us all, yet you all think there is a path where you may take to avoid risk. Your dominion over your souls is at risk whether you face it boldly or cower like beaten dogs."

Dread pooled over everyone. Shalahora drew from a vast well of experience dwarfing all those present combined.

"How many times can we survive against these forces? You must all remember that one loss will be the loss of your will for eternity. I guarantee you that once your will is taken, your soul will never be given back again. Once it is done, it is done."

His voice shook as he spoke; pain nested in his words like internal wounds under the skin.

"It is your selfish desire to demand your loved ones to walk a safe, concerted path. Daniel wishes to be bold. We may fight him like some shadow made of sludge, or we can support his cause. He wishes to be given a chance to rise above the Old Ones. We can fight that or embrace his choice. Either way, he will fight."

Shalahora gazed into a past unseen.

"I will not force him to walk upon glass and embers alone. As a shadow of who I was, I will tread behind his path and do what I may to keep him in the light. What will you all do?"

Murmurs spread across the group. In the background, a portal opened before Helios stepped out with Florence. The albony both brushed themselves off before Florence spread his hands wide.

"Ah, it's so good to be back among friends. What did we miss?"

Plazia tapped the side of his head.

"Everything. As usual."

Helios stared down at Plazia.

"We were busy uplifting our entire species from enslavement and purgatory. Excuse the lateness. Speaking of, we need several cities erected across the moon if there's time for it."

Helios spread his arms to me and bowed. Sarcasm dripped from his words.

"But of course, when your lordship can give us a moment, that is."

I weighed my hand back and forth.

"I can give you guys a couple cities before heading back out. Before that, let's catch you up on the meet-up."

I got them back up to speed. As I finished, Helios crossed his arms. He shook his head.

"You're all demanding Daniel take a safe route to success? Have you all lost your minds? Need I remind you that he is insane. He's been insane since we've met. Before then, as well, from what I've gathered."

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

Helios looked at everyone like lost children.

"Why would any of you think he'll listen to reason? He's a lunatic. A madman. A raving deviant."

Everybody looked at each other and nodded. I was taken aback. Helios shook his head in exasperation.

"So stop being fools and help the idiot. He needs it. Desperately. To begin, someone will create a branch dedicated to testing these runes on his dimensional fabric. Pieces that get out of hand can be lobbed into his dimensional storage or destroyed. Promising pieces can then be used on his golems. So on and so forth until we reach the genuine article."

Torix nodded.

"Hm. That sounds far more reasonable."

Helios pointed at Amara.

"You understand the sigils better than anyone here. Use that strength on something that actually matters rather than your playpen with the eldritch."

Plazia let out a long cackle while Amara steamed. Helios turned to Plazia.

"We all know you were too afraid to face down the Spatial Fortress-"

I raised a hand.

"Ahem. Hybrid Star."

Helios rolled his eyes.

"Whatever. Plazia, you have no room to criticize others when your weaknesses are so glaring. Krog, Chrona, you should've already offered to help Daniel with terraforming the planet you and the gialgathens will likely be colonizing. Get your kind more involved and moving. Remember this. You can rely on slaves no longer. We are the same."

The retired generals stared at each other before giving him a nod. Helios turned his palm to Diesel.

"You've been hard at work with the infrastructure project. I've seen multiple cities connected, and it's built so that it can handle much larger scales. We'll need your assistance on the moon once you've established the larger pieces here."

Diesel gave him a salute.

"Now that's something I can actually do. In a spacesuit, of course. And with golem guards."

Helios gave him a rare smile before glaring at me in disgust.

"And you. You're the leader of this guild. It is fine to accept counsel, but there's no reason to beg these people for permission. They, despite their abilities and merits, haven't achieved what you have. It is insane to watch you stand here like some trembling cub when all of us may be killed by you at any time."

Plazia let out a dark, echoing chuckle while Shalahora's body rippled for a moment. Helios put a fist against my chest.

"There are times and places to listen. This isn't one of them."

At that moment, something dawned on me. Helios had ruled a planet with a developed society, and he'd done it to a high standard. He had over a decade of experience in the task, and that confidence shined through in meetings like this. From understanding what needed to be done to who needed to do it, he broke down a task into slices and allocated the jobs to who could handle it best.

It left me with little to say but a lot to learn, so I lifted a fist in response. Helios gave me a nod before Florence clapped his hands.

"Good. With the business side of our endeavors handled, let's enjoy the moment we have together after all this time."

Plazia leaned to him.

"We are no family. We are not even friends."

Tension passed over everyone. Florence stepped up to the hivemind.

"You are exactly right. We're more than blood ties or relationships built on casual moments. We're brothers and sisters of the legion, and we're here to turn the path of this entire universe, aren't we?"

Plazia said nothing. Florence put a hand on the eldritch's shoulder.

"That's what weaves our paths together. A singular purpose to change the status quo. It stops your hunger. It stops my decadence. It has forged us, and it still makes us. Even now."

Florence turned to everyone. A glass formed in his hand.

"To friends who are closer than family."

His voice trembled at his last word, the absence of his people like an open wound. His vulnerability disarmed Plazia, leaving the hivemind with nothing to add. Florence snapped his fingers, and glasses formed in everyone's palms. We raised our glasses, even Plazia. We spoke as a unit.

"To the legion."

Over the next few hours, I had conversations with everybody. Catching up breathed life into me, and it gave me a renewed sense of purpose. Diesel had spent the last few

months building up the grid we erected, my golems turning a decades-long process into something done in months. He kept the guild busy tearing down the old world powerlines and replacing them with the new world tech run by magic.

To my surprise, the aesthetic element held a high priority. From Diesel's perspective, the long-term utility of the project was so evident that only complete zealots would fight against it. Convincing those people required a different angle than mere obvious facts, and Diesel found the project's beautification acted as that angle. It wasn't as if we lacked the resources for it, either.

With his compass, Diesel owned a mobile Architect golem at his fingertips. He collaborated with designers who used the overwhelming manufacturing capacity of his artifact. Lavish layouts turned from exorbitant luxuries to obvious expectations, given how easily they could be sourced and maintained. This allowed him to construct power lines that mirrored the designs of craftsmen from the old world.

Power grids turned from wooden poles and plastic lines to embroidered steel and copper cables. From the copper wires, ivies hung like green curtains and moss coated gaps in the engraved metal pillars. They incorporated the histories of local areas, trying to tie in well-known figures and heroes from past eras.

Local heroes who helped elevate the towns were memorialized, and Diesel blended the local fauna of an area with the pragmatic framework. Spanish moss and palm trees embroidered the South East. Western columbine and Oregon grape covered the lines of the North West. Merry bells and maidenhair ferns adorned our cities in the North East, and Firecracker Penstemon grew on the projects alongside yucca and Texas Mountain Laurels in the South West.

It was an incredible fact about conquering a territory - a bit of botanical work and historical respect made it a lot easier to win people over. That's why flowers and trees were bent and molded around everything, giving the new infrastructure an ancient and natural feel. Diesel even kept the local area's aesthetic, using the older, more differentiated versions of a place than their more modern counterparts.

It sounded incredible, but I had questions. I put my hands on my hips as he finished describing the process.

"Doesn't that slow everything down? These people need power and water now."

Diesel shook his head with a smile teasing his lips.

"Will people use these utilities if we just make them? Maybe. Maybe not. It's based on how much they trust us. Where do we get that kind of trust? By making everything beautiful. It helps mitigate one of the biggest problems with this project - the people we're saving don't think of our takeover as helping."

I took a breath.

"They don't. How?"

"We're a heavily armored and well-stocked invasion force. Even when we build them wells and give them back electricity, the golems you've sent are still silent messengers of what happens should they resist. It's threatening no matter how you slice it."

I grimaced.

"Damn. Maybe I can redesign-"

Diesel hit my side by swinging his compass on its chain.

"No. You've got a lot on your plate. Let us handle it."

I raised a hand.

"But it wouldn't be-"

He hit me again. Diesel rolled his eyes.

"I can tell you've never worked in management. You actually remind me of one of my old managers at my waterworks company. He was a guy who excelled at every position and was extremely productive. He could do five people's jobs all at once. You know, if he was willing to drag himself through the mud to make it happen."

Diesel swung the compass, and it wrapped around his arm like a set of keys on a lanyard.

"What do you think happened to him?"

A shadow went over me.

"He probably died during the culling."

Diesel scoffed.

"He joined us in the fight against Yawm and survived. He's a prolific dungeon clearer now, and he does a lot of solo missions. I'm talking about his time at the water company."

I smiled; the story was one full of more redemption than I expected.

"I'm happy to hear he's doing fine now."

"Me too, but it's worth mentioning that history repeats itself in all kinds of different forms. That's why I'm bringing this up."

I smiled at Diesel. His growing confidence exposed the internal competence hidden under his shyness. I shrugged.

"I don't know. Was he moved into upper management?"

"Nope. He was demoted after being a manager for six months. He kept micromanaging everyone and trying to take over projects that were being handled well enough. The same drive that got him promoted lost him his position and by no genuine, ill-willed fault of his own. I think you match his energy."

I shrugged.

"Eh, you're probably right about that."

Diesel turned to everyone, but he kept our conversation between us.

"I don't mean to be critical here either. What you do is incredible. You're giving everyone a reason to work hard, and sincerely, your work ethic is one of the best parts of this guild. It's hard to come up with excuses when your boss is grinding himself down to the bone all the time."

He met my eye.

"You know what I mean, right? This guild...It gives us all a reason to wake up and get through the hard bits of life. We've really been needing that for a while since the system arrived. Now look at you going off and trying to take that all away. Tsk tsk."

He pointed at me.

"We have a future now. You have to let us buy in on it, so yeah, you don't get to have all the work just to yourself. We all get a piece of that pie."

I swarmed with thought, and my initial reaction was to defend myself. I thought better of it and nodded.

"I'll keep that in mind. Thank you for letting me know."

"Anytime, chief. And uh, I know I said all that, but I'm still terrified of Amara and Plazia. Please keep my squishy body away from them."

I scoffed.

"Actually, I think this is a great opportunity to apply what you just said. You're their new manager. Boom. Duties delegated."

As horror cropped up on Diesel's face, I gave him a satisfied smile.

"Ah, I love listening to my guildmates. I've really got this figured out, huh?"

Diesel gave me a salute.

"It was an honor to serve, sir, but my time here has come to a close."

He and I laughed before Diesel walked off. He wasn't the only one busy.

Althea's orphanage came together during my time away. She connected with several other individuals driven by her purpose, and that expanded her growing network. Those contacts let her spread her reach to more cities, ensuring that more children received reasonable upbringings.

She established training programs for their future Schematization alongside education on everything magical or system-related. Torix helped iron out a holistic curriculum, though Althea had to tone it down by more than a few notches. I added a few tidbits to their studies, mainly bits about leveling certain skills and abusing certain trees.

From what I gathered, that was a key difference between my guild and most forces. We aimed to spread knowledge about the system far and wide. It's what humanity did with the internet, and we weren't stopping anytime soon. Still, even with Althea's intervention in local communities, her schools weren't as extensive as what she and Torix developed on Mt. Verner.

For now, these new institutes far exceeded anything Earth had mustered up. Well, that we'd seen so far. From a few of the scouting reports, our guildmates found pocketed communities grounded by powerful warriors, and they were spread throughout the continents. The more benevolent warlords received our assistance for free, while the more spiteful tyrants were conquered by my legion.

We didn't need to fight often, at least anywhere near New York. After tearing down Marcella Meyer, my guild gained a reputation across the Northeast of North America. Our dominance avoided a lot of fights we'd otherwise have slugged out, but further out from that sphere of influence, the sheer strength of my golems deterred most attacks and assaults from anyone sane.

On the other hand, we experienced quite a bit of resistance near major population centers. I had expected as much. The strongest individuals gathered there. In that

regard, cities operated as a filter and as a magnet. In those population centers, the strongest of millions rose to the top, and they surrounded themselves with the same millions to stand on.

To many, they needed dominion over a population, and these tyrants tried to rule what was left of the world. Tearing them down wasn't difficult, but they kept crawling out of the woodwork like flies from a bloated corpse.

That was the most challenging part of taking Earth so far - arresting control without slaughter.

In all honesty, I owned the planet already. I had system perks and titles to prove it, but this wasn't what I wanted Earth to be. I wanted a place drenched in harmony and prosperity. I could ensure that happened over the long term, but it would take far more work than what I put in already.

The sheer magnitude of the task weighed on me, and those thoughts swirled through my mind as Torix finished his report. We sat near the edge of Chrona's home, viewing the sunset and glowing lights of the city proper. After having heard Diesel's explanation, I searched for what he talked about.

And I found signs of the beautification project.

Blazing stars reached from under the power lines while honeysuckle vines crept up around them. Enchantments lined the electrical grid, giving them an otherworldly glow that traced lines of light across their outreach. A few forest critter spirits lined each set, the mana constructs singing and flying near their power sources.

I smiled at the sight, and the improving view was something I was getting used to. More skyscrapers were etched into the sky, and they carried the greenery and growth our guild chose as its aesthetic. Flowering virgin's bower crossed the window panes and fruit trees rose from the soil at the tops of buildings.

It helped give the air a sweeter scent, and that gave me solace as Torix handed me a list of twenty warlords ruling over old-world cities. From Rome to Tokyo, they dug their hands deep into this world to try and take as much control as they could. Torix leaned in and whispered.

"We can finish them off if you'd like. It would be so simple. Easy. Final."

I let out a long sigh.

"Murder. Torix. We've been over this."

Torix raised a finger.

"They're warlords. Though some carry a certain amount of benevolence, they lack any real substance. Any goodwill they present is either a political tool they've used to manipulate their image or a means of unspoken control."

I tapped my chin with a knuckle.

"That's conjecture. By that logic, you could say the same about us."

Torix's eyes flared green.

"But of course. That's what we're doing, isn't it?"

Before I could answer, Althea stepped up to us.

"It's not why I'm setting up schools."

Torix waved a dismissive hand.

"That's in honor of a higher ideal. Education is a worthy end in and of itself. I'm discussing power and influence, two factors that are expressly gained with a singular purpose - to impose our will."

Althea put her weight on one leg, her hip sticking out a bit.

"But we're imposing our will for those higher principles like education."

Torix's eyes flared bright.

"And that could be out of benevolence or a self-serving desire to feel like a savior. Regardless of our aims, I believe that most people aim to influence for a primal pleasure that comes from enacting their will."

Althea crossed her arms.

"That hasn't been the case for the educators I've worked with. I think some people feel content with simply helping people as best they can."

I smiled at her.

"I would say the majority, actually."

Torix interlocked his hands behind himself.

"My personal ideas differ. By my estimation, the character failings of successful individuals are an unfortunate reality of Schema's system. Whenever you dictate strength and influence on the ability to kill monsters, the most violent individuals rise to prominence. That much is inevitable."

I raised my brow.

"So violent rulers are a feature, not a bug?"

"Ahem...Perhaps. I'm not well versed in that adage."

I rolled a hand.

"It's an old-world phrase. It means something that looks like a flaw in a system is actually something baked in. I don't think that's true in this case, though. I've met a couple of emperors and the like. They aren't these scathing, hateful warriors who thirst for blood, as far as I could tell."

Torix raised a finger.

"Apt observation, but from what you've described, you've never seen a rising ruler. You've either met an established one or one without a backbone. This has allowed you to skip most originating rulers' brutal ascensions. By comparison, you've seen their educated, spoiled offspring."

Torix raised a hand.

"From my research, there are few rulers that lie between those two extremes. Considering Earth's current historical era, we'll only meet these would-be rulers striving for dominance. Thus, violence permeates to an extreme within them. Since it is their chosen language, we may speak it back in turn."

I peered at Hod as he had an eating contest with Krog and Chrona. With ease, our birdman decimated them in the competition. I sighed.

"I'm hoping we can skip the bloodthirsty part of all that."

Torix coughed into a hand. I crossed my arms.

"I know you think that's a subtle gesture, but you're a metal skeleton. You don't even breathe."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

I rolled my fingertips across my forearm.

"Oh, come on, man. Out with it."

Torix turned around.

"My my, is that Hod in an eating competition? Perhaps some telekinesis may make his body burst. Hm. Wouldn't that be fun?"

He paced over before Althea put a hand on my arm. She tightened her squeeze.

"Hey, don't take what he said too seriously. I know you. I think you enjoy fighting, but being bloodthirsty? That's a bit much."

I gave her a beaming smile. She took a breath.

"Because, you know, it's pretty rare I see you in your berzerker mode. Usually. It kind of depends on where we are, actually. You know what? Forget I said anything."

I furrowed my brow.

"I don't have a berzerker mode."

She scoffed.

"Uhm...Ok. Then a rampaging warrior mode."

I leaned back.

"Wow. Really? Come on now. I'm not like that."

She stared at me in disbelief.

"Uhm, then a cookie monster mode? Look, I don't know what you want from me here."

"I don't want you to act like I'm some evil eldritch."

"You're not...You just look

like it sometimes."

I raised my brow.

"Does everybody think I'm like that?"

Althea scratched the back of her head.

"Uhm... Yes, probably. I can't see how they wouldn't if they saw you in war or a hard battle."

I took a step back as if struck.

"Augh, my chest. That's a blow, and from you, no less. I'm affronted. Vexed. Some might even say indignant."

She smiled.

"Hey, I know you worry about your humanity, but it's not like animosity and wrath are never warranted. Taking yourself to that place is important sometimes. Besides, it's nice seeing you angry. I don't like it when you're always nice."

"I wouldn't imagine that coming from you. I mean, you run an orphanage. You're the definition of nice."

She leaned against me.

"So that's why I like someone spicy for my sweet. It keeps things fresh."

My armor rippled over my skin.

"Like that choker?"

She rubbed the bracelet over her neck, her smile soft.

"Just like it, actually."

Shalahora assimilated from the surrounding shadows and darkness.

"Am I interrupting something?"

Althea put a hand on Shalahora's arm.

"Definitely not. You should both talk. Daniel and I will catch up later."

As she stepped away, Shalahora shook his head.

"None are worthy of her."

I scratched the back of my head.

"I couldn't agree more. So anyways, what's up?"

My peripheral vision sank inward, the world closing in around me and Shalahora. Without disrupting anyone, Shalahora masked our presence. As everyone lost track of us, the shadow murmured.

"I've been rummaging through the minds of people during my psionic assessments. In memory, I've walked every inch of this world through the visions and sights of others. It's a beautiful realm, one we will fight hard for."

I kept my eyes on Althea.

"Definitely. It's home, at the very least."

Shalahora raised a hand.

"I say that with reason...I've uncovered vital information on the largest factions pressing against us."

"I'm guessing Elysium and Schema, then?"

"Not entirely. It stems Elysium but also something from between dimensions."

My stomach sank as I turned my gaze to him.

"Between dimensions? Sounds like it's from Kryyah, then."

Shalahora's form shifted in and out of existence.

"It is. Something is lurking in that interdimensional space, and they've built some kind of interdimensional horror."

I dragged a hand down my face.

"Haven't they all?"

"I would say no. Few beings can access that realm, even in terms as large as galactic ones. However, no matter their origin, these entities have existed on the other side of the galaxy and haven't pressed into this portion of Schema-owned space yet. From what I've gathered from my sources, this enemy's arrival is inevitable, and we must be ready."

My eyes sharpened.

"These huge, galaxy-warping threats just pop out of the ether. How in the hell haven't we heard of these guys?"

Shalahora tilted his head.

"There are many reasons. The most obvious cause is Schema's informational lockdown. Without an infrastructure to spread information, every empire becomes an isolated space without any substantial reach. Certain empires fight against this and proliferate their influence, but many remain in relative obscurity."

"Like us."

"We exist within the shadow of Schema, something shown to many, yet we know of little beyond our borders. That stems from a lack of scouting or further operations outside of internal affairs. This is to be expected, given the age of your empire."

I frowned.

"Really, it's a guild."

"My point is that our emphasis on what happens upon your planets allows for insulation from the wider galactic world. Taking time and traversing a few galactic capitals and spending time within them would season your approach and broaden your perspective."

I shook my head.

"Hah. It sure would, but I doubt I'll get time for something like that for a while."

Shalahora's shadow let out several scouts that traversed through the shadows of the room.

"Once more, this is to be expected, but you will be alive for a long time. That gives you the ability to have many stages of your life. One will be a season of learning and culture. Others will be the seasons of war, their shades painted in blood and their scents effused in death. Preparing for them all shall make you into the force you wish to become."

"Poetic, but it feels like the seasons are all war with tiny gaps between them."

Shalahora whispered with force.

"I've seen the memories of the dying, and many of the shortest lived have the fullest lives. In many ways, a ceaseless struggle stretches one's life while comfortable times pass quickly, almost as if temporality has hastened itself."

"Interesting perspective, but we've gotten way, way off topic. What about these interdimensional things? What are they bringing here?"

"They are shearing space. In doing so, this enemy force wishes to widen the gaps that are spreading across the many realms availed to us."

I bit my lip.

"Ahhhh. Then they ripped a third of the oceans off of Blegara by feeding that eldritch?"

"In essence, they have. They caused the initial opening the Hybrid Star fed on."

My armor formed spines across my back.

"Then we have debts to settle with them."

Shalahora's form became corporeal, solidifying.

"They have little to offer aside from war and destruction."

A silence passed over us. It soaked into the air, strangling it of its levity and leaving it like lead. I took a breath of that intensity, two parts of me fighting the other. One part wished for war, for a place to stretch my limbs and test my limits. The other wanted wonder and time to explore. For now, my desires were irrelevant.

All that seemed to matter were the circumstances I found myself in. It was this way every damn time, and I bit my inner cheek.

"You know, I just want peace and time to establish myself, my territory, and my planet. Every time I think a situation has calmed down, I get dragged into some

interdimensional, galactic-scale conflict that reeks of ethical horror, gods beyond space and time, and evil organizations hell-bent on eliminating free will."

I squeezed a hand into a fist.

"It can't be like this everywhere, can it?"

Another quiet passed over us. Shalahora murmured, and yet his voice quaked over our surroundings.

"If there exists a sanctum free of this, my journey hasn't uncovered where that is."

I gave him a weak smile.

"To be fair, you do tend to find the shadow in any light. Eh? Eh? Puns?"

"Awful jokes or not, you're right. It is my nature to find the gloom."

I raised a hand.

"Shalahora, I know you've done plenty you're not proud of. We all have. That being said, I also know you haven't had many good options to pick from, and so far, you've been doing your best with what you have. You should know there's honor in doing the best you can, whether you feel otherwise or not."

Shalahora let out a laugh.

"There is much that honor finds itself in. The plight of a lone mother carrying her child from danger. The worry of a philosopher ready to unleash his ideas on an unready world. Even in the falling of a leaf, its flight downward waving back and forth, fighting for its last piece of existence."

Shalahora murmured,

"Honor is in most things, but what I've done with my life...It doesn't fall in honor's purview. The more you learn of me, the more you will know that as an immutable fact."

A quiet encompassed us once more. After soaking his words in, I smiled and shrugged.

"Eh, we'll see. You've still got plenty of time to make amends for whatever you've done."

Shalahora's voice rumbled like a far-off storm.

"Or spread my poison further. Time will tell whether my path changed when I aligned myself with you."

"Let's hope so. Now, if this interdimensional faction succeeds, then I'm guessing they'll destroy all life? Maybe eliminate all matter? Perhaps it's both?"

"Whoever leads them is going to create an enormous dimensional disturbance. So yes, they will likely do both."

I remembered the name, but I dared not speak it aloud. Cygna the Silent. It was fitting given how even Sovereigns spoke around their name.

Shalahora murmured,

"They're creating holes in spacetime to ravage entire celestial bodies. Earth is a prime target as it lies on a dimensional fault line. It could be the center of what they wish to create. Whatever that may be."

"I'm guessing Kryya was one of their agents?"

"There is little doubt in my mind. From what you've described, Kryya was something that leaked out of the ether, and it intercepted one of these dimensional rips as a scout. That falls in line with what I've learned from my patron."

I pivoted to the side, turning on one heel.

"Any ideas on what we'll be doing about it?"

"I've psionically assimilated important memories from unscrupulous individuals. They will inform you."

My gaze sharpened.

"Stealing memories? From whom?"

"I've taken the bulk of these data points from Elysium agents across the many species under your protection. The other bits and pieces were snippets garnered from passing wanderers from other empires or parts I obtained during my own travels. Aside from that, stolen isn't correct. They still have their memories. I simply have them as well."

I raised a hand.

"So you copied them?"

Shalahora raised a hand.

"Yes, that's right. I...I can give portions of the memories to you, and they shall grant you an assessment of the situation, should you want them."

"Depends on what they're about. I'm guessing it's only the most relevant stuff?"

"Of course. I would never willingly waste your time."

I took a breath.

"Then let'em rip."

Shalahora placed a fingertip on his forehead before pulling a strand of mana from his head. It swirled as if alive, reminding me of a glowing jellyfish. He pulled it towards

me before tapping my forehead. As it flowed into my head, I blinked, and a series of images flashed through my mind.

"This...This is-" I gasped before my shoulders dropped. "This is a bunch of animated series from Batman and Spiderman. Wait...It's especially about Venom and Inque. Honestly, any blurry and dark character in general."

A silence passed over us, heavy like a lie on the tongue. Shalahora's body condensed into a smaller shape.

"This...Is the wrong batch of memories."