

## New World 71

### Chapter 71: Another World

Checking out my status screen, I placed all my remaining points into strength. Strength coursed through my flesh, might filling my bones. I grinned, stomping a foot to the ground. Cracks formed beneath me. The quickness of my nerves sharpened, as if my control tightened. My body balanced, staying stable as a mountain.

I rolled my shoulders, enjoying the enhancement of my own limits. Every piece of me felt on point, like one of those days where everything goes right. I opened my status screen. Its magnificence explained why.

Level 997

Strength – 830.6 | Constitution – 1110.7 | Endurance – 1077

Dexterity – 273 | Willpower – 1000.7 | Intelligence – 324.2

Charisma – 71.3 | Luck – 121.3 | Perception – 151

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Daniel Hillside Totals Regen Buffs/Debuffs Health 84,350/84,350 26,258/min or  
438/sec Oppression Damage- 15,000+(80%  
hp)/min Stamina 28,647/28,647 459/sec Elemental Res – 98% Harbinger of  
Cataclysm 1.48 Billion/56.6 Billion 69.4/per min (conduit) Plasma Res – 98% Phys Dam  
Reduction – 98%

Rad Res – 98% Phys Dam Bonus – 8591% Mental Res – 98% Total Damage Bonus  
20% Boundless Storm

It had been a long time since I took a long, hard look at my status. I didn't see a point in checking it every ten levels. What difference would two hundred more health make? Damn near nothing. The difference now was immense. I closed in on 100,000 health, and my health regen almost outpaced my stamina regen now.

Other stats had become ridiculous as well. My physical damage bonus neared ten thousand by itself. Just as impressive, Oppression was insane with the bonus scaling from Cosmic Soul. It made sense why I could burn through someone's health with a condensed version of it. Last and not least, Harbinger of Cataclysm looked like it would take years before it finally maxed out.

Taking another look at my attributes, I was a jack of all trades now, except charisma. With all other attributes, my confidence was absolute. My build balanced out over time, making me into a tanky generalist. My only weakness was talking to people, and it just so happens that was what was waiting for me.

Maybe Torix could cut me some slack after what this mission turned into. Explaining it would be hellish enough as is. Before leaving though, I walked over and absorbed what was left of the boss's corpse. I headed back towards the encampment, checking for left over bodies or remnants. I found a few, using my armor to soak them up.

After that, I covered the area with oppression, killing anything that remained of the massacre. Letting the insects of Yawm or the hands of Bloodbull escape wasn't on my priority list. After basically salting the earth, I headed out with nothing gained but levels. A mission made for honing my charismatic qualities devolved into one of my most brutal yet.

Pulling in oppression, I sprinted through the forest, heading back towards the base. I kept my head held high. Even though the mission didn't work out like planned, I learned a few lessons. The first lesson learned was that while I was strong, fighting head on wouldn't work forever. Second, I would gather information before any fight from now on if possible.

My build and armor stopped me from dying, but it didn't make me invincible. Maybe, in the back of my mind, the risks I've taken were because of this revival passive I had. Way back when, I got the leveling perk for luck. It included a way to come back after death. Ever since, the desperation and struggle I put into surviving waned.

While I couldn't force those feelings to return, I could fight smarter, not harder. With all my intelligence and willpower, the problem didn't stem from being unable to think quick or smart enough. It came down to being lazy. I focused so intently on becoming stronger during my training, that maybe I believed it made up for poor battling. Who knew, maybe it was a sense of entitlement, like I deserve this ease in battle after training my heart out.

That's the thing about life though. Just because you work hard, that doesn't mean you'll get a damn thing. You have to be methodical, focused, etc. I couldn't just work hard and live forever off it. I needed to use the brain between my shoulders too.

At least that's what I thought as I reached back towards the steel legion. Once I was back, I jogged up towards Kessiah's tent. Hers was closer than Torix's tent anyway. Besides that, I figured she'd be easier to worm the cores from anyway.

As I walked up, I kept the telekinetic pads under my feet. Instead of converting all my weight, I converted most of it. My footsteps still made sound, making my approach a bit less eerie. Even if I did redirect all the force into my armor, it still ebbed sound now though. With so much constitution, I simply weighed too much for utter silence.

Considering my damage now, a telekinetic sneaking ability would pair well with my power. Silencing those racing thoughts, I tapped on Kessiah's tent,

"Hey, you in there Kess?"

"Hhmmm, what?" A second later, it was like her brain caught up to her lips, "Oh, Daniel. Yeah, sure."

I unzipped the tent, bending my head as I paced in. Even though Kessiah's tent was specially made for her height, I stood taller than it now. Kessiah sat at a desk. Under the desk, a square plate of steel had been placed. Every piece of furniture in the tent shared that quality, the steel supporting the ground she slept on.

She pushed herself from under the desk while setting down a thick book. She stood from the reinforced chair, propping a hand and weight on her hip. She liked wearing a black leather jacket that stopped an inch or two above her bellybutton. She knew she had a good figure, and she was proud of it. Flaunting off some skin came off as casual. Combine the skin-tight leather chaps and the edgy haircut, she might as well have been a biker chick at this point.

Of course, she wore different clothes whenever she went out on missions. She preferred form fitting, carbon fiber suits that could handle the unreal stress of combat. All those observations and thoughts flooded my mind with crystal clarity as I looked at her. From what I could tell, the change in level and attributes was the cause.

As I walked up, my armor peeled off my head without me thinking about it. I suppose it had become a habit, but I never really took note of it. Starting with my now exposed face, Kessiah looked up and down at me, checking me out before raising an eyebrow,

“You’re taller again. Here I thought Torix sent you to go get some pawns or something like that. What gives?”

I frowned, “Uh, it turned messy.”

She glanced above my head, “Yeah, it did.” She met my eye, “Wanna talk about it?”

I shrugged, “I’ll just have to tell the story to Torix after telling you. If you want, we can meet and talk to him. You can hear the story there.”

She pursed her lips, “What did you stop by for?”

I scratched the back of my head, “Well, to let you know about the story, and to ask for some more dungeon cores.”

Her face shot up, “Ahhhhhhh.” She grinned at me, “Really now?” She pressed a finger against my chest, “You know it’s been a while since I stared at a man in the face who was taller than me. Shouldn’t a man like that carry his own weight around here?”

My heart rate rising, I raised an eyebrow, “Hmmm. I guess so.”

She tiptoed her fingers up my chest plate, “I’ve got a few ideas of how you could.”

I grinned, my heart pounding in my chest, “So do I.”

She leaned closer to me, “Like what, big man?”

Suppressing my desire, I pushed her away by pressing two fingers on her forehead, keeping casual, “How about I make you something?”

Her curiosity peaked, Kessiah's eyes opened wider as she pressed my hand away from her, "Really? I saw what you made Althea. It looked-" Her excitement died down, like she was trying to suppress her it, "Yenno, uh, pretty."

I nodded, "Yeah, I can do something like that. It'll probably be something more like jewelry then. Working on something like that could help with my precision with my carving."

Kessiah nodded before she frowned. A second later, she snapped, "All you ever talk about is training. Training this, training that. Why don't you let loose every once in a while?"

I breathed deep before letting out a long sigh,

"Because I can relax after we've dealt with Yawm. Hell, based on my perks, I could relax forever if I wanted too. I'm only seventeen...damn. I'm eighteen now. Shit. Anyways, I'm eighteen years old. I got a lot of life left in me. It just so happens that it's on the other side of a mountain. That mountain is killing Yawm."

Kessiah's eyes narrowed, "What if we die when Yawm busts out? What then? That means you lived your last days of your life working like some slave."

I shook my head, "No. It means I spent my last days fighting."

I held my tongue, not saying anymore. I wanted to go off about how she didn't give a shit about dying, about how she just floated through her endless life. I didn't though. I needed her help. She crossed her arms, a tense moment passing. It stretched out, turning into a rather painful set of seconds.

Kessiah uncrossed her arms, locking them behind herself. She balanced on her heels, breaking the silence, "Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to go at you like that. I don't know why, but watching you work so hard...sometimes it's sexy and sometimes it just pisses me off. That time it pissed me off. No hard feelings?"

Not really knowing what to say to that, I nodded, "Yeah, no big deal. Times are tense. We don't have much time, and the pressure's getting to people. It's alright."

She tapped her crossed hands against her back, looking awkward. She glanced away, then back at me. She unlocked her hands, grabbing the at the satchel on her side, “Oh yeah, that’s why you came here. Sorry, I got sidetracked.”

I let out a chuckle. It was rare to see Kessiah flustered. She handed me a few dungeon cores while saying, “You sure do use a lot of these.”

I took a few, “Eh, I finished a tree for them. Means I need more of them than normal.”

She finished handing them off. Kessiah grinned at me, “Good luck dealing with Torix. I’d stay and listen to the story, but I forgot he’d bitch the whole time. Honestly, I’d rather not deal with it.”

I laughed, “Hah, yeah. I’m not looking forward to it either. See yah.”

I stepped out of the tent and walked towards Torix’s tent. By now, I already know what you’re thinking. ‘Daniel, why the fuck did you turn her down? She’s a hot alien babe!’ True, but see, here’s the thing. She didn’t want sex for any other reason besides blowing off some steam.

I’m not saying I didn’t want to. Hell yeah I did, I’m a man too after all. The thing is, I’ve been in relationships like that before. Dating someone is hard work, and if your partner is the type of person to use someone, the whole thing becomes more trouble than it’s worth. I spent months dealing with this one girl who played games all the time. I hate playing games in relationships. It’s like a power struggle, and whoever loses becomes a doormat. I’m not a doormat, and I don’t want a doormat for a lover either.

Kessiah gives off that kind of vibe to her. She isn’t in love with me. She just wants to use me for sex. I can’t honestly say that’s the only thing she’d stop at either. If someone starts out a relationship by using you, you can’t expect that to change. If anything, things will just get worse. I’ll become a rag, and she’ll squeeze me dry...And I don’t mean my balls.

Of course there’s men that do the same thing to women. I’m not trying to make this a battle of genders. What I am saying is that I should set boundaries with Kessiah. Refusing her now says I won’t let myself be used. It’s cutting an impulse short for long-term gain in the future.

Besides, the situation could turn even more sour than just being a tool for Kessiah. Something could go wrong and maybe I end up hurting Kessiah's feelings further down the road. She might not even help against Yawm. We would all be really fucked then, and not in the literal sense.

Of course I can say that all now with a straight face, but at the time, denying her was a feat of willpower. I found a way though. It didn't help that Kessiah was gorgeous, kind of like a fairy that lures you into the woods and gets you eaten. You know you shouldn't go inside, but stopping yourself was damn difficult.

I did though. The thousand points into willpower didn't hurt the situation either. Running towards Torix, I used the skill phaser for movement. I dashed up and across buildings. As I moved, I learned as well. With a bit of telekinesis, I could create fields and reinforce materials. It felt like hitting myself since I used my body as the shock absorber, but it wasn't too bad. My armor was dense and difficult to break after all.

If I pushed my telekinesis, I extended the range of my feet. I would walk on invisible telekinetic pads, letting me get twenty feet high in the air. The further up I went, the more painful the process became. I needed to stomp with all my might to get enough oomph from the telekinetic pads. That meant stomping my side as hard I could. Turns out, heel stomps do damage.

Keeping around double my height made the process comfortable. Jumping would take me higher than telekinesis, but the utility of floating on nothing was awesome. Walking on something like water with wide, broad telekinetic fields might be possible too. Of course I couldn't keep it up forever, but even a few steps might make the difference.

Within a minute, I reached Torix's house. I flew into the room before kicking off a telekinetic pad to stop my momentum. As I did, the force redirected into my sides, shoulders, and chest, compressing me. It was like being wrapped up by a boa constrictor. In other words, not so bad.

Regardless, it surprised Torix. He had an egg sitting in the middle of the room. All around it, marking and inscriptions covered it in a circle. Reading them, it seemed like he was working on a bigger, better version of the beetle. The essence of control and power, the mark for efficiency, he placed them into a circular form around him.

He sighed at my entrance, "Using that skill of yours again."

I grinned, “Eh, someone has to keep you on your toes. Anyways...” I glanced at my screen, remembering the strength perk. I put points into strength, relishing the feeling of pressing the button. As I finished allocating my stats except one point for the perk, my blood ran cold. My stomach sank. Leaving a point for the perk, I only had 971 strength. I grabbed the sides of my head, “Noooo. I thought, fuck.”

Torix stood before floating with a cloud of mana as support. The runes remained untouched before he placed a hand on my shoulder, “What is it? Did the mission go poorly?”

My shoulders slumped, “That too. I have a perk that requires 1000 strength to get, but I have to have that much strength before being level 1000. It would be a solid boost, but I won’t be able to get it.”

Torix raised an eyebrow, “Sounds like a rather intense requirement. It’s a shame.” He lowered his arm. “Is your strength six hundred? Perhaps seven?”

I shook my head, “Naw. It’s 971. I’m so close.”

Torix’s head tilted back, “So close? You’re practically there. There are items you may wear that can enhance your strength. Obviously, armor isn’t one of those things in your case, but rings, amulets, anklets, they can all strengthen you.”

I raised an eyebrow, “How much?”

“Not by the hundred, but a few dozen is within the realm of possibility. In fact, it may prove a fruitful exercise to create them on your own. You understand the process of enchanting. Your armor is a rare metal to say the least. Why not try that?”

I frowned, “I could. Are there buffs for strength?”

Torix grinned, “A sly deduction.”

He pulled out his personal tome from underneath his robe. He opened the page without touching it. The pages turned at rapid speed before stopping on a relatively simple enchantment. He continued, “You may want to make one these. Makes casting a variety of spells a breeze.”

I glanced at my armor, the runic carvings a polished white metal while the normal stuff was black. I nodded, “Yeah. One day for sure.”

Torix opened a palm towards me, a wave of green aura passing over me. Tiny bits light, kind of like floating lamps, passed through me before a bit of power filled my bones. It was like a watered-down version of the ascendant mana. Some of the might, but none of the fury.

It was enough. I opened my status screen, seeing my strength at 1021. The perk screen appeared.

Void Maker (Strength of 1000 or more, Level below 1000) – You grab towards the stars, and they shatter in your hand. You breathe at mountains, they turn to dust. As you live, all becomes null and void. +10% more bonus physical damage and relative strength every 1000 points in strength. For every 1000 points in strength, 1% of physical damage is added as true damage. You may place 1/10th of strength into any attribute, except Constitution, Endurance, Strength, and Willpower.

I had to admit, whenever I selected yes, I was beaming. The bonus was ridiculous, just absurd. Against most enemies, I did only 5% of my actual damage against them. It was because most eldritch had high resistance. Even 1% of my damage added as true damage was a 20% increase to my physical damage against armored foes.

Of course, Althea had 100% of her physical damage converted into true damage. Even thinking about it for a second, I couldn't help but be flabbergasted. Still, my armor made me over three times tankier, not even including the extra health regen. All the other bonuses added up to, like oppression. I counted my blessings before confirming the perk.

Which attribute will you select for the 1/10th addition? Intel, Luck, Char, Dex, or Per?

It didn't take too much thinking before selecting intelligence. The extra health was worth it, and none of my other stats gave me the same bang for the buck. I selected intelligence, confirming my choice.

Strength roared up my limbs, like liquid euphoria. The certainty and comprehension of intelligence clicked into place in my head. I gripped my hands smiling, testing my new-found strength.

Torix grinned at me, “It’s good to see the young so hungry.”

I laughed, giddy of the boost. After a few moments of thought, I frowned, “Why don’t people just use buffs for perks at lower levels?”

Torix frowned, “Level limits. Buffs are useless until you reach around level 100. Before then, I test you to find a single buff that increases an attribute by even five points. Schema won’t allow it. Even at your level, I can only increase it by about 45 points.”

I nodded, “Ahh, my strength bonus applies to buffs.”

“Naturally.”

I sighed, “Thank you Torix. That could have been bad.”

With pride, Torix puffed out his chest as he placed his tome back into his robe,

“If I couldn’t even do this much, then what kind of master would I be?”

I patted him on the back, “Still a damn good one, in my opinion.”

He raised a hand, pointing a finger at the roof, “The real question is, what kind of apostle have you been?”

I scratched the back of my head, glancing away from him, “Uh...not the best.”

He sat down on a chair of mana. He steepled his fingers, “Oh, do tell.”

I explained how the situation played out, trying to emphasize how close I came to death. I also had a section where I explained what I learned. Torix remained quiet, keeping his fireball eyes focused the entire time. After I finished, he sighed,

“By Baldowah, I tell you to gain a speech skill. You go and kill everyone.”

I glanced at the ground, “Yeah. I fucked up.”

Torix shook his head, “Not particularly. You gained quite a few levels, learned a few lessons. It isn’t like near death experiences are easily forgotten.” With a sharp grin growing, he continued, “I would know.”

Despite being curious, I nodded in silence.

Torix sighed, “After that utter failure, I see no reason in postponing the mission to the rift. You’ve shown a rather deft incompetence for charisma related skills. You should focus on your strengths, and fighting giant monsters seems to be one of them. Once you’ve gained gravity magic, I’ll teach you how to wield it.”

He met my eyes, “You and Althea leave in the morning. Learn to feel the fabric of another dimension, then you may wield the fabric within your own.”

Torix cackled with a grin equally evil,

“Good luck, harbinger. You may need it.”

## Chapter 72: Last Night

I shook my head, “I don’t need luck. I need a plan. Food, some supplies, maybe finishing a unique skill or two.”

Torix frowned, “From what I’ve seen, your armor can store things. How, I’ve no idea. Discovering that may make your journey easier, however. Outside of that, perhaps leaving a conduit in our world would be a good idea.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Conduit?”

Torix nodded, “Yes. Remember how I created one between you and Althea.”

I blinked twice before smacking my forehead, “Ah, yeah. Of course. It siphons out her excess mana, stopping her transformations from going crazy. Yeah, I remember.”

Torix raised a finger, “Conduits have many applications. They siphon mana between targets, but they also act as beacons during long distance travels. Perhaps leaving one with someone would be a good way of keeping grounded. That beacon prevents you from losing track of where or who you are.”

I pursed my lips, “Yeah. My and Althea’s link is useless for that, since we’re both going to the rift. Sounds useful for my forging.”

Torix made an O shape with his thumb and index finger, “Precisely. You already know the runes for the ritual. You simply need to learn how to imbue your mana into your blood.”

I shook my head, “I picked up the trick a while back while forging. I’ll use my blood to lock mana into enchantments.”

Torix placed two fingertips against a temple, “Hmmm...I don’t imbue that way. I use a liquid variant of mana. I suppose your Arcane Blood allows you to do so. Skipping that step then, mastering runes will allow you to imbue memories onto objects with the runes.”

I raised my hands, “I knew there was something weird about the runes now. It’s not like I’m converting what I know into words. The runes are my memories now.”

Torix frowned, “You’ve mastered them already?”

I nodded, “Think of it like this. You must struggle with having the strength, precision, and perception of carving. I don’t. My extra leveling perks give me the various soft skills needed for carving runes. Makes learning the main parts of the skill a piece of cake.”

“Indeed it would. Abuse your gifts, because you’ll find others who do the same.” Torix leaned up off his fingers,

“Speaking of which, creating a conduit should be simple then. Create something, then charge it with a memory. That will leave a piece of you. Circling the rune with your mana will hold in your energy. Dousing the rune with blood will create a connection between you and the creation.”

Torix weighed his hands back and forth, “The larger the runic inscription, the larger the mana cost that can be drained from you.”

I nodded my head, “Really now? Well, that’s interesting.” My head bubbled with ideas and possibilities of the new technique.

“Indeed. You’ll find it quite useful during your travels with Althea. Your own build can shore up most of her weaknesses, allowing her to specialize. Her damage can spike to immense levels, and you receive a trivial detriment, since her mana costs are so low.”

I nodded, “Just wondering, but why didn’t you tell me about this earlier?”

Torix glanced at the runes on the ground, “I underestimated your learning abilities. I thought your mythical skill was a fluke, a byproduct of your earlier life.” He glanced back at me, “My mistake.”

I shrugged, “Eh, shit happens.” I turned to look outside, “I’ve already got quite a few ideas of how to use it.”

Torix nodded, standing from his chair of mana as it dissipated, “Then I suggest you go out and implement them.”

I turned back to him, a growing grin plastered on my face, “Yeah, I think I will. Thanks, Torix.”

With a knowing grin, he glanced back the egg on the floor, “Never a problem, disciple.”

I left Torix before heading back to the building area at the center of the camp. A few goals stuck out in my head. Creating Kessiah some jewelry was the first, but I wouldn't stop there. Making her new ring into a conduit would give me the grounding that Torix mentioned. I could kill two birds with a single stone.

Outside of that, giving Althea a conduit towards my mana would help her quite a bit. If she didn't need mana for the firing, that meant more mana for bolts. I doubted that she could use my own armor or mana for the bolts themselves, but maybe one day.

With all this in mind, I walked up to a table in the camp. The moon peaked up on the edge of the horizon, a darkened brother of the sun. The chill in the air meant most night workers were scared off by the frigid wind. When your fingers turned clumsy with cold, working with sharp objects and strong forces were an easy way to lose them.

It didn't bother me. With a bit of ascendant mana, the buildup of heat killed the cool. With my runes blistering, I set up my work. The first object would be adding a mod for Althea's rifle. A scope presented itself as the easiest addition. Range was her greatest asset, so capitalizing on it made the most sense.

With that in mind, I created another tube from my armor. I looked like Pinocchio, except with my middle finger instead of my nose. Since my hands were so big, my middle finger made for just the right size of a scope. Of course, getting the barrel straight and smooth took quite a few tries. Since I already made a barrel before, making a second one was simpler.

After fifteen minutes, I completed the task. From my armor, the diamond sand paper rose. The armor melted off it, like the paper was rising from a deep pool of liquid metal. I couldn't even remember doing this, yet there it was, stored and convenient. Mastering that storage could make for some interesting applications.

Trying that out would have to wait for later. I sanded the inside and outer layer of the scope, making them smooth and polished. After finishing that, I carved out a few runes onto the edges of the barrel. As I did so, I used Torix's advice of pouring a memory into the runes. For this one, I focused on one time when I gave blood at a hospital.

As the memory flowed, so did my hands in carving. The symbols etched to perfection, like the elegant framework of a master architect. With the carving skill mastered, making solid stuff wasn't so difficult anymore. In fact, it made the process instinctive. I

didn't think my way through writing the runes now. I felt my way through them. I decided what I wanted, then I wrote it, no planning needed.

It sped up the process. An hour into making the barrel of the scope, and I'd come so far. Once I finished the conduit process, the scope would allow for using my blood in place of Althea's blood. There was a bit more I could do though.

For a bit of flexibility, I carved some more inscriptions onto the center of the scope. I began with the rune for adaptability and change. This was different from the changing of seasons, however. That kind of change occurs regardless of your intention. I wanted these runes to symbolize change guided by purpose.

With that in mind, I finished the dual rune with the symbol for discipline and drive. The molded into a control enchantment. Once I picked up a scope from the steel legion, the aiming sight would be adjustable with thought as well. Changing the intensity would take a bit of mana, but having the option was useful regardless.

A soldier leaned over one of the unlit tables. You see, some of the tables had lamps and some didn't. When working with objects that glowed, the unlit tables were superior. Since my runes always offered light on their own, I took the less popular unlit tables. No point in using something I didn't need. This soldier would often do the same since he worked with the glowing electronics in his rifles.

There were only two unlit tables, so we found ourselves working beside each other often. Over time, I learned the soldier by name, John Diesel, since he always worked here during the night. Like me, he tinkered about, but on his rifles instead of with runes. We chatted here or there about parts and the intricacies of building rifles. Casual conversation of course, but enough to build familiarity over time.

He helped me build the rifle for Althea. Even excluding that, he humanized me a bit in the eyes of the others, which was always a plus. With that in mind, I waved him over,

"Hey, John, can you spare a minute?"

John glanced around, always checking to see if another John was nearby. His name was common, so it was a habit he picked up without even knowing it.

I murmured, "I mean Diesel."

No one else had the last name, so he recognized who I was calling for. He set down an electronic chip he was working on, pacing over towards me. He gave me a salute, something I told him repeatedly to stop doing. He couldn't help it though.

"Sir, what is it?"

I pointed at the scope, "Can you get a rifle lens fitted for this and bring it back to me. It would be a huge help."

John nodded, "Of course. Did the Equalize-I mean, the cannon rifle work out for Althea."

I nodded, "Hell yeah. It worked like a charm. Hopefully this will be the last bit it needs to push it over the edge."

John grinned, glancing downwards, "That's good to hear. Did she smile?"

I nodded, "She picked me up and nearly squeezed the life out of me. She loved it."

With a distant smile, John murmured, "That's good, that's good." He glanced back up at me, "I'll get this fitted for her. Hope she likes it as much."

I shrugged, "You can never know with women."

He nodded, "You sure got that right."

He jogged off. The guy had a crush on Althea, hoping to get a chance with her one day. That would be hard, mainly because he was shy as a cockroach is to a foot. One day he would find someone though.

Pushing those thoughts out of my head, I turned to the task at hand. Making an amulet or an earring would be hard as fuck. Keeping it basic, I stuck with a ring. Using my pinky finger, I extended a thick tube of my armor. Making a blade on the side of my hand, I lopped an inch out of the tube. Taking the sandpaper, I grinded it down.

The polish removed some of the length, polishing it to a dark gray shine. I took my three-fingered pencil of armor and used the sandpaper on myself. Sharpening my own armor gave me a bit more precision when carving out runes.

After honing the point on my hand, I etched tiny, intricate runes into the center of the ring. I stuck with a basic memory, one of learning the most basic forms of boxing. The stances, how to punch, keeping relaxed, all those tips molded into the memory as the line of runes grew. It finished at the end of the circle, making a neat loop in the middle of the ring.

I sharpened the knife again, keeping my hand spike pointed. Beginning on the outer edge, I wrote out another memory. This one echoed my desperation and terror when in BloodHollow, my first dungeon. I figured these runes would make Kessiah more effective. She didn't know much about fighting, so even the basics would help. Her effort seemed low octane as well. A bit of a boost there wouldn't hurt things, that's for sure.

Harbinger's Ring of Bloodfury (lvl requirement: 400) – Adds a portion of the Harbinger of Cataclysm's knowledge and hunger for battle. Requires 50 mana a minute to maintain. Effects ramp up as more mana is siphoned.

Current siphoning: 0/50

Skill Gained! Mana Conduit(lvl 1) – While others aim to steal little, you aim to give plenty. +1% to conversion of siphoned mana.

As I finished the ring, John paced up. The scope was finished. John even added two mounting apparatuses on it. In his other hand, a pack of liquid carbon metal. Liquid at room temperature, it solidified when exposed to heat.

John reached me, sticking out the two objects,

“Here you go Harbinger. This should do the trick.”

I picked them up, grinning from ear to ear, “Hell yeah. It's awesome to see someone exceed my expectations for once. Good damn job.”

He puffed out his chest, suppressing a grin, "It's nothing, just make sure she gets it, and you can call us even."

I nodded, "I'll make sure she knows John Diesel did it for her too, if you'd like."

He blushed, waving me off, "What? No no no, I'd much rather her think it was completely you. That would make her smile more."

I raised an eyebrow, "Why?"

John leaned back, "Why? She likes you of course. Everyone knows it, even someone as dense as me. I figured it was obvious to you."

The thought unsettled me a bit. Being so busy with all the training didn't leave me with much time to consider my own feelings, let alone Althea's. That was one of the reasons I pushed Kessiah away. I just didn't have time to invest into a relationship. After all, if I was going to do something, I wanted to do it right. That meant putting in time and effort, something I didn't have to spare.

If we survived though, what would I do? I couldn't give a straight answer. Beating Yawm was the top priority list. Everything else, well, I just pushed it aside. These thoughts past through my mind in a second, so I blinked,

"Well, thanks for giving me credit. I won't waste it."

John nodded, "No problem. Was that all you needed?"

I nodded, "Yeah. Thanks John."

He walked over to his rifle, picking up a pair of tweezers and a small welder for working the metal,

"Not a problem sir. You kill that bastard Yawm, and it'll be more than enough."

His sentiment was shared by the other members of the steel legion. Since talking with the legion a while back, other members of the steel legion worked here more often. Whenever I passed by the firing barracks, more members fired than normal. I lit a fire under some of them, that's for sure. John had been one of those members.

His help made the rifle making processes easier. Since I finished the crafts early, I paced over towards Kessiah's tent. Kessiah didn't need as much sleep as Althea, so she might be awake already. Once I reached near Kessiah's tent, a giant, translucent barrier surrounded it and nearby. It was one of the deafening domes Torix used to trap sound.

Within it, Kessiah and Althea were practicing. You read right. They were actually practicing. Shocking, I know.

Althea's long, purple hair swung as she fired at Kessiah. Kessiah's short, edgy haircut didn't get in her eyes as she darted back and forth, catching the bolts. Kessiah liked to keep one side of her left temple trimmed short, accentuating her cheek bones and jaw. To me, I could see why. Kessiah had strong shape in both, making her face 'pop' out from her hair cut.

Althea preferred longer hair. Her softer face and silver skin suited it too. Unlike Kessiah, Althea hid some of her face from view. It was a shame. Althea's purple irises matched her purple hair, giving her an alien sort of charm. Combine that with her nigh voluptuous figure, and you had an enchanting sight. I could see why John was so taken by her.

That whole conversation with John was why I focused in on this stuff now. It's amazing how some things will go right underneath your notice until someone brings them to your attention. Noticing the women in our group of four, at least in an intimate kind way, was one of forgotten things. Whenever the thoughts of them blazed in my head, I remembered why I sort of suppressed the memories.

If you're around a woman who's beautiful, it can leave you fumbling for words. It's one of those things that only time can fix. Once you've been around it for a while, you see them as people, because that's what gorgeous women are. People, just like me or John. Really, really sexy people.

Though the hormones raged, I shot the thoughts down as I walked up through Torix's wall. The energy wall rippled once I passed through, sound blaring in all directions. Steam hissed from each shot fired from Althea's rifle. Cataclysmic booms echoed off

Kessiah crushing the bolts of bone. Hell, Kessiah's blood siphoned at regular intervals, sounds of gurgling and cracking ice lashing out like the sound of pain.

Once I stepped nearby, Kessiah passed me, missing a bolt. I clapped my hands together, catching it in front of my face. I tossed the bone aside, cracks forming throughout it before grinning at them both. Kessiah dragged her feet to a stop. Sweat dripped down her face and stomach. She almost always wore something that let you see her toned midsection. Today was no different.

Althea walked up, normally dressed in a robe. Today she wore a fitted nanofiber suit, accentuating her figure. Both were sights to behold, but I smashed those thoughts into oblivion as I walked up,

"Thanks for keeping me safe there."

Kessiah frowned, "Sorry. Didn't mean to miss."

She lied through her teeth, but I smiled at her, "Eh, it happens to the best of us. Any who, I finished your ring."

Her frowned flipped as she walked up, bouncing on her heels, "Really? I can't believe you did it so fast."

I tossed the ring at her. She snatched it out of the air, putting it on before raising an eyebrow. She siphoned mana into the ring, a slight aura of red forming from it. An almost invisible pull appeared in me, like a mosquito draining blood. Kessiah's eyes opened wide, her fists clasp. The flow of mana ceased as she stepped up with a growing grin,

"What did you do to make this?"

I shrugged, "I had to make a conduit. I figured I could make your jewelry useful and nice to look at, all at the same time."

Kessiah clenched her fist, siphoning the mana again. The same slight pull nagged me. Kessiah's shook with frenzy, the grin on her face turning maniacal. She laughed before throwing up her fists,

“Wow. I’m impressed. I can clench a fist without the ring breaking and it’s useful? Just, wow.”

Althea walked up, setting the rifle I made her onto the ground before reforming her arm. Before she reached me, I tossed the scope at her. It hit her chest before she fumbled a bit before grabbing it. She inspected it. Once she realized what it was, she beamed. I grinned at her too, walking up to the rifle at her side.

I lunged onto a knee, squeezing out a bit of the liquid metal onto each attachment of the scope. I lifted the rifle with one arm, aiming with it for a second. I lined up the scope with the iron sight. After placing the scope onto the rifle, I heated it with a bit of ascendant mana from my palm. Moments later, and the attachment was in there like swim wear. Yeah, the phrase makes no sense, but it sounds smooth, so I like it.

Regardless, I handed the rifle to Althea. She grabbed it, putting her arm into it before it reformed into the intricate parts. She aimed it, shifting between targets. She fired, a pang of mana being used drawing at me. It was almost nothing though, like the tiniest, most minute of twitches.

She blinked once before firing again. In a rapid burst, she shot out three bone spears.

Unique Skill unlocked! The fusion of Carving Into Oblivion(Maxed so it counts as two skills during fusion), Comprehension of Oblivion, Enchanting, and Mana Conduit combine into the unique skill Thaumaturge. Half of unfinished skill points are rewarded. 103 Skill points gained.

Thaumaturge(lvl 1) – Most sorcerers destroy. You make miracles, both of destruction and harmony. Ability to create enchanted items is enhanced by the level of this skill.

Giving myself a silent pat on the back, Althea’s spears dug deep into the ground before she turned to me,

“I don’t understand. How’s it making my mana cost so low?”

I pointed at myself, “Because it’s using my mana instead of yours...for some of the process at least.”

She frowned, looking at her rifle in shock, “You’d take on the pain.” She bored a hole into the rifle with her stare before glancing back up at me, “Doesn’t it hurt?”

I rolled my eyes, “I have a lot of health.”

She blinked, “Like forty thousand?”

I laughed before frowning. I didn’t actually know how much health I had. I hadn’t checked since getting the strength perk and using the dungeon cores, so I opened my status screen.

Level 997

Strength – 971.4 | Constitution – 1110.7 | Endurance – 1077

Dexterity – 315.4 | Willpower – 1000.7 | Intelligence – 421.4

Charisma – 74.6 | Luck – 150.4 | Perception – 164.6

\*\*\*\*\*

Daniel HillsideTotalsRegenBuffs/DebuffsHealth89,851/89,85127,579/min or  
460/secOppression Damage- 15,000+(80%  
hp)/minStamina28,647/28,647459/secElemental Res – 98%Harbinger of  
Cataclysm1.48 Billion/56.6 Billion69.4/per min(conduit)Plasma Res – 98%Phys Dam  
Reduction – 98%Rad Res – 98%Phys Dam Bonus – 9239%Mental Res – 98%Total  
Damage Bonus 20%

Boundless Storm

The first thing I noticed was that my physical damage bonus hadn’t moved up much. I was a bit disappointed at the sight, but then I remembered why. I didn’t have 1,000 strength yet. The perk wouldn’t give me the bonus until after I hit that threshold.

I didn't have much time to dwell on it though. I closed my status screen while meeting Althea's eye, "Think more like 90,000."

She smiled, "That's...crazy."

I nodded, "So is your true damage passive."

Althea frowned, "It's armor penetration."

I waved her defense off with a hand, "Pff, It turns your damage into true damage. Same thing."

She nodded, "Yeah, I guess you're right about that."

Kessiah walked up, "It's good to see you two get along." Kessiah grinned at me, "I mean you both really warmed up to each other."

I rolled my eyes, "Yeah, yeah, of course we did. Anyways, just stopping by to drop this stuff off. Oh yeah, and before I forget, good damn job guys." I turned to them both, "It's heartening as hell to see you guys getting on with the grind."

Kessiah propped onto her hip, "It's not my first rodeo, and you know I can't let you beat me. My pride as a warrior won't allow it."

I shrugged, an obvious but hidden confidence lacing my words, "Good luck with that."

Althea interrupted our rivalrous words, "Thanks."

I nodded, "No problem, glad to chip in here or there." I glanced at the spears in the ground then back at them, "Do you guys mind me joining in on this? I figured I'd try it out."

Althea perked up, "Yeah, absolutely...I mean, yeah, sure. Whatever."

After what John said, I was hypersensitive to what Althea said. Her sudden burst of enthusiasm at my company...well, it was cute as fuck, what can I say. It was the sort of affection you get from someone really young and really naive. Considering I was the first guy Althea ever liked, her fumbling was expected. She was a lab experiment and bounty hunter before all this after all. Not the best environment for learning love.

Kessiah sighed, "Bah, I'm trying to get some catching practice in. Why'd you have to go and ruin it."

I frowned, "I can throw stuff at you too. I practice throwing on a moving target. You get double the difficulty. Sound good?"

Kessiah glanced up, placing a single finger onto her chin. A second later, she pointed the finger at the sky, "Ok, I accept."

She jogged off fifty feet(15~ meters) away before Althea and I set up shop. Kessiah stretched herself, warming up for the movement. As she did, I checked out my tree menu. With Telekinetic Augmenter and Thaumaturge, I gained around two hundred tree points. Combine that with a few level ups in various skills, and I had enough tree points to max out my invincible tree. I did so in an instant.

To be invincible is to live despite. Whether that be the struggle of facing an enemy or perhaps the struggle of facing yourself, invincibility means being unbreakable in mind and body. Only 90% of your health may be deducted from any single attack.

No matter the calamity, those who rise above it are the unbroken. No matter how hard the life, those that truly live carry on through legacy. Live so that your memory may live on, even after death. Only 85% of your health may be deducted from any single attack.

Some warriors struggle to survive, but you must look past the day and see tomorrow. In the end, all will end. The mark you leave behind will be remembered in history. Leave a mark that stretches wide. Only 80% of your health may be deducted from any single attack.

Become a scar on history or the phantom pains of a missing limb. To kill a man is simple. To kill a memory is much harder. Only 75% of your health may be deducted from any single attack.

For your last words echo through eternity. Make them mighty. Make them memorable. Only 70% of your total health may be deducted from any single attack. Any damage received over 70% of your total health will not do damage. Instead, it will be added to your next attack as flat physical damage.

It was an interesting tree. Unlike most, it seemed more situational. Most of the time, I wouldn't worry about taking more than two thirds of my health after all. Versus someone like Kessiah or Yawm, the tree could be very useful though. The tree's last bonus was interesting too. It seemed like a way of turning the tides of a battle in my favor.

If someone would have killed me ten times over, converting that into physical damage would be huge. If you factored in my physical damage bonus, the increase became downright deadly. Against most enemies with maxed physical damage resistance, the added physical damage was notable. I could dish out about half of the damage I received from the attack if I was right. That's without factoring in the true damage part of the strength perk.

In the end, the invincible tree wasn't a game changer, but it was enough to notice. It was about what I expected from a 250 point tree. With it finished, I added the rest of my points to my last tree, fearless. No more messages popped up, so I closed my menu screen.

Glancing up, Kessiah finished her warmup. I reoriented myself with reality, getting near a pile of rubble. Once Kessiah bent her knees, Althea and I began our barrage.

We threw and fired boulders and bolts at Kessiah. At first, she struggled keeping up. Over time, she familiarized herself with all the projectiles. By the time the sun peaked over the horizon, a crowd of spectators watched us. They sat just outside the dome of deafening magic.

We fell into our positions, each of us an ebb and flow of movement. Smooth and fluid, we maintained our exercise with an inhuman precision, each bolt or stone aimed at a vital area. Over time, Althea and I changed up how we shot and threw. She would aim to make Kessiah dash a certain way, then I would throw to abuse it.

Our tricks turned more elaborate over time. I threw chunks of rebarb, then Althea would fire a bolt just as it reached Kessiah. Her bolt would split the rebar, spraying

three projectiles at Kessiah. The first few times we tried this, our attacks crashed into Kessiah head on. After a while, Kessiah adjusted to our tricks.

With more vigor, I flicked my wrist at the end of my throws, setting spins on the boulders. The rocks arced in flight, like a curveball. Althea adjusted her bolts into bursts of three at this, one of the bolts hitting and splitting the boulder. Once Kessiah adjusted to the new tactic, I threw the boulders so that whenever Althea shot them, the spin would redirect her bolts too.

The projectiles would collide in front of Kessiah, sending them spraying like spitfire in all directions. Kessiah struggled with these, sweat building as the collisions occurred closer and closer to her. By now, a sizable crowd stood behind Althea and me, spectating the event. I couldn't blame them. With the fervent pace and clashing lights of the collisions, it was a sight to be seen.

It came to a crux whenever Althea learned something rather special. She already had two unique skills, sharpshooter and tinkerer. During this training, she gained her third, Bullet Bender. She would whip her hand, creating a curve in the firing trajectory of her bolts. I learned a skill or two for throwing as well, mainly the Magnus Effect skill. It allowed me to curve my shots with greater precision.

It was hellfire on the other side of our onslaught after learning those skills. Kessiah siphoned more and more of her blood into her mythical skill before she finally relented. With sweat pouring down her face, she walked up before leaning against a wall beside us. She let herself drag down before laying her hands against her knees,

“Good session guys. I can't keep this up though. Too much bullshit being thrown at me.”

Over the course of the training, Kessiah missed about 1/10th of our shots. In all honesty, it was incredible seeing it. I couldn't have done that shit, that's for sure.

Once she rested for a bit, Kessiah pulled out a gem from her pocket. She surged mana through it, evaporating the dome over us. The white noise of a fall morning and the crowd poured in. Suddenly, a black portal opened beside us.

From it, Torix stepped out. He turned to me, “You know, this is quite the crowd the three of you have collected. Giving them a bit of a push before you and Althea leave would be quite helpful. I believe you would be perfect for just such a task.”

My stomach sank,

“Wait...what? Right now?”

Torix nodded, an awful, evil grin lining his lips. His blue fire eyes blazed with what could only be considered hatred and malice as he lifted his hand. Alright, maybe I was just imagining it that way.

Regardless, with a snap of his fingers, the sound from our group heightened. Torix spread his hands, lifting them up. As he did so, a pillar of ground grew from beneath us. He hadn't lifted us, instead he expanded the ground underneath us.

Sitting above house level, a group of about two hundred soldiers could see us. I whispered to Torix, “No way. Not happening.” His grin evolved into pure treachery. I seethed, “You evil piece of shit, why didn't you tell me?!”

Torix cackled with a bit too much glee in his voice before he glanced around, speaking through the voice enhancing magic, “Hello soldiers. Today, my harbinger and Althea leave towards a rift. Once within, they face the might of monsters and their endless reincarnations. Before then, the Harbinger would like a word with you all. May his words inspire you to work hard in his absence.”

My blood ran cold as Torix gestured towards me, speaking in a low murmur without his voice entering the magic,

“Since you won't take the initiative to learn the unique skill on your own, I decided to do it for you. Think of it as a little push. Good luck.”

I sighed. I glanced around before speaking out my first word, “We-Eck.”

Within my first word, my voice cracked louder than a whip snapping across my cheek. I sighed.

This was going to be a long and painful next few minutes.

## Chapter 73: What Lies Beyond

I shook my head, thinking up what my speech would be. Introducing myself would be an excellent way of gaining some favor. I could mention how I've slain enemies hundreds of levels above me as well. Setting myself up with some expertise helped validate what would follow.

After that, discussing how life has changed would be a good topic to touch on. Since Schema came over, life devolved for most people. That's probably the most demotivating aspect of fighting Yawm. Even if we win, many family members are gone, and life won't be the same. Ailing those concerns would help these people move forward.

Painting a picture of a better tomorrow would help them more than anything. Just like with Althea, I can mention how life on other worlds sorted itself out. The dungeons are taken care of, allowing people to pursue other, less violent careers. I could mention how we will be hailed as heroes, a generation of warriors that took on the worst of the worst. That would be a good way to end the speech.

With that in mind, I spread out my arms,

"Hello, brothers and sisters." Adding a bit of familiarity couldn't hurt. It would make them think of me as one of them.

"I am the Harbinger of Cataclysm. I've slain eldritch hundreds of levels above me, and I serve as the disciple of Torix Worm. Torix killed your commander and took over your organization. You no doubt are wondering why."

I pointed at the looming cloud of gray, "Yawm of flesh, the eater of worlds is why. Soon, his insects will bore holes into you. They will wear your skin and move your bones as if you were puppets. We aim to stop them."

Alright, my introduction was over. It was time I showed them some understanding.

"No doubt you've all seen how devastating he is when he remains unstopped. You've lost loved ones, children, and your previous lives. No more can you enjoy a Saturday morning without glancing over your head, making sure a monster isn't hunting on the horizon. These are dark days. I would know. I lost all my friends, my family, everything."

I clasped my hand, glancing around at the crowd, “I was distraught. I thought to myself time and time again, what can I do from here? The first answer was revenge. I would make the monsters who struck terror deep into my bones feel the very same fear. I would become a monster among monsters. That goal left this abominable visage before you.”

I gestured my hands with each point, painting a picture as I continued,

“Over time, I found there was no future in that darkness. It was an abyss, a pit with nothing but black at the bottom. That’s when I looked up. The light I saw was a new goal – to rebuild. I learned of worlds where dungeons were handled. Not everyone needed to fight. You could have a family. You could make a new life in this new world.”

I spread my hands, booming my voice, “But that life is no sure thing.” I pointed at the cloud of gray, “That behemoth aims to steal that life from you. He aims to kill your children, murder what family and friends you have left. He aims to steal the life you’ve scraped together. Follow me and my master, and we will tear him asunder.”

With more animation, I moved my eyes to meet the eyes of soldiers as I spoke, “Generations after us will sing our name as the greatest generation. A generation of heroes. A generation of tenacity. History will speak out our names. Tell me, will history remember us as the fallen, or, as the unbroken and unstoppable?”

A roar rippled through the crowd. I nodded, grinning, “That’s right. We are a coming storm, a living force of nature. We conquered plagues, the elements, even each other. Do these monsters stand a chance against something like that? I think not.”

I paused for another moment before thundering my voice out, “These things, we can see them. We can rip and tear them apart. We’ve killed viruses that melt our skin. Monsters we can see? The might of humanity will shatter them. Remember this. We did not have the misfortune of meeting the eldritch. The eldritch had the misfortune of meeting us.”

The crowd gushed with sound, their howling like an emboldened mob. Pride took them, spurring them into a frenzy.

Unique skill unlocked! The skill Listening, Intimidation, persuasion, Leadership, and speechcraft fuse into the skill Words of Strength. Half of remaining points in every skill are rewarded as tree points. +222 tree points.

I raised a fist, "Let's show the eldritch who the real monsters are."

The last wave of thunderous outcry coursed through the crowd. From behind me, Torix and Althea clapped as the amplifying magic subsided. Kessiah crossed her arms,

"Not bad."

I nodded while smirking with surprise glee, "Yeah, I surprised myself there. It was a lot like motivating myself."

Torix nodded, "Indeed. I anticipated utter failure. It's almost a shame."

I frowned, "Thanks oh wise master."

He shrugged with a knowing grin. Althea chimed, "He did say almost."

I sighed, smiling despite the close call, "I'm just glad this shit's over with. Waiting for this trip was killing me." I glanced at the gray cloud of Yawm, "It's been a long time since I've felt anxious about anything."

Althea locked her hands behind her, "The future can be scary sometimes. Facing it makes it less terrifying."

I raised an eyebrow, turning to her, "You sound like you heard that from someone both handsome and intelligent."

Althea rolled her eyes, but she smiled nonetheless. Torix clapped his hands, "Enough chatter. We have a portal to enter." He turned to me, "Assuming you're ready?"

I shook my head, "Naw, I'm not. I need to pack. I got caught up training with these two."

He nodded his head, “Then we’ll meet back up at my current headquarters an hour from now.”

Torix grabbed towards the blue sky, pulling his fist downward. The pillar of earth we stood on sunk back into the ground, dispersing into a slight hill. Around us, the steel legion buzzed with energy. They lacked direction, but Torix walked up towards them to fix just that,

With his voice amplified, Torix spoke out, “I’ll be sending each of you progress goals soon. Before the harbinger returns from his mission, we must complete them. Understood?”

He put an edge of the Words of Power skill into his voice, driving the point into their heads. His own use of the power was damn near physical, making the command drill into your skull. It was like someone hammering a nail into your temple.

Compared with the slight edge in my voice, I didn’t come close. He didn’t bother with milking the skill like I had too. Just his command was enough to compel action. Taking note of that, I paced back towards my tent. About fifteen minutes into packing, a pile of stuff formed in front of me. Toilet paper, coffee grinds for when I wanted a cup of joe, pots and pans, I didn’t have room for it all.

As if sensing my distress, a tapping snapped across my tent. Walking over, I unzipped the tent. Kessiah grinned at me. I zipped the tent back up without saying a word, but she stopped me. She met my eye, a piercing sincerity laced there. She frowned, the intensity fading,

“I uh, well, I wanted to give you something before you left.”

I raised an eyebrow, still suspicious of her intentions, “What is it?”

Between two of her fingers, a steel ring was between them. She grinned, “It’s a spatial compartment ring.”

I unzipped the tent, letting her walk in. She scratched the back of her head, “I figured it would make my apology sound more uh, sincere.” She stood up straight and sighed. She met my eye,

“I’m sorry about trying to push myself onto you. It wasn’t fair. I was being pushy, and you still gave me the gift you promised even after I blew up on you. When you handed me the ring, I felt so bad. After seeing it was handmade and useful...fuck, I felt awful. I knew you deserved a real apology then.”

She glanced away, “So, uh, sorry.”

I pursed my lips, crossing my arms. I looked her up and down, holding her captive in suspense. After soaking the moment in, I uncrossed my arms and smiled, “Thanks for the apology, and it really wasn’t that big a deal. If it makes you feel better, Torix told me to make a conduit for one of you guys. It was supposed to ground me or something. I made that ring for that reason.”

Kessiah rolled her eyes, “Oh yeah, sure.” She raised an eyebrow, crossing her arms, “Did the conduit have to be home made and useful?”

I glanced away, “Well, no.”

She slapped my shoulder, “My point exactly. Just accept the gift now.”

I pulled it up, identifying the steel ring,

Spatial Holder(lvl requirement: 500) – A rare ring given out by Schema for accomplishing a great mission or deed. It is one of three rewards, each of them used for different purposes. The spatial ring can hold the user’s weight in kilograms and the volume of the person. You can activate the ring by pulsing mana into it. Once activated, the ring grafts to the user. No one else will be able to access the ring even if you die.

Your possessions will be funneled towards the nearest safebox if you die. Depending on your will, the items will be dispersed accordingly. In the instance of no will after death, the items will be auctioned off. Speak with any sentinel for the creation of a will.

Mana cost per kilogram added: 1% of mana and health used per 1% of weight or mass cap used.

Warning: Do NOT break open the ring and study it. Any tampering will result in an immediate S tier bounty and unknown status. Accidents will not be forgiven.

I glanced at the ring in awe. As simple as it looked, the sheer usefulness of it seemed ridiculous. A ring like this would solve Althea's ammo problem forever. After reading closer, the limitations came up. Since it was based on weight, Althea wouldn't be able to store much.

She didn't invest into constitution. Althea's reason was because it messed with her transformation abilities. Torix gave her the ok with her build, so there had to be some legitimacy to it. The mana cost was prohibitive as well. I could die if I tried putting a mountain or some shit into one of the rings.

Clearing up some of my thoughts, Kessiah tapped the ring, "These things are great for classes like us. It takes advantage of our high constitution. Your health regeneration means you can store consumables or something like that too. Yenno, cause you regenerate so fast."

I nodded, "What about this bounty thing?"

Kessiah blinked, "You mean the S tier bounty? Yeah, don't fuck with the ring. Unknowns like us sit around with C tier bounties no matter what. There's a world of difference between C and S tier though."

I frowned, "Like what?"

She stretched out her right hand, "For C tiers, you'll get the mid-tier bounty hunters. Their obnoxious, and a few of them can be dangerous."

She stretched out her other hand, "S tier bounty hunters send total monsters like Yawm running. That's a classification for only the highest crimes, like killing a sentinel for instance. Yawm's one of those bounties, and he'd be dead ten times over if he didn't have a sentinel's spear. Otherwise, the entire planet he was stuck on would already be glassed."

I winced, “Glasses?”

She clicked her tongue, “Yup. It’s an easy way to send a big message. Yawm would be considered an S- tier criminal. I’m a C+. Torix is B-. You’re probably a C-.”

I nodded, “Well shit...no wonder you and Torix want to get out of Schema’s system so bad. Immortal and always hunted, talk about a pain in the ass.”

Kessiah crossed her arms, “Yeah, it’s not fun, but I deal with it. That’s why I came here, to find a way out of that bullshit.”

She turned her eyes towards a wall of the tent. She wasn’t looking at the wall of the tent. It was one of those looks where your traveling through memories instead of observing something. She continued,

“But nope. I end up trapped on this hellhole with a total beast named Yawm. Fun.”

I shrugged, “I told Althea the same thing. You can look at it as a curse or an opportunity.”

Kessiah glanced at me, her eyes turning hard, “Oh, really? Please tell me how me being trapped here is in anyway a good thing?”

I raised a hand, “You could gain a Sentinel’s rights.”

Her eyes opened wide as I let the info sink in. I continued, “You can escape your bounty and unknown status with that. If you think about it, this is a golden opportunity, but only if you take it.”

Kessiah pursed her lips, looking like she tasted something sour. A moment later, the expression faded. She nodded her head, a begrudging sound in her voice,

“Huh...I suppose you’re right. That is a way out of this mess, and a way out of the rat race with Schema...Damn, I nearly forgot about that.”

I raised both my palms beside my face, making a tunnel for my vision, “Keep it simple.” I tilted my fingers forward, “Never forget the end goal.”

She nodded. She reached up her hand and ruffled my hair. She grinned, “Yeah, I’ll keep that in mind.” She glanced outside, “It’s about time I leave. Torix will bitch like there’s no tomorrow if I hold you up much longer.”

I grinned, “Thanks for the ring.” I glanced at the pile of miscellaneous stuff beside us, “Perfect timing for the gift too.”

She shrugged, “A thoughtful gift deserves one in turn, or something like that.”

Kessiah left before I lifted the ring and placed it onto the middle finger of my left hand. I channeled some of my mana into it. Spikes of the gray metal pierced into my finger. Strings of metal slithered through my finger before grafting to the bone. For a normal person, the debilitating pain would crush them to their knees. Being familiar with the sensation, I only winced.

Not from pain either. The feel of it was creepy. Imagine watching an assassin bug drain your blood. Sure, it probably won’t do any meaningful harm or even hurt. That doesn’t mean you want it to happen. I wouldn’t let something like that stop me from getting such a convenient device.

Once it grafted to my bones, it retraced back into the ring. A glowing red line appeared, the same color as my mana, at the center of the ring.

Coalescence finished. Access to 2850.8 kilograms allowed for Spatial Holder, C-137-Harbinger of Cataclysm.

I couldn’t tell if I should be impressed or disappointed at my weight. Based on what it was saying, I should be able to toss a car around with ease now. It made me wonder what Kessiah could really do if she tried with her blood arts.

I snapped those thoughts, willing the ring to open. In front of me, a ripple appeared. It was strange, something unseen shifting through my flesh and bones. Everything

rippled, my armor and the space near me as the portal opened. Surrounding the ripple, a shifting portal appeared. Our reality bled into the portal's edges, opening to a void.

Surreal and unsettling, I grinned at the feeling. It was familiar. Whenever Torix and co. opened a portal into another dimension, this same bizarreness took over. Curious as cat, I pressed my finger into the void.

My flesh erased. Even I felt the pain, causing me to wince. As I pulled out my finger, the white of bone and pale pink flesh looked back at me. A perfect cut was on my finger. As I pushed my weight into the portal, the portal used up my mana at the same pace. It turns out, the portal just becomes something that disintegrates me at the same pace as I enter it.

Lesson learned, I let my finger regenerate. It took less than fifteen seconds. As I moved my finger, the portal moved with it. No matter how I turned my hand, it stayed several feet away from me. I could move my hands and limbs to it though. The mechanics of it felt weird as fuck.

That's how it worked though. After I finished toying with the portal, I packed over five minutes. I focused most of the weight on rations and some other miscellaneous survival stuff. By the time I finished, my time was up.

I ran over to Torix's place. As I did, thoughts raced through my mind. Why does tampering with the ring cause such a stiff penalty? It made no sense, unless Schema was trying to hide something about the ring. Besides that, the mechanics for how the ring worked seemed oddly specific. Of course it could be a natural limitation, but I doubted it.

It was more like Schema didn't want you crawling through the portal. Either that, or he was hiding something where he used his storage.

I shook those thoughts from my head as I walked up to Torix's house. As I reached up into the building, Torix turned up to me along with Althea and Kessiah. He gave me a hard look, but he continued giving his breakdown,

"As I was saying, the rift you're entering is here."

He pointed at a map of Springfield. It was in the eastern side of town, somewhere I wasn't familiar with. It was on the other side of our camp too. Torix covered my concerns seamlessly as he spoke though.

"This will be far and away the longest distance mission we've made. That will buy you and Althea time as you both develop your skills. Our lack of movement will alert them. Having most of our missions on this side of town will pay us back with surplus now."

He turned to Kessiah "As those two are gone, I will whip the legion into shape. I'll need you to be a drill instructor of sorts during this time. I'll focus on other aspects, like the logistics during the operation."

Kessiah looked like she was about to tell him to fuck off. She glanced at me, bit her lip, then turned back to Torix, "Fine. I'll do it."

Torix's head swung back, "Really?" Torix coughed into his hand, dismissing his surprise, "Ahem, thank you Kessiah." He turned back to us, "You two have plans for your skills, correct?"

Althea and I nodded. Torix gave us the ok before clapping his hands together,

"Then let's set off." He turned to us, a gravity overcoming him, "You two...stay safe. It would hurt me dearly to lose either of you."

Althea bent down, blushing at the sincerity. I kept composure, but on the inside, I couldn't help but feel a bit warmed. Torix walked over, taking two stones from his robe. One was red and the other blue. He gave Althea the red one and me the blue one. He turned to each of us,

"The red is Aatrox and the blue is Kade. This will only work for about thirty minutes a piece. You will count as their summoners as well. Use these in your time of need."

Althea walked up and hugged Torix. Surprised at first, Torix grinned as he hugged her back,

"Keep safe Althea. Remember what I told you."

She nodded, pulling away before Torix tapped his map,

“Then it’s time to leave. Both of you, good luck in your venture. We’ll be ready to kill a follower when you come back.”

I grinned, balling my hand into a fist, “We’ll be ready too.”

Althea and I left, passing through the sewers. The colorful combinations of flowers and odd creatures melded into fanciful scenery. We passed it in silence, the pressure pressing down on us. Our mission clear, our minds ready, we passed by before reaching the destination thirty minutes later.

I was the vanguard, stepping out of the sewer first. Around us were old, small houses. They could be nice, but neglect made them ugly, like a beautiful painting covered in mud. Trees grew in the yards, already unmowed before the apocalypse. That gave them a head start the other suburbs never had. It gave the place less emptiness though.

More animals and wildlife thrived here. Less people fed the forests of Yawm, meaning more normal plants bloomed. Wildflowers grew along the edges of the roads. The cracks in the road, once a signal of being poor, allowed tiny blades of grass and flowers to peak through. What once was a symbol of being poor turned into something that gave it a second life.

The spawns stalked the insides of buildings still. Caked on blood and sun-dried bones baked under the midday sun as Althea and I sprinted through the city. We kept under shadows, dashing from brush to brush. My telekinesis stopped me from breaking through the scenery like tissue paper. Althea moved in absolute silence. Even with my hearing, I couldn’t hear her. Her build suited secrecy and silence.

It was a false silence built on the white noise of cicadas while we climbed up. This entire part of the town was built around a mountain. Once we reached the top of it, an enormous pile of sand was spread out over it. It was like the snow that dots the top of mountains, except heat and sand instead. The further up we went, the worse it became.

Once we reached a few feet from the apex of the mountain, a gaping, black chasm stretched into the earth. Brooding and black, it was a void. No named or other members of Yawm were here either. Strange as it was, it sure was convenient too.

We surveyed the area, checking for any hidden enemies. Finding none, we opened up our status screens and checked them one last time. The delay in rifts made checking through them cumbersome.

I found the 222 points given by the Words of Strength skill. Upon closer observation, the skill wasn't made out of the skills I expected. Unlike Torix's Words of Power skill, Words of Strength used Leadership in place of Debating. I chopped that up to differences in personality and style.

It's like the difference between a general that rides into battle and the general that stays behind the front lines. Different styles lead to different results, but both can be effective. Schema's system was a bit more fluid.

Still, it gave me enough points to dig deep into the Fearless tree. I already had 27 points in it, so putting the 222 tree points from the unique skill would put my one point shy of completing the tree. Having gained two levels in phaser during the travel, I had just enough points for the tree.

With that in mind, I invested the points all at once.

Some let fear consume them. Others conquer their fears. You are without fear. Skill gained! Fear Tolerance(lvl 1) – You swallow your fear like a bitter medicine. -1% to fear generation.

Your lack of fear will in turn evoke fear in others. Fear clouds the mind, preventing clear judgment. When surrounded by the masses, you weaken their minds while no fear weakens your own. Skill gained! Pressure(lvl 1) – There is power in your presence. Mental pressure exerted onto enemies is increased by the level of this skill.

Fears span more than just fear of the physical. Many fear failure, others fear success. What if I'm not good enough? What if I can't handle the success I've earned? You silenced those voices in your mind. Skill Gained! Confidence(lvl 1) – Confidence limits you more often than your potential will. Gives more accurate assessment of your limits with level.

There are many other fears in life. Some fear the unknown. They let uncertainty freeze them. They allow consequence to rule them. You are no such person. Rather, you see

opportunity in its place. Skill gained! Pathfinder(lvl 1) – You are only home when among the unknown. +1% to processing of new risks. +1% to planning speed when many factors are uncertain.

And the final fear is fear of suffering. Make no mistake, feeling pain and overcoming it are two different things. It is the act of pushing forward despite pain that creates tolerance. Learning to cope with pain is conquering it. You've learned this as well. Skill gained! Pain Tolerance(lvl 1)\*&\$%ERROR

Skill already known. Processing...Nearest breakthrough given in place of the reward. Breakthrough achieved! Pain Tolerance(lvl 100)—>\*&\$%ERROR

Maximum skill level reached. Processing...New reward tier achieved. Unique skill gained! Fuses the skills Fear Tolerance, Pressure, Pathfinder, Confidence, and Pain Tolerance into Dominating Presence. \*&\$%ERROR

Pain Tolerance is currently maxed. Skill cap exceeded. Rare variant given in place of common variant. Unique skill gained! Fuses the skills Fear Tolerance, Pressure, Pathfinder, Confidence, and Pain Tolerance into Overwhelming Presence.No tree points rewarded due to the nature of the skill's creation.

Overwhelming Presence(lvl 1) – The force of your mentality is made palpable. Passive mental pressure is amplified greatly by the level of this skill, enhancing influence and sway during conversation and battle.

The errors were weird, but outside of that, it looked like a solid tree. It was the first one to be based on skills instead of stats. Since my goal was to collect unique skills, I wasn't complaining. Outside of that, the skill made me feel different.

How exactly, well it's hard to explain. Have you ever felt the aura of a strong, powerful person? They walk with purpose. They hold themselves high with a humble pride. What they say is respected innately. They don't demand respect. Respect is simply given.

From me, that same kind of aura ebbed but with a greater intensity. Althea even noticed, though she might not have been aware of it. She just looked at me for a second from her status screen. She narrowed her eyes before glancing back. A subtle gesture, but it showed the impact the unique skill already had.

With nothing left for status screen, I closed it and tinkered with the skill. It was a passive skill, almost like the ability Cosmic Soul. The way the ability worked gave me some ideas too. My charisma wasn't high, but with the right investment, I could bypass that weakness.

The concept was simple. A person can influence people with strength and power. An easy example is someone holding a gun, pointed at your head. More than likely, whatever they have to say to you will be compelling. If I could create the same effect with skills like Overwhelming presence, then I could bypass my low charisma.

In other words, I make my influence on people become dependent on other attributes.

Satisfied with my status screen, I turned and waited for Althea to finish with hers. A minute later, she turned to me,

“You ready?”

I nodded. Not wanting to waste anymore time, I stepped forward into the chasm. Althea followed, each of us flying through the black fog. The icy sensation covered my skin before I detached from Schema's system. My HUD left me, opening up my peripherals. The fog lessened, showing rocks and a tunnel of light ahead. The tunnel tightened before I stabbed an arm into the wall of stone.

Harder than normal rocks, the gray brick broke as I dragged further and further down. At the bottom of the tunnel, the pathway curved outwards so that we could walk upright. Althea floated down behind me, wings already formed for the occasion.

I jumped down, landing on the stone. The air smelled sweet here. Ahead of me, a wall of white covered the entire entrance, except some sand beside it. I raised an eyebrow as Althea landed on one of my shoulders. A set of talons gripped on my shoulder, but they didn't pierce my shoulder. I held her weight with ease as I walked forward.

The wall turned less pale. Cracks and marks were few and far between, like a wall of weathered stone. I reached it, touching the smooth rock. I tapped against it, noticing a hollow ringing. I walked a few steps towards my side before reaching away from the stone. Behind it, a vast desert stretched outwards.

Like a lake of sand, mountains turned the horizon jagged in the distance. The sky was red, gray clouds floating by. I breathed deep. The air was sweet and clear. I walked out a few more steps, turning back where I came from. There was a pile of stones tall as a house. I glanced up, seeing the wall of white stone arch overhead.

It curved around the mountain, taller than trees. I glanced to my side, noticing the same white walls of stone set in a pattern. Over a football field away, a giant, pale stone was at the center of the white pillars.

A chill ran up my spine as my blood ran cold. These weren't walls of stone. That wasn't an immense, white stone either. These were ribs, and that was a skull. We were surrounded by the bones of a monster.

I gulped, "Holy fuck...So that's why the named aren't here."

Althea glanced down at me, "Why?"

I grimaced, "Because whatever monsters live here, they're too big to tame."

Chapter 74: Corrupted Ruin

Althea sighed, "At least we'll see them coming."

I nodded, "Keeping it positive. I like that." I turned towards the edge of the mountains. Unlike the other rift, there wasn't any obvious barrier. The red sky stretched endlessly, no white tendrils locking it in. The sand dunes stretched up high to the horizon, but we could see the end. It would take maybe a few hours to reach the mountain tops.

The goal was to reach somewhere with food, water, and shelter. Food and water was asking a bit much though. Outside of the immediate short term, the faster gained our skills, the quicker we could leave. With that in mind, I pointed out into the distance, "Can you fly high then check out the nearby area? Once we know what's around, we'll go from there."

Althea nodded, flapping her wings before shooting into the air. Her flight was a handy piece of utility, and maybe that was why she didn't invest into constitution. It gave her a level of mobility I dreamed of. To be fair, I could tank at least 100 times more damage than her, so it was a give and take kind of situation.

She careened into the sky, flying with ease. I took a breath. I didn't remember it being so hard just to breath. With each breath, that difference in density became clearer. I adjusted my breathing along with my rolling my shoulders. A couple pops ran through my back. I swallowed, my ears popping, the kind of pop you get when rolling down the window in a car.

My body weighed into the ground more, my own body pulling me down. My extra constitution and strength minimized the difference between this world and the last, but my perception made the difference obvious. This planet was bigger than earth for one. By how much, maybe a third more gravity. I clapped my hands, wondering if sound traveled differently here. It did. The echo created a visible wave through the air, echoing faster than on earth.

If it wasn't for my enhanced physique, I'd be breathing in a toxic atmosphere, denser than I could breath. Other planets may have environments too hostile for me. It would be hard to tell until I was there. Even if the atmosphere was corrosive, if it had oxygen, I'd be fine. I learned that during research some research with my obelisk.

I was curious about drowning, wondering what would happen. After all, if it inflicted damage, I might sustain that damage forever. Unfortunately, it worked differently. Drowning inflicted unconsciousness then growing % based true damage. I could sustain through about fifteen minutes without air, all while unconscious and underwater. Someone could resuscitate me during that time, but the true damage would eventually kill me though.

Seeing Althea float upwards, it made me wonder if the air was choking her a bit. She never complained, so I assumed she was fine. With how she drifted through the air, she didn't look like she was in pain. She looked free, circling higher and higher before taking a nosedive downwards. A few seconds later, she landed on my shoulder with her talon laden feet.

"The mountains are farther away than we thought. I flew up longer than I would need to on earth, which means those mountains are really far away."

I frowned, "Well fuck. Might as well get started."

She nodded, so I glanced at the sand surrounding us. No life teemed, not even the slightest wink of it. No wind slid through the valley either. Weird as it was, other marks

in the sand stuck out more than anything alive. Vast, massive chunks of sand were missing from dunes in the distance. It looked like something took a bite out of the dune.

Those marks scattered about, once every ten or so dunes. It reminded me of the Freedom Fighters incident. More than likely, I could take on any dangers here. That didn't mean I should though. Being more aware of my mortality, I kept cautious. I stomped the stone I stood on. Cracks formed underneath my feet, stone splintering up as my foot dug into the rock.

Grabbing a piece of stone the size of my forearm, I stepped forward and tossed the rock with all my might. It flew several dunes away before slamming on top of the sand. Sand erupted from the impact as Althea gripped onto my shoulder to hold on,

"What are you doing?"

My eyes narrowed, "Playing it safe."

A few seconds later, the ground pulsed. A wave of kinetic energy shook through the sand before a monstrous worm monster flew up and out of the ground. Larger than a football field, it snapped up the stone. Even without Schema's help, I could tell this thing was over level 2000.

As it passed, the jagged, coarse lining of its throat glistened with clear, crystalline teeth. They lined the monster's maw all the way down our line of sight. They shined red from the light, showing creeping parasites that lived in its throat. These bulbous, deformed, and horrible insects and slugs squirmed on the inside of it. Many of their eyes followed the sight of us, looking for prey.

Unlike the insects, the colossal worm shifted through the sand like birds swimming through the air. It took seconds for it to pass by.

Before it finished, Althea murmured, "Oh...good thing you played it safe."

I nodded. I needed to cross the desert without touching the sand, so I jumped up, landing on a telekinetic pad I created. Instead of diverting the energy beneath me and into the sand, I shifted it behind me. I made this second panel massive, which gave me enough resistance to stomp onto the first plate.

Using the density of the air to my advantage, each of my steps created a storm's worth of wind as I bounced forward. My feet snapped off the telekinetic planes, letting me bounce across the air. If I kept up with this level of stomping though, I would run into the sand eventually. I needed to stay up and off the sand without touching it, otherwise I'd be worm's food.

To keep it up, I stomped on the pads with my ascendant mana coursing through my runes. Without the enhanced strength, I couldn't keep up with the task. Creating new pads, each reinforced and stable enough to hold my stomping weight turned something that should be easy and turned it into something hard. The extra weight amplified the complexity of it. I adjusted to this soon enough, but the enormity of the task came down on me after a while.

Strengthening the panels for my stomping took a toll on me. For some damn reason, Althea freeloaded on my shoulders too, which sucked pretty bad after a few kilometers into the run. Her stamina wasn't like mine though, so reserving some strength was probably a good idea. Doesn't mean I wasn't a bit sour over the whole thing.

Once I got over myself, I learned that making a panel too strong wasted effort and mana. Making it just tough enough made the task much easier. Learning this required a bit of trial and error though. After reducing the strength by tiny smidgens for a while, I snapped through a plate. Before falling into the sand, I created another panel to prop myself back up with.

I stomped into the plate, struggling to keep myself from falling into the sand. Althea swung her wings, pulling me back upright. Once stable, I strengthened the panels a bit before heading out on my merry way. The only reason I even tried that was because Althea offered a safety net. As I got used to measuring the strength of the panels, it got easier and easier.

By the time the mountain grew in my vision, I was a certified pro at it. Glad to be near it, the immense mountain covered most of my vision by then. The whistling of wind glided across the top of the mountain. It looked like all the wind blew up high, near the top of the mountain. That explained why I saw bite marks on all the dunes.

Around the peak, a group of decaying birds flew across the sky, riding that wind. Metallic plates helmeted their heads, like their beaks never stopped growing and eventually covered them. Black drool leaked from their mouths, and a black aura radiated off their talons eyes. Black miasma created umbral contrails behind them, like

black smoke that faded. As they flapped their molting wings, pieces of flesh and skin falling from them. Beneath the flesh, tumors grew.

They cawed at us, flashing their talons towards us. We had a few seconds to watch them dive towards us. When the group slammed into us, I side stepped them while shot off my shoulder. When she met them, Althea ripped them apart with her own talons.

Her strength in her form shook the enemies to their cores. Each swipe held a certain intention, like something changed in her. She used to just flay her arms around, more to get someone away from her than to kill them. These new strikes, while wild and inefficient, were loaded with a vitality and frenzy in them. With her absurd strength, she sundered the monsters apart.

As she slaughtered them, I bounced back and forth on my telekinetic pads while catching and consuming the corpses. On the last bird, one of my panels snapped. I gyrated in the air before flopping onto the sand. I pushed myself up, running forward and snatching up the falling corpse of the bird. After my armor absorbed it, I sprinted forward towards the mountain.

Althea flew above me, so I ran up to the top of a sand dune before leaping. Once flying, she gripped her claws into my shoulders. I stomped my feet into telekinetic pads, going upwards. Beneath us, a wave shifted through the sand. We rose higher and higher, the rumbling surging beneath us. The vibration of the rumbling shook my hands it was so violent. A growl like thunder roared beneath us, a sickening gurgle following. We needed to hurry.

Changing tactics, I let the force smash of the telekinetic pads smash into my shoulders and stomach instead of the wind. The blows hurt like kicking a cinderblock with your toe. Not bad with my pain resistance, but it ate into my health. After a few more stomps, an entire dune exploded out from beneath us. Panicking a bit, I smashed my feet into the pads, spurring me forward. The new feeling was more like kicking a cinderblock and peeling your toenail back during the process.

Thank Schema for pain resistance. Panicking a bit herself, Althea flapped her wings with a burst of effort, letting me speed up just a pinch more. The worm reached us. With teeth the size of trees, the mountainous mouth clamped shut. The wind off its bite blew on my back as it bit through one of my feet. Several of its teeth cracked, but my leg tore off like biting through aluminum foil. With its prize in its mouth, it dived back into the sand.

The shrieking of shredding metal ebbed from its insides, like a trash compacter crushing a car as disappeared. I hobbled forward on my telekinetic pads, struggling for a minute as my foot regenerated. Once my leg was back, I returned to jogging. I sighed with Althea, giving her a much-needed rest. I moment later, I lifted an arm up,

“Thanks. You saved my ass there.”

She clapped my hand with a talon foot, laughing at the absurdity of it all,

“Yeah, I didn’t think they were that dangerous. They’re a lot bigger up close.”

I shook my head, “Hell yeah they are. Those worms must be level 3000. Hard to say. No wonder Yawm and his followers aren’t coming close to them. They’re ridiculous.”

She nodded, looking up at the mountain, “Let’s hope the other monsters aren’t as dangerous.”

I agreed before we fell back into the smooth motion of running on the wind. Once over the mountain, Althea jumped off my shoulders and glided beside me. I turned to her, “Why did you make me carry you?”

A bit of shame in her voice, she murmured, “My stamina can’t keep up with flying. It’s fun but exhausting.”

I nodded my head. She didn’t have the regeneration stats that I did, including stamina regeneration. That was something I took for granted often. Because of my endurance and the determinator tree, my stamina had never been and likely never would be a problem. Sometimes I felt the tug of exhaustion, but it never lingered for any meaningful length of time. Combine that with my high willpower, and I moved like a machine.

That may be what alienated Althea from me for so long. I kind of enjoy the thrill of fighting. She struggled finding any real reason too. Up till meeting us, her life was either being in a lab or bounty hunting. Battling twenty-four seven wasn’t much better. Thinking back on it, the way we met and the lifestyle she had led up till that point was unbelievably hard. It must have sent her spiraling into depression.

I already knew about all the good stuff outside of the drudgery of Schema. Althea though, she didn't.

A pang of guilt rippled through me. If I handled us meeting better, maybe even treated her with a bit more humanity, she'd be doing better. Not just more powerful, but happier and more content as well. I may could have saved Michael and Kelsey too if I gave it my all. The problem is, I would never know now. It was regret, and regrets have a way of growing with time. Maybe I wouldn't have heard that voice a while back either if I just thought things through more.

Those thoughts left a bitter taste in my mouth, so I vowed to think things through a bit more before acting. I may end up with better results with whatever I was doing, for me and whoever I was in contact with. Who knows, I might not end up falling into another eldritch's trap again either. Preserving my humanity was a plus too.

No matter how humane I acted in this rift, I doubt any of that would be given in turn though. We reached the mountain, landing on the hard stone with loud cracks. Althea's feet turned normal, her wings returning to arms. Since we met, those abilities turned from monstrous abominations into fully formed, working limbs. It looked like she studied the anatomy of birds and applied it to herself, making the transformations elegant and natural.

This newfound care amplified her skills as well. Making full use of those powers, Althea amplified her hearing as we walked towards the mountain. Her ears grew longer, twitching at slight sounds. As she glanced around, she looked like a blueish gray elf.

She led the way up the mountain. As we moved up the pile of brown rock, features popped up. Hidden crevices lined the mountain, each of them covered in something clear like glass. All of them angled towards the inside of the mountain. The uniform formation drew our interest, so we checked it out.

Althea and I crawled into one of the caverns without a glass pane over it. Along the walls of these crevices, sharp, clear crystals lined the rugged rock. Once we walked into the mountain, Althea kept clear of them, worried of nicking her clothes. No doubt we'd be here for a while, so whatever she broke, she'd have to live with. On the other hand, I just let them scrape me. The glassy stuff broke against my armor.

Once we neared the end of the tunnel, I was surprised at how well-lit it still was. The light never waned, no matter how deep we went. Once near the end of the tunnel,

Althea and I peeked our heads through the narrow entrance. Althea scooted closer to me than she needed to, but I didn't mind. I was too busy seeing the inside of the cavern.

Unlike the dilapidated ruins of the last eldritch cavern, this was a grand city. A cavern, miles long and wide, situated itself within the hollow mountain. Beams of light leaked in from crevices all along the walls and roof of the cavern. A realization popped in my head. The spikey crystals lining the tunnels refracted light, bending it into the mountain from outside.

Some of these beams met into other crystals in rivers and waterfalls flowing inside the city. From those sky-blue shards, a light blue beamed. Above the ruins and roadways tracing the city, lanterns of orange hovered. Within them, orange opals hummed a quiet sound. Combined with the gentle humming of the water's flow, and the city calmed me.

The buildings crushed that peaceful atmosphere though. They were built along a hill at the center of the hollow mountain. These buildings were warped in strange ways, doorways and staircases facing unnatural directions. Upside down, sideways, there wasn't any rhyme or reason too it.

Other houses were disfigured, stretched into wild shapes, like some nightmare given life. The pleasant sound of gems buzzing and water flowing took on an eerie tone because of this. It contrasted the ominous, empty buildings, like opera music blaring during a gory murder. The dissonance unnerved me, but it did worse to Althea. A bead of sweat fell from Althea's brow.

I wouldn't let a chill running up my spine stop me though, so I paced forward into the unknown. As I neared the city, I found bridges and walkways sprawled across the village. Using them, I passed a river before nearing the closest building. I glanced into the building, no doors or windows on it. Like the other rundown ruins, it was just plain rock with walls and a roof. You could hardly call them houses really.

Within the near empty buildings, markings and runes were etched into the walls, roof, and floors. While somewhat like the runic language of magic, these letters grated me more. They didn't seem smooth and easy to understand. Instead, the chaotic inscriptions felt beyond me. It was like staring at complex, mathematical algorithms. It all just jumbled together.

Intent on discovering what they did, I stepped into one of the buildings. The difference was palpable. It wasn't like stepping into a room with enchantments or effects. No, it

was like stepping into a different eldritch rift. The air surrounding me decompressed as the air pressure lightened. My feet lightened. Hell, the air lightened. Inside this tiny ass building, gravity was different. I waved Althea over,

“You got to try this.”

She glanced around, looking nervous, “I don’t know Daniel. This seems dangerous.”

I rolled my eyes, “Everything here is dangerous. Might as well have some fun while we’re at it.”

She pursed her lips, walking up to the doorway. She glanced towards one of the beams of light, “It’s pretty.”

I walked over and pulled her by the hand into the room. She breathed in, gasping at the sudden shift. She looked around,

“How....” She turned to me, “What in Schema’s name is going on?”

I shrugged, “Don’t know, but it’s cool, isn’t it?”

She nodded, a wide grin on her lips. I walked over towards a square patch of the wall covered in runes. Glancing closer, they seemed familiar. I couldn’t pin the similarity down though. I studied them while Althea hopped around, toying around with the shift in basic physics. I snapped my fingers,

“None of the letters are the same. On them are two different sets of layering, one for the curvature of the letter and another for the indentation...These are like Baldag-Ruhl’s runes, the ones he used to tear open dimensions.”

Althea turned to me, giggling as she moved her hand in and out of the building, “So what?”

I narrowed my eyes, “So that means these runes are causing the crazy shift we’re feeling.”

She turned to me, “Really? Those runes are doing all that?”

I nodded, “If you think about it, the runes for magic can cause massive changes in how something works. Who’s to say there isn’t a set of runes for something, uh...” I scratched my head, “Something weird like this.”

She frowned, “Want to explore the other buildings?”

I stood up, turning to her, “Hell yeah.”

We paced out of the room, gravity pulling harder once we left. We walked towards the next building over. Within it, something even odder happened. Time slowed. The sensation was strange and distant. All of the sudden, my thoughts went way faster than my movement. It gave a sort of trapping sensation, like I didn’t have control of my body anymore.

After glancing at the runes in that room for a bit, I turned to Althea behind me, “What do you think?”

As I spoke, my voice sounded much deeper. Althea busted out into laughter, but her voice deepened as well. I cracked up too, laughing my ass off at her gorilla voice.

I clapped my hands together, deepening my voice, “I am the evil lord Baldowah.”

The ludicrous voice made a nice combo with my waving fingers.

“Beware, little girl. I’ll destroy everything, even Torix’s bad habit of overly elaborate explanations!”

We laughed for a while before getting out of the room. From there, we explored many rooms. Some of them were fun and interesting. Some of them contorted reality a bit too much for Althea’s liking. For some reason, these places didn’t affect me, but they sent Althea reeling, like some drug induced stupor. Whenever I concentrated at the runes within these faulty areas, subtle inconsistencies formed.

I still couldn't quite get it, but the runes felt off compared with the other, more stable room's runes. The lines of them were too smooth, not structured enough. That lack of structure bled into the runes effects. After interrogating Althea about it, she explained that in some rooms the gravity and time shifts were consistent throughout. The rooms with messed up runes had crazy fluctuations from one part of the room to the next. It made the whole experience nauseating for her.

Unlike her, the runes didn't affect me unless they were pristine and perfect. My guess was that it stemmed from my immunity to corruption. The messed up runes corrupted the area. Flawless runes changed the area. It was like the runes were code for a computer. If you messed up even the smallest thing, you'd get all kinds of errors. Due to my immunity to corruption, the code I was made of wouldn't process those errors. I ignored them entirely.

I got the immunity to corruption a long time ago though, even before getting my armor. Considering Baldag-Ruhl made the armor with these runes, it affecting me meant this armor was perfect. Even though the incantation was massive, he made no mistakes. That bug man was smart as fuck apparently.

Those thoughts tumbled in my brain as we explored the rest of the ruins. Most of the buildings were messed up, but Althea still had a lot of fun despite that. She lowered her guard for a change, enjoying unique sensation each room offered. I couldn't blame her. It reminded me of going to a carnival and looking through a house of mirrors. Odd and strange, but a little bit captivating nonetheless.

Once we finished moving through the rooms, something like night time came through the room. The beams of light waned, and the orange lamps dimmed. The beams of light lessened. She and I enjoyed a dinner together, each of us chatting about the ridiculous rooms and new world. We ended the conversation when Althea Yawned.

Once she was asleep, I kept guard. I'm sure it made her feel better about the whole being in a different world thing. Once she soundly slept, I went into one of the corrupted rooms and studied the runes. So far, I only studied the perfect runes of Baldag-Ruhl in detail. While they gave a good idea of the finished product, I couldn't tell what got them there. It was like looking at a finished building. I couldn't tell how it was made from start to finish, just like I couldn't see how the perfect runes were created.

The messed up runes, however, were full of holes to see into. With that in mind, I found two rooms with similar enchantments, one perfect and the other corrupted. They both

warped gravity, but one of them, according to Althea, felt like walking on hills even on the flat ground. The gravity was that inconsistent. These two rooms were the base of my learning.

I took pictures of each room with my obelisk. After that, I analyzed the differences in the languages. I went back and forth between each of the rooms, deciphering what I could. After four hours of the searching for the peculiarities of each room, I made my breakthrough. I discovered a key fact about their similarities.

There were none.

I mean no exact similarities between the two. Some of the symbols were almost identical, but a few notches made a decisive difference. Anytime I attempted replicating them, all I got were duds. After another two hours, I gained a bit of understanding about them.

It seemed like two similar codes, just interpreted differently. One person was giving their take on the language, and the other a different take entirely. That meant none of the runes worked unless you wrote them through the same perspective as the person who wrote it. In order for the runes to work, they needed a consistent way of looking at the world. Otherwise, the inconsistent and incomplete world view made inconsistent and incomplete runes.

It made some sense. Magic runes required mana to fuel their enchantments. They structured the use of magic, giving it a specific purpose and form. These runes didn't bend magic. They seemed to bend the very fabric of reality, allowing for insane creations like these rooms. Someone would need a solid, fleshed out understanding of reality before they could tamper with it.

Since most of these runes lacked that, they resulted in unfinished incantations. Not only did the runes have to be accurate and precise, they needed a concrete view behind them. It was like visualizing a building before making it. I needed to have something in mind before I went off and made a building. Otherwise, the building would fail in a spectacular fashion. These runes mirrored that.

For me, I considered this realization a breakthrough. So far, copying and repetition failed as learning methods. Instead, I would try to get an idea of the runes by carving out my own runes. I would use these other sets as references, but I wouldn't copy them anymore.

That's what I did for the rest of the night. Carve, carve, then carve more, I found an empty spot of wall and etched until my hand should have fallen the fuck off. Each time, I tried to make the runes echo my own thoughts and beliefs more. These eldritch runes would allow it. The magic runes allowed echoes to form of memories and thoughts. With the eldritch runes, I could make the memories and thoughts real.

At least that was the working theory. As consumed as I was with the process, I didn't even notice Althea sneaking up on me. When she slapped her hand on my shoulder, I flinched.

She giggled a bit, "What are you doing?"

I turned to her, then back to my runes, "Trying to learn the runes better."

She raised an eyebrow, "Looks more like you're trying to imitate a crazy person."

I cupped my chin, "Maybe that would work. I can't tell right now."

She took a few paces back, "Aren't you supposed to be learning gravity magic?"

I facepalmed, "Ahh, yeah, I am. Fuck." I glanced around, "What about doing the training here? We don't have any extra food, but we have shelter and maybe water further down the line. Seems good enough."

She shrugged, "Seems pretty decent." She glanced outside for a second, "Perfect actually."

A grin slid up her lips, so I replied, "How so?"

She sprouted wings before flapping towards one of the exits, "I have to learn stealth. If I could fool the sandworms, then maybe I'll get a unique skill and finish my mythical one."

I nodded, “Having houses with different gravities is perfect for me too. Makes feeling the difference between gravities simple. We’ll set up shop here then. I have about three month’s worth of food. You?”

She landed on one of the crevices, her voice echoing through the cavern, “About two months. We should have about three if we can, I don’t know, filter the water or something.”

I already had a perk making me immune to disease, so we probably had at least 4 months total. I nodded before heading back up to the gravity houses. That’s when I set a schedule. During the mornings, I’d practice feeling gravity. During the evenings, I’d practice the runes. As I reached inside the house, I grit my teeth and clenched my teeth. I was in this for the long haul.

It was time to dig deep.

#### Chapter 75: Who Goes There

So that’s what I did. The priority turned to sensing gravity, even the smallest fragments of it. I had to learn to walk before I ran, so to speak. After brainstorming some solutions for a bit, I sat in a room with gravity that was slightly off. I cleared my mind, directing my attention to my senses. Instead of thinking about it, I would discover it over time.

About fifteen minutes into the venture, a notification popped up.

Data Upload...Delay of ten minutes for each skill and level up. Skill Learned!  
Meditation (lvl 1) – Clearing the mind broadens the senses. +1% to regeneration when meditating. Senses outside of sight enhanced by 3%.

The skill was just what I needed. Using it, I stretched out my other senses. Smell, taste, touch, the senses I had without any skills behind them were the first culprits for easy skills. Over the next three hours, I gained the skills Feeling, Smelling, and Tasting. Using the sense of touch, I attempted to feel the subtle fluctuations of gravity around me.

Overtime, the process became more familiar. Even the smallest object exudes gravity after all. Being able to sense that would make manipulating it much easier. I ended up creating a sort of scan of the room I was in, like creating a picture without my eyes.

The wind shifting around could give me an idea of where the windows were. I perceived the slight change in temperature from the top of my head and my feet. Hot air rises, and cold air sinks, creating a difference even over short distances. I opened my mouth, tasting the air. If I tried to focus in my senses, bits of the air would taste different.

It smelled different too. Homing in on each breath, I began noticing differences in the smell of each breath. Some were fresher, more loaded with oxygen. Other breaths were stuffy, like someone had breathed them. The subtle differences leaked into my awareness, but only if I magnified them with my enhanced senses.

A few more hours, and other sensations came into focus. Drops of water splashing in the distance, the flow of liquid, falling and shifting outside the room, I even perceived Althea's breathing from across the cavern. She tried keeping her footsteps quiet, but the rang out loud and clear as being beside me. Even the waves of sound became clear. Rocks and other obstacles muddled my image, but I pieced it together.

Sight of her surroundings came into focus. The stalactites dotting around her, the lamp floating above her head and its gentle hum, it came into my mind. Layers of this kind of perception came in, giving me a detailed idea of my surroundings. I tapped the ground, and that bit of noise gave me an even clearer picture.

I tapped my fingertip again, my awareness turning clearer. Over the next few hours, I tapped my fingertip against the rock. The wave of sound turned clearer, along with the shifting of air and temperature around me. I stood, relying on the new awareness. I walked around while tapping two of my fingers together. Relying on the timing of the sounds echoes, I walked around the room.

Within this room, many square blocks etched themselves out of the brown rock. Artificial and precise, these formations served no purpose, at least to my knowledge. Giving them one, I worked on avoiding each of the blocks relying only on the sense of hearing, taste, and touch. I bumped into more blocks than I could count, but I got the hang of it eventually.

For my efforts, I got a nifty little skill.

Data Upload...Delay of ten minutes for each skill and level up. Unique Skill Gained!  
Fuses the skills Tasting, Feeling, Smelling, Meditation, and Focus into Tactile

Cognition. Total points possible from these skills was 500. Half of the incomplete total is rewarded, 176 points received.

Tactile Cognition (lvl 1) – Others may have better senses. Few will use them better. Enhances information gathered from all senses.

That was my reward for one day of intense concentration. Leveling the skill would be difficult on my own. Fortunately, I had a partner who was working on a similar skill. That partner already went to sleep and woke up during my session. She was working on sticking to the cave wall without stabbing her hands into the wall. The results were mixed so far.

Walking up to her as she hung against one of the walls, I waved a hand,

“Hey, want to have an exercise.”

Althea turned to me, a grimace plastered to her face, “For the love of Schema, tell me it isn’t sparing.”

I rolled my eyes, “It isn’t. I was going to try using one of my new skills and practice it. You’ll try and sneak up on me during the meantime.”

Althea dropped from the wall, landing on her feet, “Uhm, that sounds fun. Working all by myself gets boring after a while.”

I nodded, “Tell me about it. We should schedule some stuff like this in throughout our day. It would let us be more productive while we work.”

She grinned, “Yeah, that sounds cool...So uh, how do you want to do the exercise.”

I pointed at a bridge over a waterfall, “I’ll sit there with my eyes closed, and you try to sneak up on me.”

She smiled, “You sure about that? That’s a terrible spot for listening.”

I shook my head, “I think it’ll be the exact opposite.”

Althea shrugged before running off into the city of abandoned buildings, “I’ll start over here. You shout when you’re ready.”

I nodded, running over towards the bridge. Three minutes later, I sat cross legged across the walkway of stone. Over the next few minutes, I surged the skill Tactile Cognition. Within a minute, Althea’s movements came up. She skulked closer, but she didn’t do so quietly. Her feet made a scraping sound with each step.

Whenever she reached past a house and neared my bridge, I shot out a telekinetic panel towards her. Not enough to slam into her chest, but enough to let her know I found her. She scoffed as I grinned with my eyes closed,

“I assure you, my eyes are closed even if the slit of my helmet isn’t.”

Althea sighed, “The slit’s closed. I know your eyes aren’t opened. It makes this hard to handle. How did you know I was here?”

“Your steps are loud.”

She frowned, lifting both hands, “Really? That’s what I’m working on the most.”

I shrugged, “Eh, practice makes perfect. Let’s hop to it.”

We continued the exercise for an hour. After a few mishaps, Althea learned that she wasn’t lifting her feet up enough. She was dragging her feet, leading to the scraping sound. After she discovered that weakness, she caught me a few times without me sensing her.

One hour of practice turned to three. Althea developed tactics for making less noise, like holding her breath. Her big breakthrough came after she made her feet the same texture as wool socks. Her transformation ability made her steps dead silent. I relied on her body creating ripples in the air afterwards.

She made her figure more aerodynamic, slicing through the air instead of pushing through it. Without the shift in the air, I focused on the temperature of her skin. She let off enough heat that I could discover her even without those other signs. Whenever she made her blood the same temperature as the air, I couldn't sense her. Even with all the will in the world, my ability couldn't find her.

The third time in a row that she caught me, she jumped for joy halfway through. I stood up,

“What's up?”

She giggled with delight, “I got a unique skill. It's called Stealth Form.”

I sighed, “Yeah, it's kicking my ass. I can't find you.”

She nodded, the grin still on her lips, “I know, right? It feels good to finally beat you at something.”

I rolled my eyes, “We'll pick this up tomorrow. I'll see if I can't catch up somehow.”

She grabbed her hands together behind her back. She leaned towards me, “Good luck.”

It would've been a cute gesture if she wasn't quite so deformed. Her reformations didn't bother me like they used to though. Probably because I was less normal now, in my own eyes at least. Thinking back on it, my own weirdness may have helped her accept this bizarre side of herself too.

We talked about that and the buildings during lunch. We ate our meals together, those events being a rare moment of rest and relaxation. After finishing the meal, I went off towards one of the rooms and tried figuring out the runes. Twelve hours later, and I carved out at least a dozen pages of the runes in excruciating detail. Didn't get much from it though.

My willpower kept me from going insane though, so I met up with Althea once more. During this training session, we changed things up a bit. I searched for her instead of her approaching me. We thought up the game with the intention of mixing up our use of our skills.

I hunted for her throughout the ruins, finding it more difficult than I imagined. For starters, using my Tactile Cognition skill while moving was much more difficult. Second, Althea's lightness made her like feathers with feet. Her new form made no sound, no heat, no nothing. No matter how much I homed in on my normal senses, I couldn't find her.

Repeatedly, she executed stealth attack after stealth attack. Without oppression as a line of defense, killing me would be a simple affair for her. Knowing that made my skin crawl. All the distance I made between us was closed in one fell swoop, all in one skill. It was humbling to say the least.

In my mind, the distance was huge. Reality came crashing down on those thoughts like a sledgehammer though. She just needed to use her talents more effectively to beat me. I wasn't the kind to take an ass whooping lightly though. Over the next week, we continued the game. With every loss, I honed my efforts. With every failure, I pushed my senses further.

During the morning of one of our exercises, a sort of awareness came over me. At the limits of my feeling, I sensed a pull on all sides. Subtle and small, the pull was so small, you could argue it didn't exist. It did though, I could feel it. The water followed this pull as it flowed. The buildings pulled on the roof as the roof pulled on the buildings. Off in the distance, Althea exuded this same pull as well.

Data Upload...Delay of ten minutes for each skill and level up. Skill Learned! Gravitation Sensor (lvl 1) – Most only sense gravity through its largest effects. You discern it through honing your perception instead of broadening it. +1% to accuracy of gravitational reading. +1% to range of gravitational reading.

Using this sudden sense, I shot a wave of telekinesis at her. She flopped backwards, her smile turning to a frown. She leaned up off the side of a building,

“How did you find me?”

I grinned, “Feeling for your gravitational pull.”

She raised an eyebrow, “Really?”

I nodded my head, “Yup. Good luck getting rid of that. Game over.”

And game over it was. No matter how little she evaded my other senses, she couldn't erase her mass and weight. It was impossible. She tried reforming herself into odd shapes to throw me off. It worked a few times, but once I sharpened my sense for gravity further, I found her every time.

Althea grew frustrated, but it was a different kind of frustration. She didn't just shut down and try the same shit over and over again. She widened her approach instead. Our game turned tense as strung wires as we both tried harder to outdo the other. Competition spurred our progress, creating rapid improvement from us both.

She tossed rocks and other objects once she came near to me, throwing off my new sense. She stretched herself out, flowing through channels of water to mask her mass and weight. Over the next week, she learned to disperse herself over wide areas. Utilizing the absolute maximum of her transformational ability, she stretched herself so thin that she felt like a thick patch of air.

As my awareness of gravity leveled, I gained the tools I needed for fighting against her. Once I was feeling my own pull of gravity with deep clarity, I attempted pulling it. Like a waking dream, the gravity around me relented to my will.

Skill Gained! Gravity Shaper (lvl 1) – Through a profound understanding of gravity, you've learned to wield it. Unlike most, you bend gravity instead of creating it. +1% to ease of manipulating gravity. -0.5% to mana cost to warp gravity. You may manipulate space-time up to your own current mass without a mana cost.

It wasn't some cataclysmic bending though. I tweaked it a bit, sending a ripple out. With another attempt, I rippled gravity once more. With a wide grin, I turned towards Althea's own gravitational flux. I was situated in a small alleyway, sandwiched between two houses. She approached from overhead. Althea made herself into a cloud that hurt like hell to breath.

It was a feat of her power that I didn't quite understand. Fighting her in the form though was almost impossible without using oppression. Telekinesis and punches had little to no effect on her. This new gravity magic hopefully would pack more of a punch.

I crushed my hands, sending a moderate pulse of gravity right at her center. The pull of gravity rippled out, pulling her cloud form inwards a little bit. I pursed my lips. I hadn't

maintained the field, so it only created a jerk rather than a steady pull. If Althea reached me, she'd condense behind me and put a hand knife against my throat. We considered that a game over.

With her being several feet away now, I reached out and clamped my fist shut. I sent out a larger, steadier wave of gravitation this time. Her form compacted towards its center, but without the speed I'd like. With further strain, I tightened my fist, making it hard as a ball of iron.

My mana burned as the pull-on gravity strengthened. Althea's cloud form came together, her normal form integrating from the air. Once Althea turned back into a person, she balled herself up into fetal position. Letting her go, I smiled. Pacing up to her, I put my hands on my hips,

"Counter achieved. Take that you cloud monster."

Althea sprawled out onto the ground. She pulled herself out and gasped, "What...how did you do that?"

I raised hand, forming a gravity well above her. The pull straightened out her back, removing the slouch. She frowned, "What the hell?"

I grinned, "I finally learned how to use gravity."

She looked up, "Woah...Cool."

I nodded, my hand relaxing. I created another well right above her. Taking my cue, Althea reached up her hand to the center of the well. She pulled herself up with it. Once up, I strengthened the gravity well. I lifted my hand, lifting her in the process. She glanced at me, her feet waving through the air,

"You can do this?"

I laughed, "Hah, Apparently I can. Let me see..."

I moved her around, jerking her through the air. I tried shifting her liked a rollercoaster, causing Althea to scream with laughter. Shifting her wasn't like using telekinesis. telekinesis pulled on me, shifting gravity didn't. Besides for that, it took zero effort to throw Althea around with the power.

After a few minutes of messing around with the skill, I could chain the wells to accelerate her to swift speeds. The range was limited though. As I made the fields further away from me, they grew weaker for the same amount of effort. As I made them closer, they became stronger. To combat this, I kept Althea turning into a circle around me. Once I got her going too fast, she yelled,

"Please let me down now. I'm getting nauseous."

"Oh...Sorry about that. Got caught up playing with the new toy."

I slowed her down with a few wells before catching her as she fell. I set her back onto her feet, holding her steady by her shoulders,

"There yah go. Hope it wasn't too bad."

She shook her head, smiling, "Honestly...it was pretty fun."

I let her go once she quite wobbling. I stepped back, "Do you mind if I try some stuff out with the gravity magic for a bit?"

Althea's eyes narrowed, "As long as you don't send me in circles again."

I shrugged, lifting my left hand and sending her off the ground with a gravity well, "Eh, who knows. We'll have to see how it pans out."

She threw her fists at me, smiling despite my teasing. I laughed a bit before trying to create a gravity well with as much pull as she had. After a bit of tweaking, Althea floated through the air, nigh weightless. She waved her hands, giggling like crazy at the new sensation. She waved her hands,

"This is amazing."

I grinned, “Yeah, it’s pretty damn awesome.”

Unlike telekinesis, gravity moved like I wanted it to. Molding it wasn’t some hellish undertaking. It was as natural and easy as blinking or breathing. Figuring out a few of the intricacies of it might take a while, but making the gravity wells took little to no effort.

With that in mind, I dispersed the field holding Althea. Instead of pinning her at the center tightly, she weighed back down to the ground slowly. With a bit of effort, I compacted the field of gravity. Althea jerked back up to the center, holding there tightly. Dispersing would only be useful for extending the outer reaches of gravity’s effects, not for much else.

I kept condensing the field before the familiar pull of burning mana started. A second later, Althea shouted out. I stopped the field before she landed on her feet. She shook her head,

“What did you do then? It felt like I was in a trash compacter.”

I frowned, “Sorry about that. I was trying to see how much I could condense. It seems like a pretty solid amount.”

She narrowed her eyes, pointing at me, “Test that on something like rocks. Keep the fun stuff for me.”

I nodded, “Sure thing. Want to try out the game again?”

She grinned, “Yeah, I think I have something new to try out.”

She disappeared from sight. I blinked, not believing my eyes. A second later she appeared beside me with a knife dagger against my throat,

“Told you. I can learn too.”

I raised my eyebrow, “Damn girl. You’ll be outdoing me here soon.”

She put her hands on her hips, smiling from ear to ear, “I researched animals on your planet, and I found something called a cuttlefish. It’s an octopus that changes color. With a few tweaks, I can do the same thing. With it, I’ll be able to beat the crap out of you soon.”

I jerked up both my hands, waving my fingers, “That is, if you can even stay on the ground.”

She reached towards me, but it was too late. She frowned before forming wings on her back. With a mighty flap, she pushed against the gravity well. Another flap, and she resisted even more. On her third flap, I canceled the first well and created another one in the direction she was flapping towards. She shot forward, stumbling across the ground a few feet.

I busted into laughter. Her expression soured, “Thanks a lot.” She dug her hand into the ground. A tentacle wrapped around me leg before pulling me backward. I slammed into the ground, echoing a loud boom before she stood up while laughing back at me.

“Hah! Not so fun is it?”

I pushed myself off the rock floor, chips of stone falling from my shoulders,

“Eh, I had that one coming. Another round?”

She nodded, giving me time to heighten my senses. The fluctuations of gravity became apparent once more. Althea’s pull came into focus, but more so, a set of breathing sounded off in the distance. I turned, seeing one of the tunnels beaming light from the outside. Someone in a gas mask with red tinted lenses starred at me in the distance.

At its sides two hooks were hanging. A cape draped down its slender shoulders, ragged and covered in holes. It tilted its head, curious instead of threatening. It raised a hand towards me, feathers covering its arm. With a talon at the end of its finger, it squawked at me. I raised an eyebrow. The thing lowered its arm, standing still.

Data Upload...Ancient Language detected. Reviving dormant directories...Message received and decoded.

“Come.”

## Chapter 76: To Make Clean

I leaned over, my stare hardening. I shouted, “Who are you?”

Althea frowned, glancing around for her rifle. Unable to find it where she last left it, she reformed her hand before aiming her rifle at the thing. It tilted its head again,

“I tell you to come. You shout. Violent. I pray for Gar’s son.”

Althea and I lowered our guards. I raised an eyebrow, but no one saw it because of my helmet, “What are you talking about?”

He pointed backwards, “Gar’s son come here. He take precious item. Try to sell. Get caught. To be prosecuted by owner.”

He pointed towards himself, “Hod is here to investigate. Will get to bottom of this. Yes, Hod will.”

He leapt upwards, the hooks at his sides shooting towards the cavern’s roof. They clipped into the stone, letting Hod swing himself and use his feathered arms to guide his descent. At the edge of the swing, the clips disconnected. He finished his swing like riding a pendulum. Before he touched the ground, he sent another hook into the roof.

Using this combination of swinging and gliding, he reached us over the next thirty seconds. At seven feet tall, the thin and lithe being exuded quite an intimidating aura. That’s even with his, uh, questionable intelligence. His gas mask protruded out, like a plague doctor’s mask in medieval times. His feet were bare, the talons long and sharp.

When he reached me, he bowed, “Hod glad you both here. Do either of you own metal thing?”

We both frowned at him. Hod's head rolled up then down in a big semi-circle. It was like he was rolling his eyes.

"The metal with carvings, like the huts here?"

Althea squinted her eyes, "You mean my rifle?"

Hod's masked face shot back into the air, "Ah, you call it rifle then. The rifle Garb's son took. Yours?"

She nodded. Hod pointed towards the crevice he entered from, "Come. I show you where he is. You both persecute as see fit."

I crossed my arms, looking ever so slightly down at him, "You're saying we have to give him a punishment or something like that?"

Hod nodded, "Yes. Part of tradition. Makes stealing hard."

I narrowed my eyes, "Why should we trust you?"

Hod shrugged, "No reason. You shouldn't trust Hod. Hod sneaky. Hod very clever. Hod not lie about this though."

Althea laughed a bit before I sighed. I tilted my head, "Where are you taking us?"

Hod pointed diagonally towards the ground. I frowned, "Underground?"

Hod nodded, "Surface scary. Drikah will eat you. Can eat whole village in one bite. Nightmares given life. Hod hate them. No, we live beneath them, where it safe."

Hod glanced around, "No idea why you two stay here. The ancients lived here long ago. They leave mess behind. No fun to enter room and vomit. Hod get nauseous in them."

Althea spread her arms, “I know right? Tell me about it.”

Hod raised a hand, “Ok. Hod tell you story about it. One time, Hod get-“

I waved off his story, “Tell us while we’re walking where we need to go.”

Hod turned to me, pointing a three fingered hand, “Harbinger smart. Good idea.”

I frowned, “Harbinger? How do you know I’m a harbinger?”

Hod leaned back, spreading his arms, “It obvious. You not like Drikah, Hod, or girl there. You something else...A walking omen.”

I glanced at Althea then back at him, “Uh...how so?”

Hod shrugged, “Hod not know how Hod know. Hod only know that Hod know.”

Althea giggled as I face palmed. I removed my helmet, trusting that this harmless idiot wasn’t faking it. The dumbness was a bit too genuine for that. Hod shot a hook towards the roof,

“Can you two keep up with Hod?”

We nodded, each of us preparing our different methods of movement. Althea shifted herself to her stealth form. Invisibility leaked onto her skin, causing her to disappear from all my senses. My own ascendant mana flared before I sprinted in the direction Hod was grappling too. As we moved, Hod spoke,

“Anyway, Hod tell story now. Hod walk into building. Bad building. Hod fall upward, banging head. Hod Hurt his head. Moment later, pull flip again. Hod throw up. Throw up fall all over Hod.”

Althea laughed a bit as he chatted away. Hod spoke like a chatterbox, a constant stream of bullshit pouring out of his mouth. Some of it was hilarious though, so I didn’t mind.

Neither Althea or I spoke that much unless we were doing something. Hod had a way of filling in the gaps, promoting a bit of pleasant chatter.

With his voice as white noise, we the edge of one of the rivers flowing downward. Hod pointed down the hole, "This is where village is. Follow Hod."

We nodded. Hod Ran through the cavern, his talons crunching into stone as he did. He wasn't quite as fast as Althea and I, but he kept a steady, controlled pace. Despite him sounding stupid, his eyes scanned his environment with the keenness like an eagle. I guessed that was his bird part coming through.

As we went deep into the cavern, the desert world took a different turn. Phosphorescent roots crawled around the walls, supporting the rock tunnels. Yellow sprouts grew between cracks in the ground. Tiny insects crawled in the shadows of green glowing moss. Silver scaled fish swam in packs within the crystal-clear water of the river.

The deeper we went, the richer the life became. Scaly lizards covered in heated, red scales breathed spurts of fire. Icy rodents would fight these lizards, each of them facing off against one. They huddled into crowds and watched single rodents fight the lizards, like some show of strength. Plants with sweet pools at their pits lured anything dumb enough to fall into them.

Flowers bloomed, though not quite like Earth flowers. These flowers shot out wispy tendrils, each of them fighting for mist. Little bubbles of water would collect on them, and bugs and small birds would collect these droplets of water. Pollen would catch on the insects as they did so, letting the flowers spread out.

The shift in scenery was unbelievable in comparison with the empty, dead surface. Understanding my confusion, Hod spoke,

"The ancients took life from surface. They give it to depths. The cataclysm came. It mess with the ancient's work. Drikah cover the surface. Sand drowned the seas. Wind stole the clouds. No more rain. No more water. Only here, in the depths."

Althea yelled as we each ran, "What's the cataclysm?"

Hod shook his head, "Hod not know. Hod wish he did. Hod would tear. Hod would rip. Hod hate the cataclysm. Hod make it suffer."

Despite the lack of eloquence, the hatred seethed in his words. I frowned, “Do you know anything about what it was, like who did it, anything?”

Hod stared forward, “Village know only one thing. What caused cataclysm not like Hod. It not like Drikah or girl either. It something else, like you.”

Hod turned to me, “The elders speak. They tell prophecy. They say that something not like Hod or girl or Drikah stole life from surface. They say it brought the Drikah. They say something not like Hod or girl or Drikah will give the sun back.”

Hod adjusted his movements to match mine, his speed falling in line with my own. He ran beside me,

“Hod hope it be someone like you. Did you come to take or give?”

I shook my head, “Neither. My own world’s being churned up and spit out right now. It’s not the best place either at the moment.”

Hod sighed, patting my shoulder, “Hod understand.” He pointed up, “Hod wonder. Is surface as bad as our surface?”

I shook my head, “Naw, it will be soon though.”

Hod clasped his fist, “Hod wish you good luck in journey. May Harbinger win!”

I couldn’t help but grin, “Heh, I sure as hell hope the same too.”

We reached into another cavern deep under the world. At the edge of a cliff face, we saw the entirety of the cavern. A pillar stood at its center, ebbing energy outwards. That energy crawled out of the pillar, leaking into the surroundings. Dense clusters of energy ebbed from the surrounding trees, gorging the plants with life. At the center of the pillar, a red core sat spiraling energy.

Althea whispered,

“Well...there’s the dungeon core. Wow.”

I nodded, “That is unfortunate. Like chewing into a shit sandwich.”

Hod turned to me, “What is so bad? The core gives us life. So what?”

I put a hand on his shoulder, “It’s nothing Hod. Where’s Althea’s rifle?”

He pointed towards a village. They lived within huts built out of the trees near the pillar carrying the core. In a staggered fashion, the village was built in tiers that ascended the pillars edge. Hod’s people didn’t need masks down here. They didn’t have a beak like I thought. Instead, it was a plate of armor over their faces that extended out like a beak.

It encapsulated upper half of their heads, covering a bottom jaw full of long teeth. Two glowing white eyes appeared on the edges of the armor. They didn’t have eyelids, and their eyes were perfectly circular. Hod pulled off his mask, showing the same empty eyes. The aura radiating from him was far stronger than the others. A scar ran down the edges of his faceplate, right at the center of an eye. He turned to me,

“Does Hod’s face scare you?”

My armor grinned, leaking a bit of ascendant mana, “Not in the slightest.”

I pointed back at Althea, “Now her face on the other hand-“

Althea shoved me before I could finish. She ran and jumped onto the edge of the cliff face,

“Try looking at a mirror sometime.”

I reached out a hand, creating a gravity warp at her. She already pulled herself out of range though. I sighed as Hod patted my shoulder,

“Do not worry. Hod think you both are ugly. No, not ugly. Hideous.”

I rolled my eyes before he ran and jumped forward. A hook fired into the ceiling once more, letting him swing his way over to the village. I followed suit, using the telekinetic panels to help me keep pace.

Whenever I attempted using gravity, the process didn't flesh out like I thought it would. Unless I burned through an exorbitant amount of mana, I couldn't get enough pull on me to move.

From what I could tell, a gravity well pulled from all sides. While I could manipulate the pull until it reached my own weight for free, the gravity well spread out the pull across all angles. This reduced the power of the skill tremendously. The way they worked right now, putting a well above me would pull about a tenth of my weight, maybe less.

Still enough to throw Althea around like a ragdoll, but not enough to do the same for me. This inefficiency doomed easy travel by gravity. Keeping the well in front of me was impractical as well. It was like balancing a basketball on one finger while running forward at a full sprint.

Using it with telekinesis was much more effective. Even then though, I could run faster on the ground than I could through the air. Practice made perfect though, so I ironed out the kinks as I tried keeping pace with Hod and Althea.

I caught up to them as Hod walked up to the central market place of the village. It looked like there was at least a few thousand here, enough to make up a population. Shop keepers sold a few trinkets in a town square. Off in the outskirts of the town, a few small farms were spread out. A few of them even had pools sectioned off, each of them loaded with fish.

As Hod approached the center of this whole fiasco, several of the town's children ran up to him. He bent over, laying his hands on two of their heads,

"Hod bring no gifts today. Hod bring friends instead."

The rag wearing children glanced at us with fearful faces. Althea squatted down onto her knees, waving at them,

“Hey little guys. I’m Althea. The big, scary guy is Daniel. What’s your name?”

The child hid behind Hod, “You...you are like the older Seekers.”

She raised an eyebrow, but Hod smacked his forehead, “Do not insult our new friends. Apologize.”

The kid teared up, “Sorry.”

Althea glanced at him, “It’s ok, it’s ok. You didn’t have to do that.”

Hod shook his head, “Hod knows you are ignorant. Hod do not blame you. Trust Hod when he says the child deserves a smack across his head.”

I put a hand on Althea’s shoulder, “Let’s let it go.”

Althea frowned, but she stood up before Hod pointed towards a larger hut. It was built into the side of the pillar holding the dungeon core. Hod announced his words,

“Hod will explain these two. They own the stolen metal. Hod brought them here. They enact judgement. They give Garb just punishment.”

Several of the nearby members bent their heads to us, saying, “Justice.”

It was a ritual, like giving someone a prayer. Hod walked over towards the shack, glancing up at it. He cawed, a primal, animalistic sound. A gurgling replied. Hod bent down to a single knee. The others followed. From within the shack, a deformed member of their species hobbled up.

Using a staff to support herself, a slender bird thing walked out. A giant tumor pulsed on her back, hidden by a thin sheet of fabric over her hunched back. One of her eyes pulsed with overflowing white energy. The other eye was covered in another bulging tumor over her head. She opened her mouth, drool falling from it,

“Bring them in.”

Hod nodded. He stood, turning to me with his hollow eyes staring into mine like voids,

“Hod must confess...Hod cannot carry you up to her. Harbinger too heavy. Hod just nodded to elder so that Hod would sound cool.”

Althea giggled once more as I facepalmed. I shook my head before running up and jumping towards the hut. The ground cracked as I did so, and Althea leapt up with a grace my weight couldn't match. Both of us landed at the same time, walking up to the deformed elder.

Behind her, other deformed members of the species sat there. I peered back there, curious about what caused it. The elder standing up at the front glanced back at them with me. She turned back to me, “You wonder why we are deformed?”

I coughed into a hand, “Ahem, uh, yes. Sorry if that's rude.”

She shook her head, “Of course you are curious. There is no sin in that. I am Jass. I will tell you. Come.”

She walked into the shack, so Althea and I followed. The other members looked worse for wear. Some of them just sat and twitched. Others stared into nothingness as if returning from war. Jass spoke as we walked,

“Elders are Seekers who have been to the surface for too long. We wear masks found long ago. They protect us from the surface's corruption. They do not protect us forever. Once the tumors begin, they do not relent. Not until after we have been consumed.”

We reached a doorway in the back. From it, feathers and an empty head plate hung. Jass opened the door, “Ever since the cataclysm, the air at the surface does this to us. We are locked here now. Our brethren are the mindless monsters you saw above.”

Remembering the vultures, I winced. Having your species turned into that...well, it would be just like what Yawm has planned humanity.

Jass took her time, walking down each step one foot at a time, “Upon the pillar, our idol drains the corruption. We elders stay near it, prolonging the inevitable. Hod will join us one day. He is brave, despite his odd way of speaking. He means well.”

A light grin traced her lips. She was like a grandma who was too stern to admit she loved her grandson. It pulled a bit at my heartstrings, I tell yah.

Jass reached the bottom of the stairs, reaching a room with shackles spreading out from an adult bird person thing. I turned to Jass, “What do you call yourselves?”

“Eltari. Here is Garb.” She pointed at Althea’s rifle in the corner of the room, “That is yours, I presume?”

Althea paced up to the rifle, reforming her hand into it. The elder’s eyes opened wide, “She is a shifter then? Impressive. The weapon suits her.”

A second later, and a layer of her skin grew over the rifle. From the skin, invisibility inked onto the rifle, making it disappear with her. I shook my head, “Jesus Christ. Ridiculous.”

Jass walked over to Garb, “You both decide his punishment then. What will you have done to him.”

I gave a hard glance at Garb. He was shirtless, showing what was underneath everybody’s capes. They had humanoid muscles, just in different proportions. The chest for instance, the muscle inserted all the way down his ribcage, creating a fan of muscle. Muscle piled onto his back as well, but his arms were stretched out and remarkably thin.

With a thick, muscled neck, the Eltari looked like giant birds of prey. They looked deadly and dangerous. I walked up, looking at him. He glanced up at me, speaking in a gruff voice,

“I mean no harm. I want food for family.”

The elder snapped, “You have no family. I will not let you lie to them.”

Garb stared to the ground. I turned to Althea, "What are you thinking?"

She shrugged, "I don't care. He won't be our problem after this."

I turned back to him, "Alright, if I hear you stole something again, I'm going to snap your beak off and shove it up your ass. Wherever that is."

The elder pulled out a key, walking over and unlocking the shackles. Garb walked up to me feet, "Thank you, walking nightmare. May your evil spread forever."

I rolled my eyes as I turned around. After walking back up and back out to the front of the shack. I glanced up at the pillar. Hod landed beside me,

"Hod also think it beautiful."

I pointed at it, "What would it take for you guys to give that to us."

Hod's glance turned hard. He seethed his words, "You would take our idol? Why?"

I shrugged, "Your planet, it's gone." I grinned, "I know a planet that still has a fighting chance though. That's only if you guys are willing to join the fight though."

Hod's glance lowered, his eyes cut into an angle. As he glared, he opened his hands and flared his talons, "Hod and the village will not let you steal. Hod will tear you apart."

Jass walked up to him and lowered his hands with her cane. She shook her head, "Now Hod, there is one way we may leave."

I raised an eyebrow, "What would it take?"

She pointed upwards, "You must Kill the king of Drikah."

I glanced at althea, "Shouldn't be too hard, right?"

Jass shook her head, “No, not her. Only you.”

My shoulders drooped, “Oh....Well then...how big is it?”

Hod murmured, “It’s shadow could swallow the sky.”

I turned back to Jass, “Mind explaining why I have to fight it alone?”

She puffed her chest, “She is like us elders, bathed in corruption. She will draw in our deformed brethren during your battle. If not for her connection with you, then the air would infest her lungs just as it has ours.”

She tapped my chest with her cane, “In you, there is purity. There’s a void, a kind of hunger that is impartial. I do not trust you or her, but I do trust that hunger.”

Hod snapped, “Hod disagree. How can elder give them core? Eltari die. Hod die. All die.”

She glared at him, causing Hod to take a step backward and curl up. She narrowed her eyes, “He spoke of his world dying, yes?”

Hod nodded. She continued, “Then if he can purify the king of drikah, he can purify this world. Simple, is it not?”

Hod nodded, “Yes elder. Hod sorry. Hod not mean to interrupt.”

She turned to me, “The King of Drikah always reaches the top of the sand first. You may have seen it.”

My shoulders drooped, “Yeah, the fucker tore off my foot. I have to purify that?”

She nodded. I glanced up at the core, a piece of me just wanting to reach out and snatch it away. I glanced at Hod then at the other Eltari. With a bit of training, they could

bolster our fighting force tremendously. Their mobility would be amazing in the sewers, letting them run their own strike teams to fight back against the quarantine area.

Not only that, but they seemed like good people. Primitive and a bit backwards, but all in all, fine people. Taking the core meant they would all die, every last one. Doing something like that, committing a genocide just to avoid killing a giant sandworm... man, I'd have to be the ultimate scumbag.

I glanced towards the ground, balling my fists. It would take time and a strategy, but I would manage it.

It was time to take down a gigantic motherfucking sandworm.

## Chapter 77: Groundwork

I turned to the elder, "Alright, I'll kill it." I pointed at Hod, "I'll need his help for training though."

Jass tapped her cane, "Done."

Hod turned towards the elder then towards me, "Why does Harbinger want Hod? Hod not able to kill Drikah."

I shook my head, "Sure, but you do know how to use those hooks of yours. I have something very similar that I'm needing to master. I'll need you to teach me how to use them."

Hod put his taloned hands on his hips, "Hod help how Hod can."

"Good." I turned to the elder, "I'll get to it then."

I turned, walking away. Before we left, Althea walked up and asked Jass, "Where does the water come from?"

Jass pointed upwards, "From the ancients and their cryptic language. How they do such a thing, I will never know."

Althea nodded, “Thanks. It’s safe to drink then?”

Jass laughed, “Hah, child, it is the only water left to drink. It does us no harm if that eases some of your concerns.”

Althea jogged towards us, waving by, “It does. Good luck with whatever it is you’re doing.”

Jass grinned, “May the corruption never take you.”

Hod, Althea, and I sprinted back towards the passage. I didn’t use gravity or telekinesis this time. I just ran since it was faster. Once we reached back up the caverns and back to the ruins, I called Hod over towards one of the more open areas.

Around us, the orange lamps hung over head, the gems buzzing. The ruins towered over us towards my left, the odd shapes making a strange background. The wind whistled through the cavern, complementing the beams of light.

With the cool stone underfoot, I walked up to Hod. One of the biggest problems with using gravity for flight was the difficulty of keeping the well in front of me. I figured that making and destroying wells would make this process simpler. Hod’s hooks worked a lot like that.

Drawing from his experience, I asked, “Here’s what I need. You know how you use your hooks right?”

Hod nodded, “Hod know very well. Hod use them all the time.”

I spread both my hands to him, “I have a method of movement very similar to it. Could you teach me how you swing and use momentum with those hooks?”

Hod shrugged, “Hod not see why not. Hod teach you tricks.”

He walked up to me, slapping the hooks at his sides, “Hod first tell you basics. Hooks work better when pulled near center. If you pull from top or bottom, you not move how you want to. You lose balance. When balance lost, head end up hitting rock.”

Hod grabbed his head, squirming around like he was in pain, “Head hitting rock is bad. Very bad.”

Hod stood up straight, “Harbinger may think Hod speak this way because Hod hit head. Not true. Hod tell story. Hod child of two seekers. Both seekers deformed. Hod end up deformed at birth, not from hitting head.”

I frowned. Hod slammed his chest, “Hod want Harbinger to know it no longer hurt Hod’s feelings. Hod learned something long ago.” He opened a hand to me,

“Hod not strong in head, but Hod strong in heart. A strong heart will give good friends. That how Hod friends with villagers, even when other seekers are shunned.”

He turned towards the ceiling, “Hod end story. Back to training. See roof? It like new ground when hooked. Remember, just because you have a new ground doesn’t mean the old ground is gone. It still pulls too. You must use both grounds to get where you need to go.”

I raised an eyebrow, “You mean the old ground as in gravity?”

Hod tapped the sides of his head, “Hmmm... Yes. Gravity still work from old ground. It pull you in, even if you get pulled away by hook. Whatever it is that pulls you, make it pull from your center. Keeps you balanced.”

I pursed my lips, “I’ll give it a try.”

I walked away from him, shaking my hands as I prepared myself. Burning a bit of ascendant mana, I created a gravity well above me. I ran and jumped up, making me fly towards the well. I reached out an arm, acting as if I was holding onto a rope. The gravity of the planet and the well fought over me, shifting the curve of my jump.

I reached out another hand, lowering the other one. As I did, the first gravity well dissipated and another formed in front of me. I kept it lower this time, like I was

shooting out a grappling hook to another wall. The force pulled me forward, burning a morsel of mana. I approached it before creating another orb in front of me.

After about an hour of trying out this technique, I gave up. Creating dozens of orbs for flight was just too damn hard. I needed another way of using it. I left Hod to do whatever it is he does, intent on finding another way of using the gravitation.

So far I created spheres of gravity. They pulled in from any angle and any side. This dispersed the gravity's pull, meaning I couldn't get much out of it. Using it more efficiently was the key to my success. Thinking up some other way of using it, I planned out a few theoretical techniques.

The first idea was making panels of gravity. Instead of the gravity pulling from all sides, it would pull from a single angle. If I got a hold of this technique, kiting the gargantuan worm wouldn't be impossible. I needed more mobility, and that wasn't coming from telekinesis or just running around.

I focused on creating a gravity well. I tried flattening it out, but the damn thing wouldn't respond. After a few more minutes of trial and error, I found that spinning the well caused it to stretch out into a disk. Once fully stretched out, I threw the gravity disk towards some water. It moved without the same resistance that wells had.

Once the gravity disk hit the water, weird stuff happened. The sharp side of the disk led towards the target, floating without any pull from the side. Once the disk hit the target, the flattened upper and lower parts of the well pulled from above and below. This pulled water before the disk dissipated. The water collapsed into the sunken in spots a second later, resulting in the water flopping. The next time, I sent out a much larger disk of gravity, one that required some mana to create.

I launched it towards the water, and the larger disk created the same collapse in the water. This time, the water dipped down before spiraling into a whirlpool. The whirlpool dug deeper into the pool of water before the disk dissipated. The dip in water crashed back in, creating a sudden spout of water.

Data Upload Complete. Gravitational Vortex(lvl 1) – By spinning a gravity well at high speeds, you create a flattened, two dimensional circle of gravity. +1% gravitational force of gravitational vortexes. +1% sheering of gravitational vortexes.

Raising my hands in triumph, I thought of a way of using my new skill. It would be situational under most circumstances, but something like this might be useful. An idea sparked in my brain like electricity.

I created another well of the gravity. I spun it, turning it into a flat vortex at the front of my fist. With a bit of effort, I tightened the spin, condensing the edges of the vortex. The vortex compacted further, reinforcing the power of the spin.

Following up on my idea, I placed the disk over my left fist. Walking over towards a rock, I stomped my heels and shot out a punch towards the rock, keeping the vortex aligned with my knuckles.

The disk pulled my fist into the rock and pulled the rock into my fist. When my knuckles landed, the vortex spun my wrist and the rock. Since my armor was so dense and hard, this pulling and twisting enhanced the destructive impact of my punch dramatically. Like a cannon echoing through the cavern, my fist destroyed the rock with ease.

I laughed like a maniac at the result. Mastering this technique and combining it with my telekinetic augments would give my punches even more oomph. I lifted my other fist, walking up to another rock. I placed another disk of gravity on my hand. This time I fired a compact hook into the side of the rock. When my fist landed, I stopped my wrist forearm from twisting.

This made the rotational force of the gravitational disk transfer into the boulder. Responding with explosive results, the boulder disintegrated. I pounded my fists together, laughing at a new rush of power. This would be the key to my next mythical skill, I was sure of it.

Combining the free pull of gravitation with the telekinetic augments, and topping it all off with the ascendant mana boost. It was a recipe for destruction.

Even better still, the skill would work seamlessly with Boundless Storm. Boundless Storm let me beat foes in close range with my sheer technical prowess. This combination of skills would result in a monstrous offensive potential loaded into each and every punch.

With that tenacious desire fueling me, I cut out the other aspects of my training. The runes could wait. I wanted my fists to blow shit up. All the constitution I stacked would come into play, allowing me to control my targets and decimate them at the same time.

Over the next two weeks, I practiced with the gravitational vortexes. Each punch required a new vortex to fuel them. That meant making them had to be instinctive, like a reflex at the end of each punch. I trained the technique relentlessly, drilling it into my head. By the end of my impromptu bootcamp, and two breakthroughs, the vortex skill was already level 67. With that level of mastery, I gained a unique skill for all my efforts.

Data Upload Complete. Unique Skill gained! Gravitational Augmenter (Apply gravitational augments even at full strength. Do so without needing mana.) 100 tree points rewarded for learning involved.

Gravitational Augmenter (lvl 1) – Others yield to the perpetual pull of gravity. You mold it into the core of your being. Enhances force and shearing from gravitational augments with level. Increases ease of use with level.

With the new unique skill at my disposal, I began using the gravitational augments with the telekinetic augments.

The two opposing techniques molded into a cataclysmic force. The augments amplified the force of the new vortexes in a way I never intended. You see, whenever my fist hits a telekinetic panel, the force bounces into it, transferring the force into a smaller surface area. As a result of that, my fist bounces back after landing on the pads. The gravitational vortex pulled my fist into the attack, resisting that backwards bounce.

That further enhanced the force of my attacks. My fists actually bounced back with greater force than before. The extra pulling in helped control the recoil however. As a result, my fists caused shit to explode, and there wasn't an unrealistic blowback. I could launch another strike immediately after despite this enhance recoil, letting my chain my strikes together.

The combination resulted in rapid flurries. I doubled my volume of hits, and they in turn doubled in lethal force. The synergistic effects turned my fists into lethal weapons. The best part was that I didn't need mana for the techniques either. If the telekinetic augments didn't exceed my strength, then telekinesis costed no mana. If the gravitational vortexes didn't exceed my weight, then they cost no mana either.

This freed me up to surge my ascendant mana through my runes. Learning to do all three at once took a long damn time though. Weeks faded into months, the training and time outside it an afterthought. During this time, I cherished my meals and evenings with Althea and sometimes even Hod.

I taught Althea the Tactile Cognition skill, figuring she'd use the unique skill well. The resulting payoff was massive. During one of our more intense training sessions, I used my new gravity punch skill. It countered Althea to a ridiculous extent. Even her cloud form couldn't do anything because the vortexes on my fists made her solidify.

Of course I kept the punches light, not wanting to kill her. Althea saw through my restraint, making her frustrated. She combined her strength and speed with her stealth, making her hits overwhelming. Even against my tanky stats, she did sizable damage. After that, she began running and using her stealth to disguise her presence.

Every time I came close to her, she would snap in a few strong strikes before dashing away. As she ran away, she fired shots from her rifle. Combined with her stealth, and I struggled dealing with the style of combat. Once I believed she might even be able to beat me with it, she collapsed from exhaustion. Once I walked over and helped her up, she grinned with sweat pouring down her face,

"I got it."

I raised an eyebrow, so she raised both hands while screaming, "I got a mythical skill!"

I ran up and picked her up by her waist, spinning her around. I shook her over me as I shouted, "Hell yeah. That's what the fuck I'm talking about!"

She and I jumped for joy, each of us ecstatic at our newfound spikes in strength. It was one of those moments you can't help but smile when you remember it. By the time we settled down, she and I were chatting away about the daily game. That's something I noticed since coming here. Althea and I had grown closer.

It wasn't awkward to sit beside her and just think anymore. She was someone I could just exist and be comfortable around. That wasn't easy to do either. I'm a jumpy guy, and I don't trust easy. The fact I could let my guard down around anyone was a breath

of fresh air. A part of me hoped it was the same for Althea as well. She deserved somebody like that in her life.

Still, I didn't let it steer my training off track. Twenty hours out of each day were dedicated to training. If you think about it, it was like I was training 3-4 times faster than a normal person. Combine that with the rift's time dilation, and I might as well have been in a hyperbolic time chamber.

Althea progressed even more than I did, at least relative to where we started. She didn't know much about her powers and only had one unique skill at her disposal at first. Now she had a mythical skill, one that complemented her powers to an extreme extent.

We weren't alone though. Hod visited us often. Dull as he was, he offered some insight into the Drikah's biggest weaknesses. The worm would jump out of the sand, open its mouth, swallow something, then dive back in. It never bit into its prey. The Drikah closed its mouth then let the pressure of the surrounding sand kill its target. Since it dived thousands of feet into the sand, that meant the pressure could crumple metal with ease.

Fighting it head on without Althea's help was pretty much impossible. Instead, I would kite it while using guerilla tactics. After evading its bite, I would strike it with an attack or two while covering it in oppression. Once it disappeared, my health and stats would regenerate. By the time it came back, I could dodge then unload yet another massive strike into it.

I doubt my hits would do substantial damage, but over time I could whittle it down. The main problem came with doing enough damage and being able to kite it. With that in mind, I homed in on finishing my new mythical skill.

Another month passed before everything clicked. During one of my training sessions, my runes were blazing. My augments, both types, were on point. As I shifted my steps, even the most complex patterns of movement came with intrinsic ease. No more struggling to use them together. They blended into an orchestra of calamitous havoc. With their fluid use in conjunction, I learned another mythical skill.

Data Upload Complete. Mythical skill gained! Fuses the three unique skills, Ascendant, Gravitational Augmenter, and Telekinetic Augmenter into a single skill, Volatile Carnage. Gives half of missing tree points from skill fusion. 121 points rewarded.

Volatile Carnage (lvl 1) – You spent your life governing the forces of this world. Now you turn them towards destruction. Increases efficiency and ease of use of augmentations from mana, telekinesis, and gravity. Enhanced by strength, constitution, and physical damage reduction.

I tested the new skill, enjoying the sudden rush of clarity. Before I gained the skill, I relied on my enhanced dexterity and willpower to carry me. The motions were just too difficult to do without them. Calculating each augment, chaining them together, using the right amount of mana for my runes, it took a lot out of me.

Now it was effortless. There was no need for calculation. There was no need for chaining them together. They flowed from my fists like a river made of mayhem. I could focus on using boundless storm with the skill now, making my movements evolve. From simple jabs to complex maneuvers, I dashed and ducked, weaving in strikes.

Distancing myself, assessing range, all the intricacies involved in close combat came together. After enjoying the new skill for a bit, I walked over to Althea. Since my training, she'd developed a unique skill of her own that involved flight. While not enhancing her power by any at all, it turned her mobility from good to excellent.

Instead of turning her arms into wings, she grew extra wings from her back. This gave her the option to fire in mid flight, but it increased the difficulty of the maneuver. In my own case, I tried using the gravitational vortex for flight. It didn't work out so well.

The gravitational vortexes pulled much more of my weight than the gravity wells did, about half of my weight. It took a lot of mana to make up the difference. Adjusting the vortex to counteract gravity while pulling myself forward was intensely complicated too. Combining it with telekineses made the process better though.

It just wasn't as effective as true flight. As I walked up, Althea's new, muscled wings wrapped around her as she rested. When she glanced up at me, she grinned,

"How's it going Daniel? Sounds like you've been trying to break the world over there."

I shrugged, "Eh, just trying to figure out how to hurt the worm. I think I got it now. Unfortunately, I don't know how to keep my distance. Sucks."

Althea frowned, “Ah yeah, you can’t just sprout wings and fly. Why not use that telekinesis and gravity magic? I thought that would work out.”

I shook my head, “They’re both great to help enhance movements, but they both suck at helping me do entirely new stuff. Flying with telekinesis is more trouble than it’s worth. Same with gravity.”

Althea narrowed her eyes, staring forward. I walked over and sat beside her. I leaned my elbows against my knees, “Something wrong?”

She shook her head, “Nuh uh, just thinking.” After a moment, she glanced at me, “Why not try the opposite of flying?”

I leaned back, raising an eyebrow, “What do you mean the opposite of flying?”

She stared forward, away from me again while raising two hands, “Think of it like this. Why can I fly through the air?”

I glanced up, “Hmmm. You have wings.”

She shrugged, “You could probably make wings with your armor too. That’s not going to let you fly though, is it?”

I cupped my chin, glancing back down, “Touché.”

I racked my head for a minute before slapping my left fist against my palm, “It’s weight.”

She nodded, “You’re just too heavy and too dense to fly. You must weigh ten times more than me at least. The air above us, it’s light like me, so I can use it to fly.” Althea pointed down, “The ground though, it’s too hard for me to claw through. Once I’ve dug a bit too low, I end up choking on the ground.”

She poked one of my armored shoulders, “Why not try to master the ground and I’ll master the sky. We’ll be like a dynamic duo or something.”

I thought things through for a bit. I already had the burrowing skill, and my armor and weight helped with it already. When fighting Bloodbull, I made my armor burrow me away from them. It's why I survived in fact. Instead of fighting against my weight and density by flying up, why not work with it and dig down?

I couldn't come up with a decent answer against that question. It made things clear. I stood up, "Hell yeah. That's brilliant." I turned to Althea, claspig a fist, "That's what I'm talking about." I ruffled her hair, making sure I was gentle and didn't hurt her, "Miss mokey over here has a trick or two up her sleeve, eh?"

She slapped towards my hand, but I lifted them over her. I stood two feet taller than her now, so it was easy. She threw a couple more playful swipes towards me, trying to grab my hand. I sidestepped and outdid her attempts to catch me. She fainted with one hand before flapping a wing behind me.

It caught my back, letting her pull me forward. She jumped up and grabbed my left hand with her right. I sighed, "Fuck. Alright, you got me."

With a glowing grin, she raised her left hand in victory, "Yeah, alright. Take that, Harbinger."

She unwrapped her wing and let me go, popping back onto her feet. Even when gripping my hand, Althea's strength amazed me. Whatever perk she had for it, it must have at least doubled hers. That was a good thing since she'd need to eventually kill a tree monster that was much stronger than me.

As if replying to my thoughts, Althea shook out her right hand, "Your armor is so hard. It makes rocks feel soft."

I nudged her, "I was just thinking you gripped my hand too hard. Anyways, when do you think we should leave? Once I kill the worm, I'm thinking we'll only need a few hours."

Althea deflated before trying to look casual, "Uh, let's take our time. No need to rush, right? We're facing Yawm here. He's a lot stronger than that sandworm anyways."

I shrugged, “Hmmm.” As I considered, Althea looked closer, as if waiting for my answer. I held her in suspense for a moment before smiling,

“Maybe killing a few more sandworms would be a good way to close the gap in levels. We can stick around for a while.”

Suppressing a grin, Althea waved at me, “Yeah, that sounds like the right thing to do. I have to level some too. We can’t just run back to Torix with the same levels as we had coming in. Can you imagine the look on his face?”

I stood up straight, sticking out my bottom jaw and lip, “Oh, why hello there. It’s good to see you two didn’t even gain a single level during your training. I suppose they changed the definition of the word while you were out. Excellent work in keeping with the times. Just majestic.”

Althea giggled at my Torix impression before I clapped my hands together, “Yeah, fuck that. Sounds good to me. I’m going to try and come up with some crazy burrowing move. Good luck with your flight stuff.”

As I turned to walk away, Althea waved, “Sure thing. We’ll eat lunch later though?”

I nodded, “Of course.”

I paced off before finding an empty slate of stone nearby. Not too hard with how large the cavern was. I dug into the stone, clawing with my hands. The stone relented to my gauntlets and fingers. It was like ripping into a brittle gel whenever my ascendant mana pulsed through my runes. I burrowed at a reasonable rate like this, but it wouldn’t be near fast enough to escape the worm.

Molding my armor, I created armor spikes from my hands. As the spikes pulled the rocks from in front of me, they pulled me forward. Each spike pierced into the stone then picked it apart towards my side, opening a path for me. In order to move forward, I pushed with my feet. It wasn’t the most efficient kind of movement though. To move fast, I needed to trim the fat off this style of movement.

With that goal in mind, I changed my armor a bit. A couple spikes reached off my shoulders, back, and helmet. They kept catching on the stone. To stop that, I molded my armor into a smoother, thinner form.

Working further into that, I made my head end in a sharp point. After that, I created long claws at the edges of my fingers. Sure, I looked ridiculous...ridiculously effective that is.

Awful jokes aside, I dived into the ground this time. As my head hit the stone, it cracked. My armor grew from my horned helmet, tearing through the ground. As it did, I pushed myself forward with my arms and legs. At this point, I moved as quick as a light jog. Nowhere near fast enough to escape good old sandworm guy.

So, I launched myself out of the ground and brainstormed for a minute. This time before I burrowed, I made a gravitational vortex at the top of my head. Whenever I dived into the ground, the pulling action was enhanced by the gravitational pull.

The vortex dissipated with a quick jolt, spinning me forward. I wormed my way through the stone, my armor cracking and cleaving it the whole way.

I was booking it now. Unlike when running, I had something solid for my gravity vortex to pull me into when burrowing. The air didn't give enough resistance, making a wind tunnel whenever I made the gravitational vortex to pull me forward.

The hardest part of either process of keeping the vortex in front of me. Whenever the vortex pulled the same amount of weight on both sides, then moving it was much easier. Flying through the air lacked meant one side was weighted down and the other wasn't. The rocky ground gave the grip my vortex needed so that I could move it with ease.

I needed more speed though. At this point, I crawled through the earth damn fast. I didn't need damn fast though. I needed ultra fast. This time when I went to burrow, I created telekinetic pads beneath my feet. Each time I stomped into them, I transferred that force into plates above my head. These new plates were smaller with reduced surface areas.

It was the same bullet technique I used for my fists, just tweaked a bit for traveling through the ground. With it, the ground above me offered almost no resistance. This telekinetic stomping destroyed the ground utterly, shooting me forward. The gravity vortex kept pulling me towards the broken ground, speeding me up further. During all that, I used my arms for adjusting the direction of my descent.

It was like I was swimming through the ocean, except the ocean was made of solid stone. Awesome.

Data Upload Complete. Unique Skill Gained! Fuses the skills Burrowing, Gravity Vortex, Soul Forging (Armor Molding), Telekinesis, and Stomp into the unique skill Earth Glider. Total tree points possible for fused skills, 500. Total earned from fused skills, 186. Half of unearned tree points are rewarded, 157.

Earth Glider (lvl 1) – Most swim through the air and through water. You laugh at their limits, choosing to swim through stone. Allows the user to swim through solid materials. Enhanced by constitution and physical damage reduction.

I dug around for a while, relishing in the new skill. It didn't leave tunnels or anything either. It was like I was sliding through the ground by churning it up then sliding through the mush. This let me use the the skill without causing cave ins.

Practicing that skill took priority. Over the next few weeks, I practiced the skill with my other kinds of combat. The first hurdle came from changing my armor quickly. To make the most of the skill, I needed to jump in and out of the earth all the time. Shifting the form of my armor took a bit of thought and practice, making the transition difficult.

The next step was learning to jump into the ground. In other words, digging with my feet first instead of my face. I couldn't maintain decent speeds like that, but hiding in the ground quickly was invaluable. I could already imagine it. Some monster bites at me, but I jump backwards and slide into the ground. They bite into thin air before I shoot back out, slamming them in the face with a hard punch.

Once I learned that, I worked on the transitions of the skill. Jumping in and out of the ground, all while swapping the form in and out for my mythical skills. While not quite perfect, I had enough fluidity that I didn't need to spend seconds transitioning anymore. The true test would be seeing if it worked in sand.

With that in mind, I crawled outside the cavern wall. Once under the red sky, I glanced at the sea of sand around me. Glancing back at the mountain, Hod fiddled on a patch of runes near the mountain. From the runes, water materialized out of nothing. The eldritch runes worked like that, casually breaking the laws of physics.

I shouted, "Hey Hod, can you help me out with this for a minute?"

Hod stood straight up, glancing around till his masked face met mine. He grabbed the side of his head, “Hod not know if he can help, but Hod will try.”

Using his hooks and wings, he dived down the mountain. Reaching me in seconds, he landed onto the ground near me. His talons crushed the stone beneath him. He was a surprisingly powerful creature, despite the way he acted.

I pointed at the sand, “I’m going to try and dig through the sand. I need you to save my ass if it doesn’t work out and the sand worm comes.”

Hod walked over, gripping my shoulders and lifting. With a bit of strain, he lifted me off the ground slightly. I raised an eyebrow, “What are you doing?”

“Hod seeing if Hod can lift Harbinger.”

He set me down, wiping a bead of sweat from his brow, “Hod can handle it.”

I frowned, “You sure? I can just go snag Althea-“

Hod brandished his hooks, “Hod use hooks. Hod carry harbinger out with ease.”

I shook my head, “You know what, I think it’s actually dumb as hell to put my life in the hands of an acquaintance. I don’t know what came over me. I’ll just get Althea to help me on this one.”

Hod’s shoulders drooped, “Daw. Hod disappointed, but Hod understand.”

After getting Althea to come out and watch over me. I prepared myself for the dive. At the edges of the mountain, a steep cliff around a hundred feet(thirty meters) tall towered over the dunes in the distance. I stood beside it, rolling my shoulders and cracking my neck.

Althea had her wings at the ready, just in case she needed to fish me out. Hod stood with his hooks ready as well. I sighed out my worries, knowing they could help me if things went sour. Like pulling out a tooth, I ran and jumped off the cliff.

It was time to see if I could dodge the King of Drikah.

## Chapter 78: Not As It Seems

The wind rushed past my face as the sand came closer. I reformed my armor, activating the Earth Glider skill. I sliced into the sand like diving into water. I shot through the sand, burning through it. The sand grazed against my sides, collecting heat over my armor. The friction built, my armor scorching me like a rope scraping your hand too fast.

With each stomp of my foot, a telekinetic burst detonated into the sand. Once I neared the surface, waves of sand erupted behind me in time with each stomp. As I flowed through the sand, a near deafening rumble came towards me. Using the unique skill Tactile Cognition, I used the vibrations to visualize my surroundings.

Even with my eyes shut, my sense of touch let me understand where the worm was coming from. Below me, a massive form shot towards me at an explosive speed. It was the King of Drikah. As it neared me, my ascendant mana roared in my bones. Sacrificing a chunk of my health, I empowered myself until my movement crushed the sand to fine powder.

The Drikah shot past me, missing by a few feet. The shockwave of his passing sent me flying. I flipped several times before finding the ground. I angled myself, slipping into the side of a dune. So far, so good. After another minute, the sandworm made another pass at me. Sacrificing a chunk of my health once more, I accelerated past his mad dash.

The Drikah flopped up and out of the ground once more. This time he belly flopped against the sand, detonating a titanic explosion. The shock wave passed through me, rattling my bones and destroying blood vessels. Blood spurted out of my eyes and gushed from my mouth. Even just being near the fucking thing was that dangerous.

Not letting the opportunity slip, I shot towards the monster before flying out of the sand. Like a cannonball, I collided with the monster and unleashed Volatile Carnage at my full strength. Even when I covered my ears, the thundering might of the blow left

my ears ringing. The impact shot into the side of the worm, causing the flesh of it to bend.

The monster's tough hide rippled on the surface of its skin, a heated crater forming in it. The collision ruptured through the hide at the crater's center, just large enough for my hand to be stuck. Before jerking my hand out of its hide, I dug my armor into the monster. As I jumped away, a chunk of the monster's flesh ripped out.

The Drikah roared, tossing its head back and forth. Killing it might not be as hard as I imagined it would be. Snapping like lightning, the Drikah whipped its head towards me. I dived into the sand and shot myself away. Before I escaped, another cataclysmic wave of force shot through me. More blood gushed from my mouth, ears, and eyes.

It wouldn't stop me. I still had 80% of my health left, despite all the damage. My body was made of tough stuff after all. I wasn't going to fight it head on right now though, so I evaded another of the monster's dashes. Before it came back, I flopped out of the sand like a dolphin coming out of the water,

I shouted, "Come get me."

Althea brandished her wings, shooting off the cliff face. Hod leapt forward, gliding on his wings. I drilled towards them, trying to reach the rock wall. I sensed things squirming near it. Thousands of smaller worms writhed there, awakened by my presence. When I focused hard, the way they awakened became clear.

The monsters were stony, solid blocks before reverting to starving grubs. That's why I hadn't seen or sensed them prior. They were identical to rocks when hibernating. Now fully awakened, they swarmed towards me. I wasn't worried. I expected as much from a boss this high level. I needed to keep my head cool and my pace level. Panicking would do me no good.

Easy to think, hard to do. The earth bending sound of the worm coming did me no favors either. The sound of flapping came into focus from overhead, so I shot myself out of the sand right towards the sound. Althea passed by me, gripping her talons into my shoulders like an eagle catching its prey. Behind us, Hod landed onto the sand, facing the worms.

I shouted, "What the fuck are you doing Hod?"

Hod yelled, “Hod killing larva. Less larva, less Drikah. Less Drikah, better world.”

I facepalmed before creating a gravity vortex in front of us. It helped pull Althea and me along, blasting a tunnel of wind at us. I stepped onto telekinetic pads to help turn us around as Althea flapped her wings like a crazed crow. We turned back towards the mountain, aiming to save Hod from his own lunacy. As we approached, Hod removed his gas mask. He spread out his arms and breathed in the toxic air.

The feathers lining his body sharpened and raised off him, puffing him up. His body expanded as his breathing grew rapid. The teeth underneath his jawline elongated and sharpened. The white of his eyes flooded with black energy, along with his talons and teeth, darkening them. The air around him sucked into his chest, slowly building him from a lanky bird and into a brute.

Hod slammed his hands together. In a deep, ragged voice, Hod roared, “Hod now know where you hide, little larva.”

He breathed deep once more, holding his breath as black drool leaked from his mouth. His talons expanded, drawing in the surrounding light as he dashed into the pack of monsters. He swiped towards the first larva, missing it because he attacked too soon. At least I thought he did. His blackened talons left streaks of darkness in the air that lingered like blotches of floating ink.

As the larva jumped towards him, the black streaks stayed afloat. Whenever the larva charged into the streaks, the black marks sliced them apart. The larva offered no resistance to the technique either. The perfect cross sections of the bugs could attest to that.

With grace, Hod weaved around his own black markings, continuing his onslaught. As he sliced again, the old markings disappeared behind him and new ones appeared where he sliced. He chained these formations together, utterly destroying the larva.

Within seconds, he butchered swarm after swarm of the insects. Here I thought we would have to save him. Instead of being a complete idiot, Hod turned into a total badass. As his rampaging continued, the rumbling of the Drikah roared in our ears. Time was running out, so I shouted over the chaos,

“We need to get out of here. He’s got things handled.”

Althea yelled, “Yeah. Let’s let him do his thing.”

Hod tore two larvae apart, drinking the blood as he thundered, “Hod will eat you filthy insects, just as filthy insects eat Hod Parents.”

When we passed by him, he glanced at us then back towards the ground. Around him, a sea of gore and shredded bodies covered him and the sand. With no larva left to kill, Hod nodded in satisfaction before firing a hook into the wall of the mountain. He turned himself around, breathing out all the toxic air he had held in. His awesome, badass form melted into the thin, spindly Hod I was used to seeing.

Combine the blowback from his deformation with the hook’s pull, and he bolted towards us like a racehorse smoking crack. Just as he gained speed, the sandworm cleaved the spot he was standing at. In typical Hod fashion, he ruined the epic performance in one fell swoop.

You see, he hadn’t planned out his landing.

He slapped into the stone wall like a bird slamming into a window. Before he peeled off the wall, Hod lifted his face back and stabbed his beak into the wall. Relaxing himself, one of his arms hung by his side, broken and limp.

Sounding like he was holding his nose shut, he whimpered, “Harbinger, lady friend, please help Hod.”

Althea dived off the cliff before snatching him off the sheer face of the mountain. Once he was up with us, I ripped off a piece of my armor. After straightening it, I carved out a few runes real quick. After charging it with my mana for a few minutes, I took two more strips from my armor and walked over to Hod.

He whimpered, holding his broken arm. Tears of white poured from his circular, blank eyes. They evaporated into a fog as he turned to me, “Hod hurt Hod’s arm.”

He held it up to me, expecting something. Honestly, I don’t know what exactly. Not wanting to betray his expectations for something, I frowned,

“This is going to hurt really, really bad.”

I grabbed his arm and jerked it into place. He howled before I pressed his arm against the straightened armor I made. Using the two other strips, I tied Hod’s arm in place.

The mana ebbed into his skin and bone, healing him through the power of the runes. It would take time, but making the splint out of metal ensured he wasn’t getting rid of it anytime soon. Hod sighed in relief when the aura leaked into his arm. He turned up to me,

“Hod thought Harbinger evil for second there. Hod thankful that Hod wrong.”

I sat down, letting myself fall against the rocky ground. It cracked before I crossed my legs and leaned back. I propped myself up on my arms,

“Alright Hod. First off, that was awesome. Second, what the fuck was it exactly?”

Althea sat down on her legs, folding her wings together. Hod peered down, propping his splinted arm into his stomach. He glanced back up at me,

“Hod sorry. Hod not want Harbinger and lady friend to hate Hod, so Hod hold secrets.”

Hod peeked at the sand dunes, “Hod parents were seekers. Hod mention to throw Harbinger and lady friend off track. Hod fail.”

Althea and I looked at each other in confusion. Both our faces went blank as Hod continued,

“Hod know it hard to believe when looking at Hod...but Hod parents very deformed. Harbinger and lady friend may not believe it, but Hod’s parents even more ugly than Harbinger or lady friend.”

Althea rolled her eyes before Hod gestured at the desert, “Hod born of corruption. Hod born as part of world. Hod draw energy from air that corrupt world. Hod build himself into part monster. Hod hold it in. Hod let it out when job finished.”

He scanned the dunes, “Hod not like other seekers. Hod drink the corruption. Hod use it as strength.” He turned to me, an almost sinister tone in his voice, “Just like Harbinger.”

A tense atmosphere passed. Hod stood, turning to us both. A second later, he shrugged, “Hod think this true. Hod not know for sure.”

I scratched the side of my face, sand falling out of my helmet, “You sure it was inherited from your parents? That shit on the seekers looks more like cancer than eldritch.”

Hod peered up, tapping the metallic plate covering his head. He raised the finger to the sky, “Hod have one other guess.”

He pulled off his cape, revealing a ragged, black long sleeve underneath. After taking the shirt off, he turned his back towards us. Across it, only a few feathers dotted his pale skin. A massive, intricate tattoo traced up and down his entire back. Beneath the tattoo, lines and lines of symbols were branded into his skin.

“Hod think it could be this. This last message parents left Hod. Hod still not read it...” He turned to me, “Ok, Harbinger force it out of Hod. Hod can’t read. Too hard for Hod.”

I stood up, shaking my head, “I don’t think this is a message.”

I walked over and glanced closer at them. The tattoo and brand both had been done multiple times. Upon the scar, different textures and depths of scarring were used. Combine that with the several colors of the tattoo, and it looked like a puzzle more than language.

I nodded, “Yup. This is what causes your transformation. This is like a variant of the eldritch runes.” I gave Hod some space as he put back on his shirt and cape. I cupped my chin, “Hod, can you tell me anything about your parents?”

Hod shrugged, “Hod know little. They die not long after Hod born. Parents not obey other elders. Parents disobey tradition. Village kill parents, throw them to worms. Hod angry, but parents tamper in dark arts. Parents write the language of ancients.”

My eyes narrowed, “You’re telling me they could write the eldritch runes?”

“Language of ancients, runes, Hod not know what it called. Hod do know runes evil. Runes brought cataclysm. Runes brought end. Now village suffer.”

Althea turned from me to Hod, “Does anybody, I don’t know, remember more about that stuff?”

Hod nodded, “Elders do. Hod take you. Hod even put in good word for Harbinger and lady friend.”

I nodded, “Then let’s go.”

We passed through the tunnels of rock. More life thrived the cavern until we reached the massive chasm the Eltari called home. Once inside, we headed out towards the elder’s shanty shack. Just like before, the village greeted Hod with open arms. Based on what I heard, most seekers were isolated and treated as freaks.

Despite that, Hod’s personality had a way of disarming people. Even I was a victim of that. So were the elders. Jass, the only speaking elder so far, walked out of her shack. When she saw us, she raised an eyebrow,

“You killed the Drikah?”

Hod shook his head, “Harbinger hasn’t. Harbinger getting closer. Not why here though. Harbinger interested in history of village. Jass smartest elder, know the most about village. Jass help Harbinger?”

Jass pursed her lips, her eyes narrowing, “If I must.”

I jumped up towards her, landing on a telekinetic pad that compressed my sides. I glimpsed at her, “I just have a few questions.”

We walked into the room full of other elders. The wheezing, sniffing, and medley of odors made the place less than pleasant. I was on a mission though, so I waited until Jass sat down on a cushioned seat that used old feathers.

I opened a palm to her, “Why do you kill people who know the ancient one’s language?”

The old seekers looked at me from across the room. Several of them sharpened their gazes. Many of them kept drooling as they stared at nothing. Jass sighed, “You ask questions that are hard to answer.”

I waited for a real answer. She glanced up at the ceiling then back at me, “Because the language caused the cataclysm.”

I leaned towards her, “How do you know that?”

She glanced around the room like she was looking for a way out, “It is a part of the legends told during mealtimes. The ancients discovered a language that could do things that shouldn’t be done. They opened a doorway that should never have been opened. What came through that doorway obliterated them, leaving nothing but their precious runes behind.”

She leaned onto her cane, “Their dabbling destroyed our people.”

I raised an eyebrow, “So you’re telling me you killed two seekers because of some myth?”

Her eyes hardened, “They both studied the language for ages. They ran experiments on living Eltari. On our people. They touted that they could create an Eltari immune to the corruption. They spoke lies about us being able to return to the surface safely. Our people have scraped by for many years by following our traditions. It is the exploration they so craved that caused the cataclysm.

I crossed my arms, “There’s nothing that verifies that though. You’re basing all this on that one assumption. That’s like building a castle on sand. It’s dumb.”

She coughed into her hand while the other elders shifted in their seats. I held firm.

She stared daggers at me, “We know it is true. We are not as primitive as you’d like to think we are.”

I rolled my eyes, “Come on then, let’s see it.”

She glanced at the other elders. She bit her lip then walked over towards a mat made of straw. She kicked it aside, exposing a trap door. She tapped it with her cane, “Look at it.”

I walked over, lunging to one knee and landing on a telekinetic pad. The trapdoor popped open from redirecting the force of the lunge, and I caught the doorway with a hand. Within were stone tablets and a pile of garbage, including the gas masks the seekers used. I glanced up at her,

“What is this?”

She frowned, “What remains of the ancients.”

I turned back to the piles. Inside were yellowed paper manuals. Some of them revolved around farming in deserts. Others explained how to collect water. They all revolved around surviving a desert climate. On the dozens of tablets were incomplete markings of the eldritch runes. I leaned closer, tapping the edge of one.

I clanked my teeth, “These are the tablets that Hod’s parents used.”

Jass nodded, “And they’re what caused the second coming.”

I turned to her, “The second what?”

“The second cataclysm. The sky turned from orange to red. The machines came once more.”

I squinted my eyes, “Machines...what did the machines look like.”

She bent over and took the tablet out of my hand, glancing at it as if staring somewhere else in time. She answered,

“There were three of them that came. Two of them wielded violet spears, covered in blue armor. They were covered in a blue aura and armor, and they covered their faces with masks. No eyes or ears or anything.”

I gritted my teeth as she continued, “The other was a giant with enormous hands and covered in black, except the shining steel over it. It glowed and hissed as it moved, and it would lift its hands and bend anything it wanted too with just its fingers. It had several eyes over it, and it made the sky change with gigantic squares.”

I shook my head, groping for possibilities. It had to be something else. I thought of all the eldritch I’d faced, but none of them fit the bill. None of the monsters in the books Torix gave me matched her description either. The resemblance was uncanny, from the violet spear to the dimensional shift using squares. There was only one thing that either of those could be.

I whispered, “Those machines...They sound a lot like a sentinel and overseer.”

## Chapter 79: Might

Jass leaned onto her cane, “Are they the Harbingers that came?”

I raised an eyebrow, “I don’t know exactly, but why are you calling them Harbingers?”

Her eyes and nose scrunched, the wrinkles shifting on her old face, “What do you mean why? They are bringers of change. You have that aura about you as well.”

I glanced back at the tablets. My eyes narrowed. The etchings and patterns on the tablets mimicked the markings of the runes. There was no difference in how they were

made, yet they held none of the world warping effects of the other runes. Picking one up, I turned to Jass,

“Do you mind if I take one of these?”

She glimpsed towards the ruins, then back towards me, “There’s no point.”

I waved the tablet at her, “I need this to figure out more about those runes.”

Jass walked over towards a chair, “I told you there’s no point because I’m going to tell you what you want to know.” She sat down,

“Those runes and ruins, Hod’s parents are the ones who created them.”

I sat down on a chair made of molded armor, a gravity well above me, and some telekinesis, “I figured.”

After glancing beneath me a few times, Jass just accepted my invisible chair and continued, “Ahem, as I said, they created them. Their tampering brought the...what did you call them?”

I opened my spacial ring, the portal looking like space as I shoved the stone tablets into them, “The sentinel and Overseer?”

She pointed at me, a quick flick of a gesture, “Yes, that’s it.” She leaned back into her chair,

“We killed the parents of Hod so that the machines would spare us. When they first came, the Eltari flourished. We had cities that touched the skies. We mastered flight, and we loved the sun as our eternal sister in the sky. Now we are trapped here, beneath the soil. I am the only one who still survives and remembers those times.”

She glanced towards a wall, staring into the distance, “I was a girl then. Our people had already discovered the language you saw within those runes. The machines didn’t take kindly to this knowledge. After they came, giant squares turned the sky red, and with

this change came the toxic air. Our people breathed it in, and no matter how advanced our masks were, the poison found its way in.”

Pain leaked into her voice, “I watched our people fall apart. It took less than a dozen years before we turned to nothing but shells of our former selves. Only our small, tiny enclave survived...All due to this core.”

The pain left her voice, “Now another Harbinger has come and wishes to create another change in our world. A younger me would have fought. This older self will just ride the winds of change. Where we land is fate’s decision.”

I shook my head, “Don’t go pushing off responsibility that’s your own.” I stood up, raising a tablet in front of my face, “It won’t do you any good. Regardless, from what you just told me, Schema fucked your planet up, all because of these little scribbles. The question is why...”

Jass sighed, “I only wish I could have known. Perhaps we’d still be at our former glory.”

I shrugged, “Eh, hard to say. Schema probably did what he did for a reason. Who’s to say harmless, weird rooms were the only things the Eltari were doing after all?”

Jass nodded, “Is that why you study the markings then?”

I waved my hand back and forth, “Naw, I want to know what my armor is. I’m searching for answers.”

She grimaced, “You might not like the answers you find.”

I rolled my shoulders, a grin leaking onto my lips, “I get it. Some doors are better left unopened. Worse still, some doors can never be closed. The thing is, I have a plan for just such an occasion.”

With a biting sarcasm, she frowned, “Mind sharing it with an old seeker? I’m always looking for bits of wisdom.”

I smashed my hands together, echoing a loud clank, “I’ll beat the shit out of what’s on the other side.”

A look of profound confusion covered Jass’s face for a moment. The pause passed, and the sardonic frown snapped. Jass relished a long, hearty laugh. After wiping away a tear, she pointed her cane at me, “Now I see why you’re a Harbinger. Just remember youngling. I’m old. Whatever happens, I don’t have to live with it.” She poked my chest with her cane,

“You do.”

I stood from my invisible chair, “I’m ready for it. Knowledge is never evil anyways. It’s who uses it that matters.”

I turned outside, “Speaking of which, I’m thinking about killing a giant sandworm soon. Wish me luck.”

She rolled her eyes, “Good luck then. I hope you get eaten. Would be good to see you humbled.”

I laughed before heading out. Jass had a quiet way of handling things, just going with the flow now. Either that, or she was just giving me control of the problem. It didn’t matter to me. I knew what I needed to do now – kill a motherfucking sandworm.

With that in mind, I picked up two more tablets and closed the trapdoor. After saying goodbye and heading out, I reached up the tunnels and back into the ruins. I used my skill Knowledge Maker to do so. It let me use my photographic memory with efficiency. It took quite a bit of effort to do so, but I got to the ruins much faster than running around at random.

Once up there, I planned on taking down some crows to power level. Taking the sandworm at my current level would prove arduous, so getting a bit of a power bonus would be excellent. Before leaving, I met up with Althea for a late lunch.

We met up on the eastern side of the ruins. Beside us, a waterfall churned the water into a pool of white water and bubbles. Beside the waterfall, the ground was flat, perfect for sitting. Beside it, Althea sliced the tops off two boulders, giving us a pleasant set of seats. The ruins weren’t eerie anymore. We’d been here too long for that.

The harsh light came into the room through the beams as we enjoyed a meal of rations. Sitting on the sliced boulders, I told her about the revelations from the elder's hidden stash. Once I hit the part where I mentioned power leveling, Althea gave me a sinister smile,

“You’re going to struggle with that.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Why?”

She pointed a thumb towards herself while puffing out her chest, “Because I killed tons of those bird monsters.”

I shrugged, “I’m sure you missed a few.”

Althea shook her head, “Nope. I flew for miles and miles and miles. I’ve been killing them the whole time we’ve been here.”

I scrunched my eyebrows together, “Wait, you’re telling me...No way.”

I glanced up at her, identifying her status,

Althea Tolstoy (lvl 1143) – An unknown who sports enormous strength and damage output, Althea Tolstoy has gone missing from the clutches of Yawm. Her build's exact specs are unknown, but she sports tremendous power in her rifle and during her transformed state. Her ability also gives her tremendous potential for creative solutions to problems. She's a very difficult opponent for most.

Her Achilles heel is her squishiness. Her natural bulk simply isn't optimized, so she struggles against tanky bruisers. Your current build matches up well against hers, just always be aware when you're near her. Her assassination bonuses are excellent and can make a devastating blow into a fatal one, even against your defensive specs.

I stood up from my boulder, “No fucking way. You’re over one hundred levels above me. What the fuck?”

She finished her last bite before throwing the empty tray to her side. She raised her hands, “Hahahaha! I told you that you’d have problems finding any of them left. And I mean any for like, fifty miles.”

I flopped back onto the boulder, “Fuck man. You got me with this one.”

As my ass landed on the boulder, I cleaved the rock in two before falling backwards. I raised my face and hand while the rest of me rested on the ground, “I’ll catch up yah hear?”

Althea giggled before walking up, offering a hand. She pulled me up,

“You’ll jump back in the lead after killing the Drikah anyways. I just didn’t want to fall too far behind.”

I scratched my nose, “Thanks, but that’s only if I can kill it.”

With a knowing grin, Althea placed her hands on her hips, “You can. I’m sure of it.”

I crossed my arms, “It’s weird having someone more confident in me than I am.”

She shrugged, “You have a history of kicking ass and, uh, taking names, right? No reason to stop now.”

With a dramatic tone to my voice, I uncrossed my arms, “I got to stay humble. I don’t know if I’m going to make it after all.”

I turned towards a beam of light, trying to finish off the melodrama. Falling for it, Althea took the bait. Althea reached up and placed a hand on my shoulder,

“Don’t worry. You’ll be fine. I believe in you.”

No longer pretending I was worried, I cupped my chin, smirking at her, “I mean who wouldn’t? I’m pretty damn awesome.”

With a playful shove, Althea snapped, “Ugh, you ass. Here I thought you were worried. Nope. You’re the same Daniel as always.”

She grinned despite her words, laughing a little. I shrugged, “I’ll be fine. No need in postponing it anymore either. Just a little nervous.”

From beneath us, the ground rumbled. Cracks formed on the ground before Hod’s face popped out of the rock between Althea and I. He glanced around,

“Hod not know where Hod at.” He peered up, “Ah, Harbinger and Lady Friend. Hod happy to see you two in good spirit. Hod sorry for interruption. Hod practice burrowing. Hod try shouting at ground to stay away from Hod’s eyes.”

Hod shook his head in deep disappointment, “Ground not listen to Hod. Hod saddened by ground. Hod thought ground and Hod friends. Hod betrayed. Hod back to ground. Hod will train ground! Hod Promise! Goodbye Harbinger and Lady Friend.”

Hod’s head disappeared back into the ground. I dragged my hand across my face as Althea giggled for a while. I turned to her, “Mind being my safety net again?”

She wrapped her hands behind her, “I suppose I can. Hopefully I won’t need too though. You’re heavy.”

We chatted, the both of us walking outside. Once out, the sun beamed down with harsh intensity. I walked towards the cliff before Hod’s head exploded out of the ground again. He pulled himself out of the ground,

“Harbinger trying to kill Drikah?”

I nodded. Hod walked beside Althea, placing his hands on his hips, “Then Hod will watch.” He turned towards Althea, “Hod make sure Lady friend not interfere unless saving. Must keep village trust.”

I gave him a thumbs up before turning towards the sand. I rolled my shoulders before doing a stretch or two. Althea yelled,

“Stop stalling.”

I kicked my feet back like I was stretching, but I scraped my feet against the ground. Bits of sand and rock flew towards Althea. She waved her arms, blocking some of the rubble. I grinned,

“Oh, sorry about that. Didn’t mean to spray rocks over you. Shit happens.”

She picked up a rock and tossed it towards me, “Just do it already.”

The rock bounced off my shoulder before I twisted my neck back and forth. I growled for a second, pumping myself up. After banging my fist against my chest twice, I ran up and jumped off the cliffside. My armor reformed. Air rushed past my face. My stomach floated as the top of a sand dune grew in my sight.

I sliced into the sand, shifting through the thick powder with my Earth Glider skill. Within seconds, the rumbling of the Drikah started. My armor sealed my eyes. I felt my way through the grit as the rumbling turned to a thunderous drumming in my ears. The drumming came quick before the enormous sand worm shot out toward me.

Activating oppression, I shifted the aura onto the creature, condensing the giant cloud into a compact tendril. At the same time, I surged my ascendant mana, using Volatile Carnage on my feet. The explosive power shot me out of range from the worm’s bite.

It reached the apex of its ascent, writhing in the air. Before the moving mountain fell, I turned in the sand before firing myself out of the sand. Like a giant metal slug, I collided with the worm and slammed my fist into its side. The force almost crumpled my armor, but it stayed firm as the worm’s hide dented. With my arm stuck in its side, I stomped my feet against it while digging my armor into the wound.

Tentacles of armor ripped out from under its skin as I shot off the side of the worm. A mist of blood sprayed on me, but it didn’t clog my ears. Hearing was all I needed now. With it, I crafted the vague images I needed. I no longer needed direct sight. I dived towards the ground before the worm roared like a thunderclap beside your ear.

The lumbering head leaned backwards as I traveled deeper into the sand. It arced towards me, crushing into the sand like a living meteor. As it did, I kicked my feet up

into the sand above me with all my might. The rippling impact from my feet met the impact caused by the worm.

The worm's overwhelmed my little kinetic wave of course, but my tiny impact acted like a barrier against his. It was kind of like breaking water tension before jumping into a pool, except breaking the tension of a kinetic wave instead.

Whenever the worm's wave shot through me, my bones and blood shook to their core. They held along with my blood vessels though. This impact shield resulted in halving the damage I received compared with before.

Armed with the knowledge needed, I weaved towards the side of the worm, dodging its descent. Again, the Drikah came up like cataclysm. Again, I dodged the monster's wrath. The worm's tactics never changed, but mine evolved, turning more methodical and efficient with practice.

The worm always slammed towards the most recent injury I caused. Instead of jumping straight away from the worm, I leapt off towards the left or right side. This prevented the worm from slamming as close to me, reducing the damage of its impacts.

The process of landing my leaping blows turned into a smooth, fluid motion as I practiced it. Gorgers of mana leveled, allowing me to fire the tendrils of armor into the monster faster. I created minute spikes on the bottom of my feet, giving me a solid grip into the monster's hide whenever leaping off it. I even dug both my arms into the monster's wounds, letting me further rend its insides.

Data Upload Complete...Skill gained! Aerial Strike (lvl 1) – Through practice, you've gained the skills needed to add weight to your strikes while in the air. +1% to striking power while soaring. +1% to striking speed while soaring.

The extra skill helped build the damage I dealt towards the worm over time. As I continued my onslaught, the worm's body became riddled with holes. Blood poured from the wounds. Instead of letting the blood build around our enormous arena, I soaked it up with my armor. I didn't want this monster using its body to reform like BloodBull had.

What if some unseen larva fed on its blood and evolved? I wouldn't take that chance again. Instead I covered my bases, making sure it didn't come back from those kinds of

wounds. Any blood I couldn't soak up, I disintegrated with oppression. How it got rid of the material exactly, I didn't know.

It worked well, however. Hours passed of this pattern. I sliced into the worm, executing on my plan and new skills. The worm never adapted. The red fountains that the wounds left behind covered the creature in its blood. No longer a sickly yellow, the red worm slowed its rising and falling from the sand.

As if fatigued, it turned from a devastating struggle into an eventual victory. I oppressed the creature, crushing it like a glacier. The once mighty beast's hide turned to a dry prune's skin, the wrinkling a result of its draining vitality. Time made the monster slow to a crawl. After what felt like an eternity, the monster collapsed into the sand. It no longer mustered up the energy to dive into the sand.

Large and exposed, I leapt onto the worm and tore into its soon to be corpse. I bathed in blood. I soaked in the thick sanguine, pooling into the flesh of the worm as I carved through it. The worm ceased twitching moments later. From there, I drained its vitality, piercing it with a dozen tendrils of armor that shot out thousands of needles.

Hours more passed. By now, a night already passed. I drained the creature of its life, slowly sapping it to nothing. Before it wilted into nothing, the skin dried and cracked. From the shell of skin, green scales gleamed beneath them. A snake ripped out of the dried shell, the thickest part of it the size of a bus. I tried stomping it, but the scales curved up.

From beneath the diamond shaped plates, horns shot out of the skin. It looked like a tentacle of spikes when it finished. One of the spines dented my foot and sent me tumbling. I flopped into the side of a dune, blowing sand in every direction. As the cloud of grit fell, I pushed myself back up and leaned downwards, ready for battle.

Feathers along the back of the snake shivered as it consumed the skin of its former self. Before the stretching maw of the snake even got an eighth the way done, I charged forward. When I reached the monster, I used both my mythical skills in conjunction. I slammed my feet into the sand, rippling force through it as I torqued my fist into the monster's emerald colored eye.

Like punching a crystal, the eye cracked and blew backwards. As it did, I grabbed the snake skin in its mouth, forcing it out. My armor devoured the shriveled skin, absorbing it to nothing as the snake swallowed the small part it had.

Crystalline blades expanded off the sides and belly of the beast once it swallowed. Its fangs turned violet in its pink mouth, the teeth radiant and shimmering with power. A unstable humming ebbed from the mouth as a violet liquid leaked from the fangs. Sparks of violet lightning shot into nearby dunes, glassing the nearby sand.

With the scorched glass fizzing in the background, the snake hissed as it shook its tail. From the tail a curved, crystalline blade expanded. With the same violet energy and aura emanating from the center of the blade, the tail whipped back and forth. The air whistled with the volatile energy of the blade.

The entire time the snake tried intimidating me, I was absorbing the snake skin and charging my runes. They swelled with energy as the monster hissed and did all its dumb bullshit. By the time it slithered over towards me, my runes pulsed with the radiant energy lying within them. No longer able to restrain the lightning within my own runes, the fervor of ascendant mana coursed through my blood and bones.

My own sparks of lightning arced from my forearms, chest, and legs. My armor shivered, having feasted on the skin of the snake. The dormant energy within filled my health, giving me a massive pool of mana. With the energy building in my hands and arms, my hands shook with an eager violence. The full frenzy of battle coursed in my veins, thicker than molten lead.

The gem viper brandished its fangs towards me, the air squealing around its fangs. An aura leaked from me, a pounding, oppressive aura. I glanced up at the monster. The violet energy was familiar. It was arcane energy. No matter how beefy I was, the serpent could kill me with it. I grinned at the sight, my armor forming jagged teeth, red mana vibrating the air near me.

I'd like to see it try.

## Chapter 80: What Follows

The viper struck towards me. I stomped my feet into the sand, extending my grip with a telekinetic wave. The snake's strike blurred through the air, faster than I could see. Its fangs pierced through my armor, pumping the vicious venom.

Without pain, I kept steady despite the injury. Without fear, I retained the intent of my blow.

As my insides corroded, overwhelming power discharged from my runes as my fist collided with the back of the snake's throat. A tectonic boom echoed across the open dessert. The dune beneath us disintegrated as the shockwave blew the sand away.

A hole punched through the viper's throat. An enormous explosion of energy fragmented the brains of the monster out the back of its skull. The crystalline fangs jutted in off, random directions after the impact. As the viper's body blew backwards. My own arm shattered. The bones crumbled. The skin ruptured. The armor sheared. My shoulder melted from the inside, the venom corroding me.

I fell into the crater my punch created. After landing, I turned behind me. My arm was twisted and contorted, bending backwards. The limb looked like it just got caught in a meatgrinder. My shoulder was dislocated, some of my organs melting. Several of the arteries in the shoulder snapped, nerves and tissue shearing on impact.

I couldn't feel the actual arm anymore. In my mind, it was a blessing.

However, I could still feel the armor that coated the arm. Instead of wincing at the bit of pain, I reached out and molded my armor. I didn't wait for the limb to heal. I actively worked to make it regenerate faster this time. I untwisted the armor, turning my arm from a pretzel back into its normal shape. I reset my bones, piercing my flesh with spikes of armor to hold them in place.

Once finished, I bent the armor to seal up the ruptures on my skin. I molded my armor to block the acid from melting further into my flesh. Each time I made an adjustment, my health jumped up. This enhanced my healing process. Controlling my armor let me do crazy shit like that. As I healed my own wounds, the snake processed its own. The head whipped back and forth, confused and searching.

It hissed, spewing the toxic venom around it. Whenever it landed on the sand, the grit melted into glass while violet thunder sparked off it. The snake never saw my strike coming. It probably thought I wouldn't be able to muster up enough strength to do damage. Oh, how wrong it was. A few arteries pumped blood out from the back of its head, speeding up that eventual death.

By the time it understood it was going to die, I clasped my once broken hand, good as new. I grinned at the monster, my armor following suit. An aura came over me, reaching out to the monster. As I stepped towards it, the monster scrambled for escape.

The monster's eyes met mine, and its iris dilated. The monster heaved for breath. It tried escaping. It feared me.

I rolled my shoulders, catching up to the snake with slow, measured steps. There was no need to rush. The blood pumping from the back of its broken skull ensured that. As I reached it, the monster tried crawling into the sand. Before it disappeared, I grabbed the tail and pulled it out. With one tug at a time, the snake revealed itself.

Whenever I pulled the head out, sand stuck onto the back of its head wound. It turned its face towards me, shooting the arcane venom. I ducked under the purple liquid, reaching up with my left hand. My fingers pincerd its mouth shut. The venom passed harmlessly over my head. I raised a my right fist above the monster, its eyes darting around in their crystalline shells.

Before my strike landed, the monster whipped its tail towards my throat from the right side. The crystalline blade glistened in the sun as I pulled the monster's head down. Molding my armor and leaning over, the blade hit the upper part of my right shoulder at an angle. My armor guided the blade up and over my head, diverting the strike. Before the tail whipped back, I turned on my heels and unleashed another blow.

The sand around us exploded, firing the coarse powder in all directions. The muffled echo radiated into the distance. The scales on the snake fractured like slamming a ceramic plate on the ground. My punch punctured through the snake's tail, causing the back of the monster to explode. The gravitational pull from the punch threw the monster off balance.

The light around us dimmed, a shadow growing from the snake. A blanket of black covered us before the reptile opened its eye towards me. Brighter than the sun, the beams of light singed my eyes before I stumbled backwards off reflex. The snake snapped its jaw towards me. Using Tactile Cognition, I visualized the snake's movement off the sound and shifting air around it.

Ducking down, the bottom of its jaw skimmed past my shoulder. I rotated on my heels, firing a catastrophic uppercut into its upper jaw. My ascendant mana roared as I did so, sparks of lightning firing off the impact. A deafening boom radiated through the dessert as the snake's jaw snapped. The sickening pop of breaking bones was music to my ears.

The mangled tail whipped towards me again. The air whistled as the speed of it tore through the air. It was plenty enough sound to see with Tactile Cognition. I dashed into

the tail, causing the measured strike to miss. Wrapping my left arm around the tail, I pinned the writhing tentacle to my waist. With all my strength, I turned the snake around.

Using a gravity well to help pull it along, I turned the snake in a spiral. Before I could toss it, the monster tightened its grip on me. From all angles, the lithe, muscular animal constricted my breathing. The coils pressed from all sides before I opened my mouth and chomped into the snake. My armor shot out spikes in all directions, turning the monster into a pin cushion.

It snake jerked away from me, blood pouring from all its wounds. As it writhed away, its slit irises stared into mine. I grinned along with my armor, pacing towards it like a reaper. With the blood loss catching up to the creature, it fumbled on the sand before I charged at it. With my mana shimmering red, I clashed with the creature's next bite.

I slammed my fist into its nose. It lashed out towards me, but I timed another compact hook into the side of its face. The punch cracked the crystalline eye. It opened its mouth, firing venom at me. I blocked the venom with my left arm, the acid melting me. Without pause, I reached my right arm down its throat. I dug my fingers into the monster's esophagus. It gagged, but the tendrils of my armor already invaded its body. It was over.

Using my armor teeth, I bit into my acid soaked left arm and peeled the melting armor off. With the acid off me, I gripped my left hand and raised it above the snake's face. I slammed the fist into the emerald colored scales, intent on bathing it in red.

With each hammer fist, I converted the snake's elegant scales into mush. The emerald green scales turned crimson and carmine as the structure of its face devolved. Once it stopped squirming, I jabbed my other hand into the carcass. Gorged of Mana sapped the flesh as I glanced at my notifications.

Data Upload Complete...Skill gained! Discharge (lvl 1) – Using a built up source of mana, you unload with extreme energy. +1% to power of Discharge. -0.5% to recoil of Discharge.

Data Upload Complete...Skill Gained! Active Recovery (lvl 1) – By binding your wounds and assisting recovery, you enhance the speed of your health regenerating. +1% to regeneration speed when actively recovering.

Data Upload Complete...Ouroboros, King of Drikah( lvl 2312) Slain! Level ups will proceed over ten-minute intervals. Level ups registered, 347 total. Estimated time for full download: 2.4 Earth days.

Data Upload Complete...Level up! Level 998 achieved.

I hadn't quite achieved level 1000 yet. It would take days for all the levels to pass through probably. Instead of checking my status screen hundreds of times, I went towards my trees. What was there was interesting.

[New Trees Unlocked!]

[II Obliterator(Kill a boss over 1000 levels above you, both before level 1000, while alone, and without previous assistance like items or consumables) [0/2,500] | Killer of Titans(Kill a monster with over 1,000 times your own mass. Constitution over 1,000. Star Matter perk unlocked.)(0/1,500)]

After reading them over, another rank in Obliterator was the obvious choice. Besides that, the tree only let me get the bonus if I was below level one thousand. Normally that would have been impossible since I would have immediately gained the levels outside of this rift. Inside the rift though, the time delay let me unlock it.

Before missing the time limit, I selected the Obliterator tree. From all the skill training and what not, I stockpiled quite a few tree points over the long run. Since unlocking fearless, I gained 1004 skill points. Most of that was from unlocking my mythical and unique skills. With that stockpile, I poured them into the Obliterator tree.

To another plane, you've ascended. Below you, the crying of others echoes in your ears. They shout at your hard work and sacrifice, "Why should he rise and not I?" They choose not to see the time and energy devoted towards honing your strengths. They only peer at your current self and not the mountain of corpses you stand upon. 500/2,500 milestone reached! Obliterator bonus unlocked (Tier 1) +25% to total experience gained for levels and skills. This bonus is multiplicative with previous bonuses, not additive. +2 attributes rewarded for every 5 levels over level 1,000.

The corpses you stand on are not of enemies, however. They are the weaker versions of yourself. You culled them, no longer letting their weaknesses live within you. You didn't stop at the surface either. You dug deep into who you are, carving out even the tiniest traces of frailty. What grows back in place of this weakness is a pure and

palpable strength. 1,000/2,500 milestone reached! II Obliterator unlocked (Tier 2) +50% to total experience gained for levels and skills. This bonus is multiplicative with previous bonuses, not additive. +4 attributes rewarded for every 5 levels over level 1,000.

Months of training night and day resulted in this. I gained the next level in the most powerful tree I owned and gained two tiers in the tree. Combine that with a surge in levels, and it was a short and sweet kind of bonus too. While ridiculous and powerful, the bonuses didn't need a ton of words to get that across. The simplicity of it satisfied me to no end.

After relishing in the new tree, I checked out the snake. Its body already disintegrated. The monster left three things behind, however. The first was a giant clump of the white crystal, violet energy emanating from it and all that. The two fangs were left as well, still soaked with the violet venom. The sword tipping the tail radiated a few meters away from me too. All in all, the monster gave me an enormous haul of loot.

It was one of the only monsters to leave anything behind. The high level was probably why. I wouldn't waste it though. From what I could tell, the violet energy was like a consumable. Once it discharged, the only thing left behind would be the crystal. While somewhat sturdy, my armor left cracks in it. For me, it was nearly worthless.

The energy lying within wasn't though. It was arcane energy, a kind of attack that did percentage based true damage. My mind raced with potential, mainly different ways of killing Yawm. If I could unload all the volatile energy lying within these artifacts into him at once, killing him might not be impossible after all.

With that in mind, getting the artifacts was the priority. I grabbed all three of the crystals, holding them beneath my arms. I sprinted across the dessert, leaving nigh nothing behind from my epic fight earlier. Whenever I reached the others, Althea already flew down from the sky towards me. She landed beside me,

"I can't believe you actually pulled that off."

I shrugged, "I'm actually a little bit disappointed. I thought it might be harder."

Althea's brow scrunched up, "What do you mean harder? It took you three days to kill it. Three days."

My jaw dropped a little, “Really? I thought it was twelve hours or something like that.”

She shook her head, “Not even close...I guess it would be hard to tell time with your eyes covered like that.”

I tossed the large chunk of crystal towards her. She caught it as I smiled, “Sustain is my middle name. It’s my specialty. Also, we got to carry these crystals. I don’t have the room in my ring.”

Althea turned and leapt onto the rock wall. I followed suit. One of our arms held the snake’s artifacts while the other let us crawl our way up the stone ledge. Althea chimed,

“Crazy though, being able to fight for so long. It’s like you’re a machine with no batteries. You didn’t even get hungry.”

Noticing a rumbling in my belly, I frowned, “Naw, I’m pretty damn hungry. Once we reach the top, I’m stuffing my face with some rations.”

She frowned, “We only have a few packs left. After this, we’ll have to start eating the villager’s food.” She shuddered, “What is it they eat, rats and worms or something?”

I frowned, “Yeah, not my idea of appetizing. We won’t be sticking around much longer. We got what we came for. A bunch of levels and skills. Maybe we didn’t close the gap entirely, but we shouldn’t be burdens anymore against followers. Yawm on the other hand...well he’s a different story altogether.”

She glared at the wall, boring a hole through it with her stare. After a few seconds, she snapped herself out of it,

“Sorry...I just really, really, really hate that guy.”

I raised an eyebrow, “You know him?”

She shook her head, “No, but I know a few people that knew him. Mainly scientists. From what I pieced together, Yawm is one of those people that doesn’t mind sacrificing a few people. He runs the whole thing, but he, I don’t know, closes his eyes to what he doesn’t want to see. He doesn’t look at the bad parts of what he’s doing.”

I blinked a few times, pausing my ascent, “You mean he thinks he’s a good guy?”

She grimaced, “Yeah. Who was it...That’s right, Hitler thought he was a good guy too, right? Everyone thinks they’re the good guy. Doesn’t meant they are. Yawm’s one of those kinds of people. He has good intentions, but they don’t work out. From what I’ve seen, he does more harm than good. Even then...”

Her hand crushed a bit of stone, “He doesn’t think about the people he’s stepped on to get where he is...people like me.”

The seething hatred there was deep as dark water. I sighed, “That sucks...”

Althea’s words stuck out in my mind. They pierced like daggers for some reason, and the reason why was at the tip of my tongue. As the feeling grew, I realized why. It was because I kind of did the same thing to her when we met.

When training with her, I didn’t pull any punches. I let her have it. Even after all that, I stepped on her to get where I am. This whole time I believed Yawm was the bad guy. If I analyzed the both of us for a minute, there wasn’t much different about the two of us.

Maybe in the scale of our actions but not at their cores. I killed that one guy, choking him to death with telekineses. Why? Just to make sure I lived. I might have lived anyways. I killed all the freedom fighters. Why? To make sure I didn’t die or kill the planet.

Maybe I could have saved a few of them. I didn’t even consider the possibility in the moment though. I did the same thing with Michael and Kelsey. I stomped on them like they were dirt beneath my feet. They weren’t people. They were inconveniences.

The more I thought about it, the worse I felt. After crawling up for a moment, I said,

“Hey.”

She looked at me, her anger at Yawm melting, “Hmm?”

My eyes turned to the ground beneath us in shame, “I uh...About how I treated you when we met...I was in a dark place. It was uh...I don’t know. I was wrong and...”

I grit my teeth before sighting. I looked up, meeting her eye, “I’m sure it hasn’t been easy for you fighting all this time. I didn’t make it any easier for you. I treated you like dirt, and I’m sorry about it. You deserved better.”

A bit of emotion leaked into my voice as I continued, “I don’t know...I just had a passing thought just now. How I treated you...It was a lot like how my father treated me. I didn’t, no, I don’t want to be like him. I want to be better, a better person than him, a better man. I haven’t really been that kind of person up till now. I want to change that...Maybe this is a good way to start.”

The thoughts tumbled into my head as I spoke them. It wasn’t the kind of announcement you think about before you make it. It was raw and rough and not too pretty to hear either. The thing that made the little speech different from a normal one was that it was genuine. I wasn’t putting up some front or guard. I just opened up for the first time in forever. Hell, I didn’t really mean too.

I glanced away after saying that, crawling up the cliff. Althea didn’t reply as we meandered up the sheer face of rock. Once we reached the top, Hod was asleep, leaning against a rock. He snored loud as a bull while I set down the sparkling artifacts beside him. The whole time, an awkward tension formed between Althea and me. Who knows, maybe it was all in my head. I was too embarrassed to think straight.

I sat down and opened the spacial ring Kessiah gave me. After pulling out the last three packs of rations, I opened my helmet, pouring them onto my face. The milky liquid seeped into my skin like a potent poison, except with nutrients instead of some venomous cocktail. Seconds later, Althea walked over, standing in front of me again. She looked back and forth, awkward as I was.

She tapped her thighs before biting her lip. She said, “I’m sorry too.”

I leaned back, my nose scrunching up, “Wait a second...About what?”

She opened her palms to me,

“This whole time, I thought you were going to kill Yawm by yourself. I was hoping I wouldn’t have to do anything. It wasn’t until that lunch you made me that I understood something... You do remember that lunch you made me right? It was amazing. I realized then that you weren’t just some battle brained lunatic. You just did stuff well, whatever it was.”

She let her arms slap against her sides, “I wasn’t like that. I just wanted this to all be over with. I forgot that you were a person too. You’re not super human... Uh, you are, but uh... You can’t do everything. Sorry for putting everything on you. It wasn’t fair.”

She waved her hands, “And I accept your apology. I tried killing you too. It’s not like you’re alone there. If anything, you’re the reason I’m out of the lab and I get to cook, sleep in a soft bed, anything fun really... so thank you.”

She flustered around the last part, her silver cheeks turning violet. I sighed in relief, amazed at her apology. I leaned against my knees,

“Thank you. It’s good to know I didn’t fuck everything up.”

She smiled, “Well, not everything, just most things.”

I rolled my eyes, “Excuse me for not apologizing well.” I glanced up at the red sky, “I mean that was nerve wracking as hell.” I dragged my hands across my face,

“I much prefer fighting giant monsters. At least they’re familiar... familiar and much less terrifying. Bleck, emotions and feelings.”

Althea laughed before I laughed too. It was the kind of laugh you let out after an awkward moment. It was a welcome release in tension. Once we let out a bit too much laughter, I composed myself,

“Anyways, I’m glad we’re on the same page.”

She nodded, holding the crystals against her side. I glanced around, another tense moment passing. Interrupting that tension, I pointed at the crystals,

“Ahem, these crystals might be perfect for killing Yawm. From what I know, these are arcane. Arcane magic does percentage based true damage. No matter what you do, it rips people apart. Even with Yawm at such a high level, it should work pretty well.”

Althea blinked before looking at the crystals, “What? Oh, yeah. They should do great. Arcane magic huh...crazy.”

I shrugged, “Eh, should be pretty good... You ready to take the core?”

Like she was coming back to her old self, she frowned, “What? Why do you want to leave already?”

I raised an eyebrow, crossing my arms while still holding the crystals, “Because you don’t want to eat rats mashed up with green vines. Me? I could make it. You? Eh, maybe not.”

She grumbled, “Well...true.”

I turned towards the runes, walking towards the core, “Come on. Let’s go.” With a bit of telekinesis, I lifted Hod over towards me. He stayed asleep, hanging like a ragdoll before I set him on my shoulder. With the artifacts under my arms, Althea and I dashed through the crevices and into the tunnels below. After a running for a while, we reached the vast cavern that harbored the Eltari.

By now, our coming didn’t spark the same level of interest as before. This time was different. The entire village ran out of their houses as several people shouted about our coming. Packs and bags made of straw sat beside throngs of Eltari. It looked like they were all ready to leave. Maybe three days of battling gave them the heads up.

We reached the inside of the village, passing the Eltari. Several of them reached out towards me, mouthing the word Harbinger. Others spoke of a third cataclysm. We didn’t pay them much mind. We ran and leapt into the shack the elders called home. As we walked in, Jass stood at our entering,

“After all the rumbling above us, I already know why you are both here.” She walked up to us and whacked Hod in the head with her cane. He awoke, throwing his feathered arms in every direction,

“Hod not easily slain. Hod a phoenix. Hod may rise again. Rise of Hod, the second coming!”

I tossed Hod off my shoulder before he stumbled up. Jass’s eyes narrowed,

“Did you watch him slay the worm by himself?”

Hod gave her a salute, “Hod watch very closely. Hod know he slayed the beast alone. Hod can say with certainty!”

Jass raised her eyebrows, “Really now? I suppose I’ll take the words of a half-asleep man over the words of no man at all.”

She poked the cane at me, “You...Are you certain we will be carried back with you?”

I gave her a thumbs up, “Maybe 60% sure.”

She sighed, “Then we’re ready to leave. We’ve had three days of ruckus to make sure of that.” She smiled, “I hope this dying planet of yours isn’t as terrifying as our own.”

I tilted my hand back and forth, “No guarantees. It’s been a while since I’ve been there.”

Jass turned to the other elders, “Do we all agree?”

They nodded in silence, their deformities weighing down their misshapen heads. We walked out of the hut before seeing the pillar the hut attached itself too. The coursing energy drained into the pillar above. I jumped up, using telekinesis and gravity for a bit of help. Once I reached the top of the pillar, I walked on a circular balcony.

All around me, the village stretched out in every direction. Beside me, the rippling force of the core coursed like a fountain of power. I turned towards the village. Many of them starred up to me, some like a guardian angel and others like I was a devil. It was time for an impromptu speech,

Wielding my Words of Strength skill, I shouted while spreading my arms, “Eltari, I am the Harbinger who has come to give you a chance for change. Some of you see me as a coming storm. Others see me as a coming savior. Neither are correct. I offer you all a chance at redemption.”

I turned myself, staring at their eerie, white eyes, “You are strong, resilient people. No matter who should judge you, that shall stand any test and any trial. Past the gate I open, you will find a world on the brink of oblivion. Here you all shall be given the chance to save this world.”

I clamped a hand into a fist, “Redeem yourselves. Walk out from the shadow of your fore fathers and come into a new dawn. I will give you this chance. Follow me as we pass through to the next world.”

I roared my last words with the full might of my skill. This might have been the first speech any of the people had heard. It worked like that at least. Many of them raised their three fingered hands. They shouted for freedom from all this planet’s bullshit. I couldn’t blame them.

I turned towards the core. I reached my hand into the stream of energy. The icy cold needles of before shot into my arm, but my armor caught up to the release of energy. I gripped my hand on the dungeon core.

It was time to go into the unknown.