

## New World 81

### Chapter 81: Rift Keeper

A colossal rumbling shook beneath me, knocking the core from my grasp. I stumbled backwards before falling off the pillar. Twisting around as I fell, I landed onto my feet, crushing the stone beneath me. I glanced up, wondering what the fuck was going on.

Above me, the elder's shack shook back and forth. A black tendril of mush shot out of the wood. A sickening gurgle growled from within before ebbing to nothing. Screaming shouted around us. Near the pillar, a black tentacle lifted the writhing body of a child. The Eltarian child leaked blood from its mouth, the black spreading through its body.

The small Eltari melted into the black, consumed by the living shadow. The high-pitched howls lessened as the mouth that made them collapsed into the pit of black. Elders howled from within the shack. I gritted my teeth at my own naivety. The Drikah hadn't been this dungeon's boss. He was something else, like a corrupted god. That moving blob of black was the real rift keeper.

Like all eldritch, the disgusting monster reached out to eat whatever it could. Jass hobbled out of the shack, leaping off the side of the wood. She glided away for a moment before another tendril of black wrapped around her. Hod leapt out of the shack, gliding towards her as he removed his mask. Without the toxic air to fuel his reformation, he remained normal.

Hod wasn't that inept without his monstrous form, however. He spun through the air before slicing a talon through the black tendril grasping Jass. A tiny cut formed in it before he spun again and fired his two hooks towards the monster. The black tentacle rived, splitting in two. The tentacle stayed wrapped around Jass as she fell onto the ground while howling in agony.

They bled into her, melting her skin and eating her blood. Hod scrambled towards her before I charged at the monster. Hod grabbed her and pulled her from the tentacle, the blackened burns reaching down to her bones in places. Once her eyes met Hod's eyes, she ceased her crying. The stern Jass returned. Hod grabbed the side of her face,

"Jass be fine. Hod save you. Hod not let you die. Hod need Jass. Hod love Jass... Please, don't leave Hod. Please."

The desperation leaking into his voice only strengthened the look of stone on Jass's face. During their struggle, I reached the pillar the monster latched to. As it reached out with its tentacles, I molded oppression onto the limbs. The writhing tendrils retracted whenever I moved oppression over them. I stopped the tentacles from taking anymore villagers instead of trying to fight the monster.

As I did, Althea leapt out of the building. She spun through the air before landing beside us. She turned to me then Jass and Hod. A look of seething hatred raced onto her face. She bent down, her body reforming. Muscles expanded. Bones and joints popped in and out of place. Metallic plates formed over her head, hands, and feet.

As she transformed, Jass reached up a hand and placed it on the side of Hod's face. Her hand shook as she lifted it towards him, but the firmness of her resolve carried her fingertips to his face. Tears fell down Hod's jaw as he stared at her. As they landed on Jass, she winced but didn't shout. She didn't have time for shouting.

She wiped away a tear from his cheek, "Hod, my child, stay calm."

With frenzy in his eyes and voice, Hod looked around, "Hod get help. Hod find doctor. Hod heal you. Hod save you."

Jass placed her hand over his mouth, "Shhhhhh. There's no saving me now. I'm not young anymore, and none of our doctors could heal me even if I was young. I've lived a full life as the caretaker of this village. I've done all I could to keep us safe."

Her hand fell down, blood spreading out from around her, "The village, it's changing. Our people don't need some old seeker stuck in her ways. They need someone who isn't so ancient and unchanging. They need someone like you."

Hod shook his head, his voice shaking, "No, Hod not smart enough. Hod can't lead village. Village need Jass. Hod need Jass."

Jass frowned, "You don't give yourself enough credit. You've defended our village as a true warrior. This is a time of war and battle. Shouldn't the greatest warrior of our village lead us then? Even without your talents in war, your thoughts are simple yet wise. Who else would steer our village during this time?"

Hod shook her shoulders, dead skin ripping in his hands, “Jass! Village need Jass. Hod need Jass. Jass mother to Hod. Please, don’t leave Hod. Please.”

Jass grinned, a tear spilling down the side of her cheek, “And you’re a son to me Hod. Your mother and father would be proud of who you’ve become. Make us even prouder in the future.”

Her white eyes dimmed, “Protect our people, and tell our story to your dying breath. In your memory, I will live on. Keep me close to your heart, and I will watch over your shoulder from the sky. I join the sun now.”

Hod grabbed her hand and pressed it against his chest. Her eyes dimmed completely. Tears spilled from his unblinking, blank eyes. He raised his head and cried out, a deep mourning. He lost the person closest to him, and in his voice was that ocean suffering. There was so much pain in his howl, you could drown in the pain it held. Even I winced at the scene. Beside me, Althea kept reforming herself as several tears streamed down her cheeks.

She turned invisible, the camouflage leaking onto her skin like blobs of ink spreading on paper. Hod stood behind me as I wrestled to contain the growing black void. Hod turned to the monster. His voice could have ground through stone,

“Hod will kill you. Hod will kill your memory and feast on your children. Hod hate you. Hod hate, hate, hate.”

The black energy leaked onto his claws without needing the toxic air to support him. The white of his eyes bled with red energy. The red consumed the normally white eyes, like a full moon eclipsing with red. The black expanded over the rest of his skin, reaching his now red eyes. At the edges of his black skin, a white aura emanated. It created a distinct outline around his otherwise depthless shape.

He stepped forward, no light showing on his body. It was like a 2-D shape with a white glow, moving in our dimension. He roared with thunder in his chest and iron in his voice. The black drool dripped from his mouth as he spread out his arms. The talons grew, like daggers made of black. From behind him, a set of wings shifted out of his body.

He flapped them, wind spreading in every direction at the force of his flight. An explosion ebbed from the black creature within the shack. Green acid covered a third of

the creature before another acid bomb exploded on the monster. The corrosive smells burned my nose and throat, but I grinned. Althea got this fucker good.

It wasn't as good as Hod, however. Hod dived towards the monster. The monster reached out a black tendril towards Hod, but Hod's own shadow devoured the black of the other monster. An unearthly squeal radiated from the monster as Hod's jaws and talons ripped it apart.

With each swipe, Hod's shadow eclipsed the monster's own shadow. The savage fury of Hod's anger unleashed as he sheared the shadow. His hate took a physical form, his darkened form growing in power with each of his attacks. The hulking Hod chomped and bit. He ripped and roared. He mauled with might. He slammed and sliced. He crushed and crumbled.

The monster was no longer a monster. It turned into the victim of Hod's relentless rage, like the wave of a river overwhelmed by the fury of a flood. The shack covering the monster disintegrated under Hod's onslaught. Anything Hod's shadows touched was erased, disappearing entirely. It tried escaping him, but I pinned it into his grasp using oppression.

The dissipating shadow drained into Hod, growing his size and strength. Within a minute, the pillar behind the monster appeared. It shrunk down into a smaller and smaller blob before reached the size of a person. It lashed out towards Hod, but Hod stabbed his talons forward. Hod's talons sliced the shadow apart, tearing it to nothing.

His hand traveled into the pillar. Hanging from the arm, he turned to the village. He thundered out in a deep voice like far off thunder,

"Hod kill the killer of Jass. Jass memory live on inside of Hod. Jass memory live on in Eltari."

He raised a fist made of shadow as the Eltari roared in applause. I retracted oppression, pulling the aura in as I sighed. A second later, Hod grabbed his chest, coughing up the black drool. He stiffened up before his claws unlatched from the pillar. He fell down towards the ground. Before he slammed into the ground, Althea appeared beneath him.

She caught him before sprinting towards me. I met her halfway, pulling my helmet off my face before she set Hod down. As if in a daze, the black drool oozed from his eyes. He turned back and forth, his chest heaving for air. I looked up at Althea,

“What the fuck is going on?”

She blinked, “I...I think it’s a mana saturation. He’s broken his limits on holding mana. Now the mana is tearing his body apart.”

I spread out my arms, “Really? Mana saturation?”

She nodded, “It’s the same thing that happened to me when we met. The difference is that my mana turns me into a monster. Hod’s mana is making this shadow stuff, and I think that’s melting him or something.”

I tapped my hand against my head before I lifted both my hands. An idea had sprouted in my mind.

“I got it.”

I pressed a palm against Hod’s chest. My armor pierced into him, draining his mana. The red surrounding his eyes waned. The shadow covering his skin retracted. Over the next five minutes, Hod returned to normal.

I pulled my armor out, satisfied once the shadow was gone. He stopped breathing before I shoved my palm against his chest. The black liquid spewed out over Althea and I. Hod raised his head, turning towards us both,

“What happened to Hod?” He picked up his arms, “Hod back to normal. Shadow gone. Good.” He looked at us again, “Harbinger, Lady Friend...You both need bath.”

He reached his wings around us, “No need to worry. Hod show you where best water spot is. Water still cold. Not as cold as normal water spot though.”

I laughed before Althea followed suit. A nervous laughter radiated through the village. I fell backwards, breathing out a sigh of relief,

“Jesus Christ Hod. I thought you were dead as hell.”

Hod let Althea go, waving away my concern with a hand, “Hod understand Harbinger’s worry. Hod thought Hod dead too. Hod remember Jass last words. Jass want Hod to live, so Hod live.” He glanced down,

“Jass with sun now. The sun always warm and never cold.”

He sighed before standing up. In the distance, a wail echoed through the cavern. A thinner, more feminine Eltari leaned near the pillar. The tears of white poured from her lidless eyes. They fell down her face plate and tapped against the ground. The weeping tore through the fleeting peace. Hod walked over towards her. He placed his hand on her shoulder,

“Hod feel your loss. Hod lose Jass too. Hod know son live with sun now, like Jass.”

He lunged onto a single knee as she looked at him. Hod continued, “Hod know son warm now, not colder. No more struggle for food. Son watch you. Son want mother to smile. Be strong for son. Son watch you, even now.”

She wiped her tears, “Ok...I’ll try.”

She stifled her loud weeping, turning it into a quiet sob. As she sniffled, Hod walked up to me, “Hod believe village need time. Village need to mourn. Harbinger wait for mourning?”

I stood up and nodded, “Of course. If you need a few weeks, that’s fine. We’ll just start eating the rats and stuff. No big deal. Take your time.”

Hod shook his head, “No need for weeks. Eltari grieve little. Eltari strong. Eltari fight in new world. Give Eltari three days. Eltari leave then.”

I nodded before wiping the black liquid off my face. Althea did as well. After getting it off, she walked up to Hod. She hugged him, “I’m sorry about Jass.”

Hod glanced down at her, and a white fog grew out of his eyes a little. He raised both his arms, “Lady Friend! No need to hug Hod. Hod covered in muck. Hod get Lady friend dirty.”

She squeezed him a bit harder, lifting him off the ground. Hod continued, “Lady Friend hug appreciated. Lady Friend hurt Hod with Hug. Please set Hod down.”

She let go of him before smiling, “You’re sweet.”

Hod scratched the side of his face, obviously embarrassed, “Uh, Hod thank Lady Friend too. Both Harbinger and Lady Friend have been kind to Hod, save village from monster, and slay Drikah. Many good things for village. Hod return favor.”

He spread his arms, “Hod grant Harbinger and Lady Friend anything in village for three day stay. Enjoy till heart content.” He let his arms down, “Though village not have much.”

Althea and I looked at each other. We gave each other one of those glances that held a conversation of details in them. I turned to him, “Sure. A break sounds damn nice. It’ll be like a vacation.”

Hod nodded before a chunk of the core pillar fell. It caught everyone’s attention before Hod frowned, “Good time to leave village. Village about to fall apart anyway.”

With the fight over, the villagers dispersed to lick their wounds. My oppression aura kept the deaths minimal though. Instead of throngs of the villagers dying, only two did. While that still sucked, at least the damage was kept to a minimum. For me, it was a resounding success compared with the Bloodbull incident. That was an unmitigated disaster.

The resulting chaos of this event paled by comparison. Before three hours passed the village went back to normal duties. The main difference was the collection of yellow flowers and fallen feathers. While they attended to their own kind of mourning, Althea and I enjoyed the sights and scenes of the village.

The main attraction was the marketplace at the middle of everything. Eight shopkeepers sold a variety of goods, each of them known by all the villagers. One of them sold

trinkets or gifts, kind of a like a shop for oddities. The others focused on more pragmatic goods, so we only picked up what we needed from them.

Despite how interesting some of the Eltari's shops were, we spent most of our time talking with villagers. The way they saw me and her surprised us both. Most of them revered me as some messiah. Others saw me as just a good guy. I preferred that opinion personally. Being a messiah was a lot of pressure.

Despite that pressure, the thanks I got was a nice change of pace. Normally, I leave a thick, bloody trail of death and destruction in my wake. Not on purpose mind you. This time was an exception, and the villager's good will served as our reward for it. The villagers even gave us a house with a place to sleep.

While a straw bed wasn't ideal, it was a hell of a lot better than stone. Althea brought an expanding mattress with her, so it wasn't a problem for her. The food turned out pretty decent too. Who knew roasted rat on a spit was actually pretty good. Put some pepper and paprika on it, and it might even be restaurant worthy.

Regardless, the three days passed by fast. We organized with Hod to make sure the villagers were ready to leave and that they knew what to expect when we got to earth. We pretty much told them that there would be a ton of zombies. That, and they would need to go through the sewers to meet up with the steel legion.

Once there, we'd be able to rendezvous with Torix and company. The plan was to train the Eltari and give them weapons. An efficient and effective aerial force would be a massive augment to the legion's lacking forces. Combine that with the physical superiority of the Eltari, and we had a recipe for Spawn of Yawm destruction.

With all those plans finished, there was only one thing left for closure's sake. The night before we all left, the Eltari held a funeral for the two lost members. Jass's body was burned, cremated to ash. Althea and I joined the ceremony as they walked up high atop the mountain. At the very peak of it, the wind blew with tremendous intensity.

There the Eltari took the yellow flowers and put the spare feathers between the petals. Once night time arrived, the family of the boy tossed many of the flowers into the air. The feathers kept them afloat as they flowed with the wind. They symbolized the boy's passage into the sky and union with the sun, or so I was told.



They did the same with Jass's ashes. Hod was the one to throw them. After watching the gray scatter, Following a mantra, Hod announced without his usual odd way of speaking,

"Jass floats with the sun at her back and the wind on her wings. May she and Kal fly forever."

The congregation raised each of their right wings, staring at the sky. They said in unison, "May they fly forever."

Their featureless, glowing eyes turned the dark mountaintop into a cluster of tiny lights. It kind of looked like a starry sky. With the ritual finished, Jass and the boy's deaths took on a finality. As we walked back towards the village, the aura of the group wasn't one of sorrow. It was a more of a determined kind of feeling, like they were moving on.

The atmosphere fit in with the next morning perfectly. All the Eltari had their packs at the ready. Before leaving, I leaned against the core holding pillar, checking out my status screen with Althea beside me. I wanted to invest my points before heading back. As I opened my status screen, I saw 347 levels gained from the sand worm, but I also gained 15 from the shadow monster.

It turned out that the boss was conglomeration of the corrupted seekers. Seekers never died of old age, the toxic air sustaining them. When they lost control of themselves, they would be put into a prison built beneath the shack. Whenever I pulled on the core, it awakened the boss, leading to Jass's death. The boss's escape was an inevitability, so the villagers were thankful that Althea and I were there to help handle it.

The fifteen levels the shadow monster gave me was a nice bonus for leveling. Combine them both and I ended up with 362 levels gained. After a little over three days of relaxation, the attribute points had uploaded, all 1012 of them.

That's right. One thousand and twelve fucking attribute points. It was an astronomical number. Both obliterator trees gave me 8 extra attributes every five levels. A normal person gains five attribute points and a single perk point every five levels. That perk point converted into an attribute point most of the time, meaning it was effectively six attribute points every five levels.

Now I gained over double the norm. As I grinned at the fact, Althea saw my smile and analyzed my status. The last time she checked, she was still a higher level. Once she saw my completed level, she punched my shoulder before pouting in frustration.

I laughed at her, “Guess who’s got a higher level now?”

She hugged her legs to her chest, “Dammit...It was lot of fun being stronger than you.”

I glanced at my status screen, soaking in the numbers, “All good things must come to an end.”

She put her chin on her knees, “I’m going to miss it...Out leveling you that is.”

I rubbed my hands together, “Let’s see the spoils.”

I dug my face into my status screen. With how I set up my stats feeding each other, the framework for Endurance made it a do all attribute. I got the most from it when compared with any other stat. Taking full advantage, I began putting the attribute points into endurance. The perk screen appeared after placing six points into endurance.

Congratulations on reaching level one thousand! Only 32.67% of current sentients have reached this level of achievement. Extra options, information, and settings are unlocked for your status. Data upload now allowed (1 terabyte of data per level over 1000.) Extra rights are unlocked for a higher status sentient.

Perks for being over level 1000 include:

Extra tiers in trees now unlocked. Ever wonder why [III Vicious] wasn’t unlocked? You had to prove yourself before being allotted that level of development. Now it’s yours for the taking! You are now allowed to visit fringe worlds using Schema’s Transference System. Unlimited Transfers between worlds. Extra information unlocked upon Schema’s web interface. A free perk from the allotment of choices.

Perk Selection. Choose one. [Body of Steel – Gives a permanent 10% bonus for endurance, constitution, and strength attribute bonuses. Grants title of Warrior. (3.7% of sentients over level 1000 own this title and perk)] [Mind of Steel – Gives a permanent 10% bonus to intelligence, perception, and dexterity attribute bonuses. Grants title of

Technician. (55.8% of sentients over level 1000 own this title and perk)] [Spirit of Steel – Gives a permanent 10% bonus to luck, charisma, and willpower. Grants title of Influencer. (40.5% of sentients over level 1000 own this title and perk)] The most surprising aspect was how rare the warrior was. Based on what I learned from talking with various aliens, most species were smaller than humans. That must mean speccking into a physical build wasn't possible for most species. remnants like Kessiah must be valuable then for their unique talents. In my case, the choice between the perks was obvious. To be honest, it didn't take much in the way of thought to decide on a perk. I selected Body of Steel. A moment later, my attribute points wouldn't go through when I tried putting them into endurance. I wrestled with my status screen before a message popped up, High speed data transfer unlocked for higher level sentient. One minute delay between further augmentations. Body of Steel now unlocked. Further allocation of attributes now allowed. Now that I knew what the fuck was going on, I allocated my points into endurance once more. After placing all 1012 points into the attribute, I selected the finalize button. A surge of strength and size coursed through me. I fell forward, off the pillar behind me. My face clapped against the stone, cracking it as I writhed back and forth. Althea bolted up, leaning over me, "Are you alright? What's going on?" I couldn't talk. Every piece of my body changed all at once. My armor snapped like always. My vision went white while my flesh turned to steel. The arcane bonds lacing my flesh turned from simple bonds into chains, preventing my body from breaking. My teeth cracked then grew larger before healing again. I slammed a fist into the ground, overwhelmed by the sudden change. My fist pierced into the ground, creating a fissure beside me. Strength flooded into my limbs. I gripped my hands, the sensation of power coursing like a drug. I slammed my face into the ground as the white faded. A distinct sense of control and lucidity rushed over me. All my senses enhanced. My joints turned nimble, my body like a well-oiled machine. The sensation of raw power passed. I pushed myself up, heaving for breath. Althea put a hand on my back, "Are you ok? For Schema's sake, I thought you were dead." She shoved my shoulder, the push playful, "Don't make me worry like that." With a sinister smile, I nodded, "Of course, sorry about that." She blinked, "What happened to you?" I looked at my hands, "Well, if I was a Pokémon, then I just evolved." She scratched her head, "What do you mean evolved?" I opened my status screen, willing my status so that Althea could see it with me. As we looked, our jaws dropped, Level 1360 Strength – 1249.6 | Constitution – 1505.9 | Endurance – 2768 Dexterity – 398.9 | Willpower – 1761.6 | Intelligence – 677.4 Charisma – 94 | Luck – 227.2 | Perception – 189.7

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Health170,239/170,23954,839/min or 912/sec Phys Dam Reduction – 98%Stamina73,134/73,134888/secElemental Res – 98%Harbinger of Cataclysm12.98 Billion/56.6 Billion74.3/per min(conduit)Plasma Res – 98%Oppression Damage- 15,000 + 80%hp/minRad Res – 98%Phys Dam Bonus – 11,999% | Total Damage Bonus 20%Mental Res – 98% Before relishing in the afterglow of my new stats, I looked at the new interface. Sleeker and less basic, the buttons layout was easier to see and understand. At the corner of the screen was a button called, 'Previous Stat Iterations.' I pressed it, and it opened my last saved stat sheet from forever ago. Level 997 | 4.2 months held. Longest iteration held so far. | 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

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\*\* 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 difference was astronomical. As I compared the two statuses, Althea gasped, “I...I can’t even...your health regen is higher than my health...By Baldowah, It’s over twice as high as my health...” I lifted both my hands into the air, “Mwahaha! Take that. Higher level than me my ass.” She fell backwards, “How are your stats so high? Are you, like, the chosen one or something? Does Schema have it out for you?” Her last few words gave me pause. I lowered my hands, staring at the ground, “I never even thought about that...Maybe he does?” She waved her arms, “I didn’t mean that in a bad way. This is a good thing.” She spread her arms wide, smiling bright, “You should be excited. This is awesome.” I laughed, “Yeah, no point in dwelling on it now. I got the levels and skills I wanted since coming here. It’s time to leave.” Althea stood up, offering a hand. I grabbed it as she pulled me up. Her feet caved into the ground as she did so. She stumbled backwards before I pulled her arm, keeping her steady. A moment later, we both laughed at the ridiculousness of the situation. Both of our stats had become ludicrous by now, at least when compared with where we started. With that handled, I looked up towards the dungeon core. After forming a gravity vortex above me, I kept it ahead of me as I jumped up, the ground caving beneath me. Keeping the ripple of gravity right above my head, I shot upwards before landing on the edge of the platform. My mastery of gravity was getting better. True flight wasn’t far off now. With that handled, I turned behind me. The crowd once again looked ready to leave. I reached towards the core, my arm piercing through the white energy. The cold, piercing sensation diminished quite a bit since last time. With ease, I grabbed the rift’s core. Not knowing what happens next, I pulled on the core. It was time to kill a follower. When I got back that is. The cores energy assimilated into my armor as I pulled it out. The sphere released a high pitch scream before silencing. Writhing, the carmine colored core died down its movements. Black expanded from the center before stopping just short of the outer edges of the sphere. The energy beaming from the pillar dimmed before stopping altogether. I stood there, waiting for the dimensional shift. Below me, Hod shouted, “Hod think core pull a letdown.” I shouted back, “Give it a minute. Patience is a virtue after all.” A rumbling started. The faint, cybernetic sound of the changing rift ebbed into the cave, muffled by a mile of sand and rock over our heads. The sound expanded into our ears, and the rumbling turned into a steady quake. Seconds later, a square outlined by blue energy appeared over the top of the cavern. The matter within it altered. The rock within each square changed color, redder and less brown. The squares webbed out from all sides of the cavern in seconds. As the squares passed us, my hud returned along with a sense of order. It was like all the entropy and chaos had been ironed out. After being away from the familiar structure of Schema’s system, it honestly felt weird. The air didn’t have the sweet smell of the rift anymore. An almost sterile odor took its place. Besides for that and a shift in gravity, the cavern didn’t change much outside of the color shift. The other most

obvious change was the disappearance of the tunnels leading up to the weird ruins. The shift in the air's density along with a shift in gravity's pull was strange too. Taking advantage, I leapt off the core's pillar. As I landed, I created a panel of telekinesis beneath me and deflected the energy throughout the surrounding air. A tempest of wind pushed in every direction, knocking over a few packs and tables nearby. Standing beside Althea, I waited for the overseer. As expected, a rip in dimensions formed beside us. The overseer walked out from his tear in space-time, turning towards us. Something seemed off about him, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. A realization came over me as I pointed at the overseer, "That's what it is. You're shorter now." He was still two feet taller than me, (0.6 meters ~) but I was closing the distance. The overseer turned his body around, analyzing his surroundings before staring at me,

"Yet another rift closed? That hunger you have, it will treat you well in time."

He opened his red status screen, outlined with liquid light,

"Interesting that you left so many eldritch alive. While not required for the core, Schema's manuals recommend killing any eldritch you come across. I'd encourage you in following them."

He glared at the Eltari, "Otherwise a new Rift Keeper will be born quite soon."

The Eltari winced and lowered their gazes at the overseer's disapproval. I opened a palm to the overseer, "They're Eltari, a sentient race. We're taking them back to Earth."

The overseer turned to me, "Eldritch are not allowed out of their rifts, Harbinger. You will not be allowed to take them out of this place." He raised a hand, closing his fingers together.

"I will see to that personally."

## Chapter 82: An Overseer's Insight

I raised my hands, "Woah now, these aren't eldritch. They're the species that lived here before. The dungeon core was stopping them from turning into monsters."

The overseer lowered his hand. He opened and fiddled with his status screen, "Hmmm. These creatures are not fully eldritch or fully sentient either. That one there-" He pointed at Hod, "He seems like an anomaly similar to Althea." The overseer lowered his hand,

“Keeping multiple anomalies within your vicinity is an excellent way to die early and in a painful manner. His physiology also aligns with Yawm’s current goals for an eldritch, flesh hybrid. Yawm will chase after you even more so after discovering him. Why not dispatch of the thing?”

I shrugged, “The same reason we didn’t dispatch Althea. He’s trying to help us out, and he’s not some terrible, evil monster. I honestly don’t get the whole, ‘destroy anything that Yawm wants’ goal you guys have.”

The overseer kept fiddling with his screen before closing it and turning to me, “Do explain.”

“Humans have a saying that describes it perfectly; an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. It basically means stopping something before it happens is a hell of a lot better than fixing it after the fuck up. Killing Yawm is the solution, not trying to find and slay all the anomalies like Althea or Hod.”

I raised my hands, “I mean if you think about it, I’ve already found two people that fit his requirements. Surely there’s more out there. Finding all of those people sounds like a much more difficult goal than just beating his ass anyways.”

The waved his hand, dismissing me, “No. You underestimate the threat that Yawm poses. Schema has personally stopped me from doing battle with him. The reason was that the threat of my termination was too great a risk. That is how powerful Yawm is. You may become like Yawm one day, but he has had centuries to hone himself into what he is now.”

I frowned, “Why are we even being tasked with doing something like this?”

The overseer raised a hand, “There is something you must understand, Harbinger. Schema took a calculated risk with letting you leave BloodHollow so long ago. Most people trapped within the system are limited by it. They need it for progression and for their livelihoods. You, well, you are an exception.”

He glanced at my status, “Unlike other players within Schema’s system, you’re pattern of growth isn’t decided by levels. That armor of your, the augment to your soul,

whatever it really is, it's growth is independent of Schema. He doesn't appreciate sources of growth outside his system."

He pointed up, accentuating his point "That was one of the key reasons out of many for why he banished the remnants for gene splicing. That is why he dislikes the necromancer, because he can build an army independently of Schema's own growth. That is why schema dislikes you as well."

He pointed the raised finger at me, "The difference between you and the others, and why Schema allows you to benefit from his system, it is all due to the nature of your growth. The growth happens to align with Schema's own goals. Destroying eldritch and their rifts."

He glanced at the Eltari, "This turned you from an agent of chaos into a sword for Schema. You use the resources he allots better than others of the same level. You can handle monsters far stronger than your designated level through a combination of that...thing on your skin, and your own ingenuity. So far, Schema is quite pleased with you."

The overseer raised a finger, "That's the reason that Schema has allowed your friend over there to live as well. She owns many gifts that set her apart from the norm. His calculated risk is paying off. You've taken the same role as Yawm had, but you own that armor as well. Defeating him will be possible without wasting resources."

I frowned, "Wait, what do you mean the same role as Yawm?"

The overseer opened a palm towards me, "Simple. The paragon of a species. All the benefits you've received that are...unique, such as the obliterator trees or the genesis of potential tree, Yawm gained those as well. He was the champion of his species after all. There was a time where he too received the blessings of Schema."

My stomach sunk. Here I thought I was closing in on Yawm when all I was progressing as he had. The difference was that my armor helped me. He was a warrior king, which allowed him to do the things he accomplished.

The overseer glared at the Eltari, "The issue comes with why we should grant the same blessings to these mongrels. They are infested with eldritch. It's deep within them. That one there. Hod you called him, correct? He could potentially become another Yawm if his own motives are derailed."

Hod walked up, “Hod not understand bringer of cataclysm. Hod not Yawm. Hod is Hod! Hod not want derailed motives. Hod want good food and good friends. Hod have those, and Hod protect food and friends. Hod not monster. Hod nice and smart. Most of all, Hod handsome.”

The overseer opened his status screen, analyzing the Eltari. He sent a message before tapping his finger against his side, “Then I will message Schema directly and check on his response.”

A painful, tense set of seconds passed over us before the overseer fiddled with his status screen once more, “Surprising. The Eltari have quite a history behind them, don’t they?”

I nodded, “I think Schema wanted to eliminate them because they understood the eldritch runes.”

Steam leaked from one of the hydraulics of the overseer, “The same eldritch runes that Baldag-Ruhl used?”

I shrugged, “It’s a working theory.”

The over seer stared at them, no face to give away his thoughts. He turned back to me, “They understood those runic inscriptions?”

I nodded, “Only two of them.”

The overseer continued, “Amazing. I never would have imagined they’d have conquered something so complex. The universe is an unending series of surprises I suppose.”

The red status screen appeared in front of the overseer before he read it over for a few minutes. We passed the time in awkward sort of limbo. As the tension became unbearable, the overseer spoke,



“Schema has decided to allow it as long as certain circumstances are met. The Eltari are to never practice or hold records of the practice of the eldritch runes. They are to accept the assimilation of the system, and guarantee their cooperation with slaying Yawm. If Yawm is killed, they will have yearly quotas to reach for slaying of eldritch and clearing dungeons.”

I clapped my hands together, “Hell yeah. That’s what I’m talking about.”

The overseer closed the status screen before pointing beside himself. He pressed his fingers together before pulling them apart. A rupture in dimensions formed, showing the mountain top of the dungeon’s entrance. The overseer turned to us,

“Coming?”

### Chapter 83: Clash

Althea stepped up, “Yeah we are. I’m ready for something good to eat and somewhere nice too sleep. I never thought I would miss the tent so much.”

I glimpsed at her, “You and me both.” I shouted at the Eltari, “Are all of you ready?”

Hod raised a wing ending in his three talons, “Village ready.”

The village gave a roar after Hod finished speaking. The overseer stepped into his own dimensional rift. A violet strip appeared in the middle of the air. It ripped open before a blue sentinel walked out. Wielding the violet tipped spear and blue armor, the new sentinel sliced through dimensions, opening another portal towards the mountain top.

On the other side of the portal, the overseer fiddled with his status screen. As he did, the mountain reformed back into a normal dungeon entrance. Within seconds, he finished the task before opening another rip in reality. He stepped through the portal, disappearing from sight.

Not wanting to waste any time, Althea and I stepped through the portal. The sight of Springfield spread out before us. The dilapidated buildings and blood streaks didn’t paint the prettiest scene though. I opened my status menu before sending a message to Torix about the Eltari coming. He might have everything ready for them when we arrived back.

That was the goal at least. Glancing around, sand no longer covered the mountain top. It was back to normal, with a forest taking the sand's place. The view around the mountain refreshed my memory of the place too. The giant gray cloud looming over Springfield's center, the growing forests colored a sickly yellow, even the surrounding suburbs, it all came together to make the town what it was.

Which was pretty much a shit show at this point, but it wouldn't stay that way forever. Armed with that knowledge, Althea and I herded the Eltari out of the dimensional rift. As they came to Earth, they showed no signs of displeasure. In fact, they all glowed with a brightness I could hardly understand. Some of them whispered among themselves,

"This place is so big."

"I thought it would be hotter. Why is it so cool?"

"What are those giant, puffy balls of white?"

Althea chimed, "Those are clouds. They're like water that's waiting to fall out of the sky."

One of the younger members of the Eltari kept the chain of questions coming,

"Water falls from the sky?"

I grinned, "Yeah. It's called rain."

"That sounds...wonderful."

I spread my arms, missing basic stuff like that, "Yeah...yeah it is."

Once the Eltari filed out, we had an enormous throng of winged bird people. They chattered about trees, grass, dirt, all kinds of stuff I never imagined people would

chatter about. At least not with such excitement. Before they got caught up in the newness of the experience, I used my Words of Strength skill,

“Now Eltari, follow Althea and I. We will take you to your new home.”

Hod raised a wing, “To new home.”

Many of the Eltari raised their arms while shouting, “To new home.”

Any of the anxiety that was in the Eltari before leaving melted as Earth mesmerized them. The buildings mesmerized them. The temperature mesmerized them. The wind mesmerized them. Shit, I think even the smell of real dirt mesmerized them. Compared with their bleak, abysmal planet, Earth had it pretty good. I couldn’t blame them for their eyes glazing over.

Still, we had a mission to complete. Staying out in the open like this was a recipe for disaster, even with a blanket of trees as cover. We walked down the mountain and towards a nearby sewer entrance. Althea and I crushed any zombies coming nearby, each of us decimating them with ease. Hod helped some as well before we funneled the Eltari into the sewers.

Many of the Eltari looked at the journey like a group of tourists. The sights, the smells, the sounds, everything was new to them. They soaked in the change in atmosphere like kids going to a zoo. Althea, Hod, and I kept them moving as the giant line of Eltari moved through the labyrinth of tunnels. Most of them handled the process with ease. Their own home had been a series of tunnels after all. This wasn’t so different.

After about three hours of walking, we finally reached underneath the steel legion’s encampment. The Eltari’s anticipation of seeing their new homes saturated the tight tunnel. With each passing moment, they looked at each other while wondering what would happen. Before letting them out, I shouted down the tunnel,

“You all will wait up here while I let the others know that you’re coming. I don’t want someone firing at you guys for no reason.”

The message echoed down the tunnel Before I left with Hod. He would be their ambassador of sorts. Not the best pick, but he was the best they had for now. Althea stayed behind, making sure the crowd didn’t do something insane.

Once we were above the surface, Hod and I walked up. Stationed a few blocks down was a group of steel legion troops. Between an old candy shop and a bookstore, they looked out of place. Safety cones were dispersed around them, leading the way back to the base. They stood in a formation for handling the inflow of Eltari. At their head was corporal Briggs, the current puppet that Torix used as their leader.

I paced up with Hod. Several of the soldiers gasped before one of them raised their rifle. I reached out my hand and jerked the rifle out of his hand with telekinesis. Lifting it, I bonked his head with the rifle as I shouted,

“Don’t fire at me you dumbass.”

I tossed his rifle aside before the other steel legion troops calmed down. They whispered as I approached,

“He’s a mage now?”

“I thought he was some warrior.”

“What’s that thing with him?”

“It’s level 1100. The Harbinger’s over level 1300. Damn man.”

“What the fuck.”

I zoned them out before walking up to Briggs. Briggs gave me a salute before I gestured with a hand as I said, “At ease.”

He lowered his hands, speaking in a gruff voice, “Sorry for the soldier pointing his rifle at you sir.”

I waved his concern away, “It’ll be good when he’s mowing down zombies. Anyways, you guys ready for a bunch of this guy-” I pointed at Hod, “To be walking into camp?”

Briggs shuffled through his thick, gray overcoat before fishing out an obelisk. He pointed it at Hod before opening his status. He typed out on the interface as he spoke,

“I’m sending a picture to the rest of the legion. It’s a guild wide transmission for our current Earth forces. I’m attaching a message letting them know these creatures aren’t hostile, and that they are the coming reinforcements.”

I blinked with a bit of surprise, “Wow, Briggs...Good Job.”

He gave me a curt nod, “That’s what I’m here for.”

I turned, walking back towards the sewer, “Good. I’ll give the Eltari a rundown on what’s going on. We’ll be coming up in about fifteen minutes.”

I reached down the tunnel before giving the Eltari a rundown on what was happening next. They’d walk into the camp, be siphoned off into random houses nearby, then they’d be allowed to settle in. By tomorrow, they should be given some schedules or training along with some rudimentary education. That should ease the transition some.

After finishing my little rundown, we walked the Eltari out of the sewer. As they passed the houses, roads, and shops nearby, the city blew their minds. Their shacks didn’t have shit on your more advanced, rock shacks for instance. After getting tired of all the ooh’s and ah’s, I got them moving. The group of soldiers acted as guards during the different turns the Eltari needed to take for getting into camp.

The process went smoothly until we actually reached the camp. Once inside, it was the steel legion’s turn to ooh and ah. The average Eltari was around level 80-90, a far cry from the 200-250 range that most members of the legion sat at. Even then, they started out with a tremendous potential when compared with humanity.

What confused me was the different starting levels. After doing some research while we walked, it had to do with the ambient mana they breathed in. The toxic air made them stronger and more like an eldritch. This sacrificed their sanity over time for that advantage. Building on top of that base of eldritch was more difficult than building on a blank slate, according to Schema’s resource index at least.

That meant adjusting their starting levels to reflect that difficulty. Besides for that, the Eltari were looked at as unknowns instead of normal people. I guessed it was probably

due to their origins. These various oddities made them bizarre, and the steel legion were fascinated at their differences.

Some people feared them though, and I couldn't blame them. Their empty eyes and large talons made for a fierce appearance after all. That fear manifested itself as a tension floating over the camp. It wasn't until a few of the legion's soldiers heard Hod speaking that the tension leveled off then dissipated. Hod had a way of disarming people, and it worked wonders in this situation.

With the legion set to ease, the Eltari packed in like sardines. Once at the center of the encampment, the Eltari stood in massive crowd, a group of several thousand. Their village's size was far larger than I imagined it would be. The ambient mana they breathed in must have reduced their need for food or something like that.

At the far end of the group, several desks were lined up for processing the new occupants. They allotted identification numbers, names, and obelisks to each of the Eltari. They described how to use the maps in the obelisks too, making sure they each understood where to go. Once ready, the family, pair, or loner Eltari would be carted off by a single legion member.

Surprised at the speed of their progress, I walked up behind the rows of desks. With efficient and purposeful movements, they sped through the process. It was a satisfying sight. Behind them, Torix and Kessiah were standing, overseeing the entire event. After breathing out a sigh, Hod and I walked up. Torix grinned at me,

"Good to see you, disciple. This is the ambassador for the Eltari then?"

Hod opened his hands, "Hod speaker for village. Hod hope Hod not disappoint Dry Man."

Torix's grin died right then and there. Confusion covered his face as his eyes and nose scrunched up. Hod continued, "Hod rude. Hod not introduce self. Hod is Hod. Hod glad to meet Dry Man. Hod also glad to meet Lady Friend number two."

Kessiah frowned, "I'm lady friend number two now?"

Hod put his hands on his hips, “Hod proud of naming abilities. Hod name second Lady Friend he meets Lady Friend number two.” Hod tapped his temple, “Hod know what friends thinking. Friends surprised with Hod’s smartness. Hod not blame you.”

Torix’s jaw fell as he stared in utter disbelief. Kessiah glanced in different directions, blinking her eyes. It was like she was making sure this was all real. Torix murmured,

“I...This...It’s impossible. He can’t be serious.”

I leaned over, a look serious as death on my face, “Oh trust me, he is.”

#### Chapter 84: Finalizing Details

Kessiah propped her weight onto one hip, “He’s actually serious?” She reached over and flicked Hod at the tip of his metallic beak, “I’m not Lady Friend number two. I’m Kessiah Crow.”

Hod grabbed his nostrils, “Hod sorry. Hod not mean to hurt Crow’s feelings. Hod thought Crow not bird like Hod. Hod see now. White hair of Crow like feathers. Crow’s Violet skin like...Hod give up. How is Crow bird and not person?”

Kessiah blinked, “Wait...My last name is Crow, I’m not an actual crow. How do you even know what a crow is?”

Hod raise a hand, “Hod use blue box’s help. Box tell Hod what Crow is.”

Torix cupped his chin, “Assuming you can’t read, you must have discovered the audio function preset into the system. You might not be as idiotic as your speech implies.”

Hod shook his head, “Hod think Dry Man think too much about Hod speaking. Hod speak strange, true, but Hod use words to speak. Words not good for speaking. Actions better, because actions speak alone. Actions not need Hod to speak for them.”

Torix lowered his hand, “Quite a strange observation. I can’t tell if that was incredibly intelligent or incredibly stupid.”

I tilted my hands back and forth, “Take everything Hod says with a grain of salt.”

From beside me, Althea materialized out of thin air. She raised a hand, “Hey guys. It’s good to be back.”

Kessiah and Torix froze in place. Unlike them, Althea’s appearances didn’t surprise me anymore. Anytime I didn’t use my skill for sensing gravity, Althea could erase herself from my senses at will. Neither Torix or Kessiah had seen it in action though. Torix gasped,

“Althea... You disguised your mana? How?”

I turned to her, curious as well.

“Oh yeah, I forgot I was doing that. Uh, well, Daniel and I trained a lot by playing a game, kind of like hide and seek. He would try to find me while I hid. I came up with all these different ways of hiding, some of them worked and some didn’t. Mana was one of those ways of hiding.”

She raised a hand, “Hmmm... What’s the best way to say this... Ok, you can sense mana anytime it’s regenerated or is full, right?”

Torix nodded, leaning closer to her, “Of course.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Why exactly?”

Torix pointed a finger towards the sky, “The reason for sensing a filled mana bar is the over capped mana creates an aura you can sense. The reason for regenerating mana is the fluctuation of mana. If someone’s mana pool is altering in size, it distinguishes itself from ambient energy. It’s similar to a camouflaged animal moving.”

Althea nodded, “So with Arcane Blood, my magic is like health. You can’t sense it being made, because it’s just health regen. The hard thing is finding a way of keeping my health uncapped all the time.”



With a vigorous nod, Torix tapped his chin, “That’s very true. Daniel couldn’t disguise his mana signature at all. His method of dispersing it is...vibrant to say the least.”

I shrugged, “I didn’t know you could even sense people’s mana like that.”

Torix grinned, “I planned on showing you later. You’ve been rather keen on developing your own skills in your own way. I decided to let you develop yourself organically.”

Althea pointed at me, “The thing is, unlike your health build, my build is strength, dexterity, and perception. I’m an assassin, and I don’t have some ridiculous value for my health regen. To keep my low regen from capping out my health, all I have to do is make it equal to my mana consumption. It uh, strengthens the stealth form and makes my mana signature harder to detect.”

Torix nodded, “But how do you use your ammunition? To my knowledge, it requires mana to make?”

She glanced at the ground, “That’s uh, well, Daniel gave me a ring that lets me use his mana for that.”

Torix grinned at us both, “Both of you working together has improved our fighting potential drastically. This is precisely what we needed out of Althea for killing a follower. I do wonder, however.”

He pointed a finger at me, “How are you sensing her then?”

I tapped temple, “I’m sensing her fluctuations in gravity.”

Kessiah frowned, “What? Bullshit. That’s impossible.”

Torix nodded, “I have to agree. That shouldn’t be possible. I told you to feel the fabric of the dimension you were in, not tiny fluctuations in it. That’s overly precise. It shouldn’t be possible for a warrior bui...Ah. Your enhanced perks.”

I grinned, “Exactly. All the extra leveling perks let me do stuff like that when other builds like mine shouldn’t be able to.”

Hod interjected, “Friends discuss complicated things. Complicated things leave Hod behind. Hod think complicated things better saved for later. Now we handle simple things, like what Hod do now.”

Torix opened his palms to Hod, “Ah yes, what to do with you. You must be bored with our discussion. It involves words with more than two syllables.”

Hod nodded, “Yes.”

Torix opened his arms in exasperation, “The Eltari will be used for handling reconnaissance and guerilla warfare. The gift of flight will allow us to strike at different areas of the quarantine zone and cull the infected there. You will lead the strike forces during those operations.”

Torix turned to us, racing through his words to get rid of Hod, “During this, Daniel and Althea will be destroying opened rifts. It will be a two-pronged assault.”

Althea offered a hand, “I can spy on them using my stealth form. I could gather intelligence or something like that on the enemy.”

Torix pointed at her, still racing through his words, “Good. You will gather details on the enemy’s habits, weaknesses, anything you may find. Daniel can focus on clearing rifts.”

Slowing him down just to tease him, I shrugged, “I could do some scouting too with my sensing abilities. I mean shit, I can sense Althea even in her stealth form. Someone still needs to clear rifts, so I’ll upload data about what I sense above me as I travel.”

Torix frowned, exasperated by our interruptions, “That’s just dandy. I’m certain that extra information will be useful. Regardless-”

Kessiah nodded, interrupting him, “It sounds pretty good I guess, but we haven’t even grilled these two on what they learned yet. How long were you guys gone exactly?”

I shrugged, “I don’t know. Maybe three or four months. It was a pretty long time.”

Torix sighed, giving up on rushing through the conversation, “You both must have found a rift with a rather intense time dilation. It’s only been three days since you both left.”

Kessiah stepped closer to me, looking up at my face, “Yeah, in three days you’re even taller now. Like six inches taller.”

I stared at one of my hands, checking out the size of it, “Yeah, I guess it comes with the whole leveling thing.”

Torix pressed his hand into the air, fiddling with a status screen none of us could see, “Speaking of which, let’s see what we’re working with.” He glanced up at me, his jaw dropping, “Since when did you become a higher level than even me?”

I raised an eyebrow, “Wait, what?”

I analyzed Torix again,

Torix Worm, of Darkhill (lvl 1341) – A powerful necromancer who has lived for a very long time. Taking a calm, patient approach, Torix Worm has slowly accrued an army of summons that he may use. Instead of focusing on leveling, Torix is a seeker of knowledge. He jumps from one interest to the next, gaining mastery of each magic or tactic he leaves behind.

While his pursuit of knowledge is admirable, knowledge does not result in the death of Eldritch. His level is far below what his volume of skills would indicate, and his ability to use those skills in combat is limited as well. His assortment of skills is like a swamp, wide and varied, but lacking in depth.

Make no mistake, however, those skills become deadly when used over time. Torix’s ability to weave intricate strategies that make use of his many skills are second to none. Combine that with his usage of fortress tactics, and you have a difficult foe to kill indeed.

I pointed at his status above his head, “So why are you not that high a level given how old you are?”

Kessiah elbowed Torix, a malicious grin growing on her lips, “He doesn’t like fighting. He’d rather sit in a library and read a book.”

Torix rolled his eyes, “The undead receive experience penalties. Outside of that, I believe I make good use of my level, unlike some high leveled remnant I could mention.”

Kessiah crossed her arms, “Oh really now? At least I was willing to go out there and kick some ass to get to my level. You’re almost out of dungeon cores for Althea and Daniel already.”

Torix chided, “Oh yes Kessiah, we’ve seen how effective you are given your level. I recall Daniel nearly defeating you with a what, a 1500 level disadvantage? Makes you wonder if my disciple would even falter now. I’m sure he’s developed his skills instead of lounging around and relying on his innate talents.”

Althea stepped up, “Will you two please stop acting like children.”

Althea wasn’t the kind of person to say that, so she got their attention. Kessiah and Torix stared at each other before Kessiah frowned at Althea,

“Are you saying we’re children now? Don’t get a big head just because you gained a few levels.”

Althea stood her ground, “It has nothing to do with levels. Try to think about this like we’re a team, because that’s what we are now.”

She pointed at Torix, “Torix has a lot knowledge. If we use that, we can get a lot out of it.” Althea pointed a hand at Kessiah, “You’re really strong. If we use that right, we can get a lot out of it too.” Althea clapped her hands together,

“But if we use them together, we can cover a lot more ground than either could cover alone. It’s kind of like me and Daniel. We have our differences, but those difference make us better together, not worse. Both of you could do the same thing if you just stopped fighting all the time.”

After the outburst, we all stared at her. Althea speaking up like this was like a rare event. It didn't happen often, and that made it stand out. As Althea blushed, I stepped up,

"In other words, stop jabbing at each other. I get why you guys dreaded working together, but come on guys. You're like a thousand years old or something, right? Live up to it."

Torix narrowed his eyes, gripping his hand into a fist before sighing. He turned a palm to Kessiah, "As much as I hate admitting it, I agree with them. We're being petty. The bad history between us has a way of bringing that out. We can set it aside until after Yawm dies."

Kessiah pursed her lips as she crossed her arms, "It was just a little bit of fun. It's better than just doing everything like we're robots, or even worse, Daniel."

I rolled my eyes, "That would just be terrible wouldn't it?"

Torix shrugged, "Few things would be worse."

I patted Althea's back, "I didn't think you had it in you to stop these two."

Althea blushed a deeper shade of violet as she glanced at the ground, "Just trying to help."

Kessiah walked up, pressing a finger to my chest, "Don't think you're off the hook. I remember what you said. It sounded to me like you were trying to start a fight."

She clenched a fist at her side. For a second, I thought she was serious. After looking a little closer, it wasn't that she was actually trying to fight. It was like she was testing me.

Taking a gamble, I shook my head, "Start a fight? Not really." I gripped my hands into fists, "Always ready for one though."

My armor grinned as my unique skill, Overwhelming presence pervaded outward. Kessiah's glare deepened. She held me in suspense for a moment before slapping my shoulder,

"Damn, you really grew a backbone while you were gone." She glanced at Althea, a teasing grin on her face as she ruffled Althea's hair, "You both did."

Using her long, purple hair as a curtain to hide her face, Althea flushed further. Despite her embarrassment and curtain of hair, I could tell there was a reluctant smile on her lips. The group let her relish in that feeling for a minute before Hod opened his wings towards us all,

"Hod feel left out. Hod go to new home. Hod tired."

As he walked off, I waved a hand, "Good luck Hod. Be careful."

Hod shook his head, "Hod more careful than even Dry Man. Cut Hod some slack."

He paced a few feet before leaping into the air. He glided upwards in a circle, following a blue screen in front of him. Hod must have already uploaded a map to his new house. He dived toward the direction his map indicated. In classic Hod fashion, he slammed straight into the side of a brick building. He might have been staring a bit too closely at that map of his.

Almost like a cartoon, he fell from the wall, leaving an imprint of himself in the brick. Althea giggled while Kessiah busted out laughing. Kessiah even pointed at him while slapping her knee. Torix and I just sighed in disappointment. Hod pointed at us, cawing, "Map dangerous. Hod know now."

He jumped back up and glided away. That's how the other birds left as well. It didn't take long before the crowd of birds dispersed. Torix walked up to me, placing a hand on my shoulder. I turned back around to face him,

"What's up?"

Torix pointed back at his laboratory house, "Before I begin on the logistics of this situation, there's something I'd like to show you. If you have the time that is."

“Of course I do. Let me say goodbye first then I’ll go with you.”

After saying some goodbyes to Kessiah and Althea, Torix and I traveled back to his home. I ran while he floated on a cloud of black mana. As we traveled, Torix went into a spill,

“You know, your capacity for leveling is highly unusual. I thought it would take at least another few years before you out leveled me, yet here you are, having already done the impossible. I suppose centuries spent inside a dusty old library didn’t do me as much good I thought it did. Regardless-“

He turned towards me with a glowing smile, “I’m proud of you.”

Fortunately for me, my helmet was on. Otherwise Torix would’ve seen me blush. I shook out my own embarrassment, “Thanks Torix. That means a lot.”

Torix faced forwards again, “As it should. I don’t give out compliments lightly. I don’t give out gifts lightly either, but I believe you’re ready for one when we get back. It should be a key component of your future progress.”

“What is it?”

Torix rubbed his hands together, “You’ll see when we get back.”

Within minutes, we reached back into Torix’s base of operations. The tunnels, wires, and runic inscriptions had slowly but surely turned this suburban home into an evil lair. As we paced inside, Torix announced,

“While you were gone, I went about creating your new gift. I was planning on giving it you as a means of furthering your runic studies. They seem to be the focal point of your current interests. Instead of trying to refocus your learning on necromancy, letting you traverse further into the runic arts would do you more good. It is by far your most advanced magic after all.”

I shook my head, “Not quite.”

Torix opened the door, turning to me, “What do you mean?”

I walked up to a nearby tree, just big enough for your average guy to wrap his arms around it. I set up my telekinetic augments, firing my ascendant mana, and drove my fist into the nearby tree all at once. Before my fist landed, a gravitational vortex snapped right where my fist was headed. As my hand impacted the vortex, my hand blew backwards like firing a cannon. The impact shot through the telekinetic augment, firing a bullet of kinetic energy at the tree.

The tree blew up. The entire trunk evaporated, splinters and sawdust floating through the air. The tree fell towards the house, but I grabbed it with telekinesis. Using a gravity warp for assistance, I pulled the tree sideways. As it fell to the ground, Torix froze in place.

I turned to him,

“It’s called Volatile Carnage.”

## Chapter 85: Grimoire

Torix stepped towards the tree, “So you gained another mythical skill then?”

I nodded, “Yeah, it worked out pretty well. I take the gravitational warps then spin them around. It creates a vortex that pulls my hand into the material and the material into my hand.”

Torix nodded, “Interesting. I’ve never even thought of using gravity that way. Here I thought you’d use the magic for mobility and the like. I should have known. You use it to punch harder. Classic Daniel.”

I frowned, “Cut me some slack. It isn’t like I’ve had gravity magic forever. It takes some time to gain mastery over something like this.”

Torix walked back towards his lair, “Indeed it does. My gift may help you progress further and faster in that regard.”



I followed him inside his home before we walked into the basement. I followed him into his lair before we walked down the tunnel system he developed with the beetles. After pacing for a bit, we reached the center of a large tunnel system. It reminded me of how the runes were set up in BloodHollow, a circle room surrounded by tunnels.

Within the circular room and tunnels, runes covered the walls. Beetles crawled along them, carving the inscriptions into the hardened earth. They weren't eldritch runes, but the complexity of the inscriptions were similar. Torches lit those inscriptions, bathing the scene in an orange light.

At the center of it all, there was a marble well full of a shining blue liquid. As we reached the well full of mana, I glanced around,

"Looks like you took a few cues from Baldag-Ruhl."

Torix shrugged, "I know genius when I see it. There is no reason in avoiding the advantages of Baldag-Ruhl's implementations. In this case, I am tweaking his own methods for creating grimoires."

I raised an eyebrow at him, "Grimoires?"

Torix nodded, "They are textbooks of magic. Every mage should own a grimoire, as they allow an easy usage of runes and complex magic. Up till this point, I've neglected giving you one. Do you know why?"

I scratched my cheek, "Maybe because I'd destroy it?"

Torix pulled the tome I'd seen him use time and time again,

"I can't deny that entirely, but that isn't the primary reason. You see, a grimoire is often given to disciples too early on in their development. You only need to write a magic once before you may use it without referencing it ever again. While this may sound absurd, it stunts the growth of a young mage."

I shook my head, "It makes perfect sense. Practice makes perfect, and it's hard to get practice when you only have to do something one time."

Torix walked up to the marble well full of mana. He tossed his dusty tome into the well of magic. The runes surrounding us shined a bright blue, spreading throughout the entire construct. The air shivered as the humming of magic energies electrified the air. As the buildup of energy reached its apex, the blue aura inside the runes imploded into the well.

No longer full of the blue liquid, Torix took out his old tome. Except, it wasn't old any more. The new leather binding complimented the pages marked with glossy ink. Torix turned through the pages, a mad grin on his face before he turned to me,

"I just created a new grimoire from the copy of my old one. I charged mana into this grimoire over the last few hours. In total, I used over 1,000,000 mana on this single book, a feat few mages can match. From what I gained of your old health regeneration, you could match that output in only twenty minutes. That is absurd."

I weighed my hands back and forth, "Yeah, but it isn't like I know what to do with all my mana yet. I'm not using it very well. At least I don't think I am."

Torix grinned, "That is what I am here for, disciple. For your own grimoire, you need to channel your mana into this well for however long you can. Most can handle the suffering and debilitating stress for about four or five minutes. I expect more out of you than that."

Torix placed his palm over the well, "To do so is simple. Place your palm over the well and flow your mana into it. The booklet will take a suitable form thereafter using the charged mana."

He turned to me, his grin growing evil, "Are you ready for the trial?"

I rolled my eyes, "I have level one hundred in Pain Tolerance. It isn't like this is going to be painful."

Torix frowned, "Bah, why ruin an old necromancer's fun? Regardless of what you might believe, the pain won't be the difficult part. Controlling the flow of your mana will be, especially considering it's more of a flood at this point."

Torix pocketed his new grimoire into his robe, “Before you begin something like this, we need you as strong as you can possibly be. As such, I’ll be giving you the dungeon cores you need.”

He opened a black portal to his side, he reached his hand into it, “How many do you need?”

I glanced at my status. Since turning level 1000, the status screen changed. At the upper right corner of it, there was a number indicating how many dungeon cores I absorbed. Below it was a number showing how many cores I could still absorb. I fiddled with my status,

“I need about eighteen of them.”

Torix sighed, “There is one thing correct about what Kessiah said earlier. I am almost out of dungeon cores for you and Althea. I still have enough for this at least.”

He handed me the eighteen red cores and two smaller yellow cores. I assimilated the cores before checking out my status. With a single thought, all the attributes poured into endurance. I selected finalize.

I didn’t expect much from 182 attribute points. At that point, it wasn’t an enormous increase in my total stats. It wasn’t even enough to move my endurance up by a tenth. That made the rush of vitality and the restructuring of the arcane chains shocking. It was a solid increase in my vitality, something I hadn’t seen coming.

With that in mind, I opened my status screens,

Level 1360

Strength – 1274 | Constitution – 1556.6 | Endurance – 3059.2

Dexterity – 406.2 | Willpower – 1892.6 | Intelligence – 719.2

Charisma – 96.3 | Luck – 239.8 | Perception – 191.9

\*\*\*\*\*

Health 193,733/193,733 66,107/min or 1102/sec Phys Dam Reduction –  
98% Stamina 86,800/86,800 1012sec Elemental Res – 98% Harbinger of Cataclysm 12.98  
Billion/56.6 Billion 74.3/per min (conduit) Plasma Res – 98%

Oppression Damage- 15,000 + 80% hp/min Rad Res – 98% Phys Dam Bonus – 13,530%  
| Total Damage Bonus 20% Mental Res – 98%

The first notable difference was that my health and health regen shifted quite a bit. All the other stats increased at a steady rate except those two stats. I almost had 200K health now, and my health regen was insane. I went back over my perks and stats totals, sifting for an answer. I found it after a minute of searching.

The level 1000 perks gave huge bonuses that scaled with every 1000 points I gained in an attribute. The reason for the steep increase in health and its regeneration was I passed 3000 total endurance. Since I amassed another 1000 in the attribute, my scaling in health and health regeneration increased. This resulted in a solid boost in stats.

It was a nice boon for my stats, kind of like a surprise gift. With that gift in tow, I walked up beside Torix. We stood in front of the marble well, the blue liquid gone now that the mana was drained. Torix turned to me, “Just channel the flow of your mana into the ritual. It should do the rest for you.”

I nodded before reaching out both my hands, “Any other tips?”

Torix pointed at the runes, “You may have to adjust the runic configuration using your own mana. I made the incantation as generalized as possible, but your mana is unique. Creating a ritual specifically for it proved difficult.”

“Alright, thanks. I’ll give it a shot.” I closed my eyes, sensing for my mana. It returned in a torrent, like a raging river of energy. I poured it into the well, the mana coursing like a vibrant cascade. The red mana infested the marble well, making a demonic red, the same color as my ascendant mana.

Not long after, my mana poured out of the well. The infestation spread throughout the runes, replacing the blue with the crimson color. I tried pulling mana in, but it was damn hard. It was like trying to aim a fire hose at a fly.

Even with my enhanced concentration, the ebb and flow of mana coursed out of the well. Starving tendrils of the red singed the runic inscriptions. They disrupted the flow of mana. From the scorch marks, a brighter red crawled outward. Within seconds, this bright red bathed the room in a red glow.

Waves of energy spilled over the fountain. The ground quaked, the shifting red tendrils tearing into the rest of the runes. The chaotic energy split the incantation, riving it apart. The mana corrupted the complex inscription as it passed through it.

Seeing the ensuing chaos, Torix shouted, "Stop the ritual. You aren't ready. We'll adjust the ritual over the next few weeks. It won't be as difficult then."

I grimaced, "We don't have a few weeks. Yawm is about to wake up. We need to be ready for that. It's now or never."

His words doubled my resolve. If I wasn't ready now, I never would be. I was a higher level than Torix, and controlling my mana would continue to be a problem down the line. The problem would expand in size, because it would increase as my health increased. Getting a hold on it now would serve me well in the future.

With this realization, I gritted my clenched my teeth. I glared at the well, commanding the mana to obey. The torrent of energy, like a thick entropy, begged for release. I wouldn't allow it. I crushed the energy, forcing it to stabilize. It rebelled against my own efforts, but my iron will oppressed it. Like the hands of a serial strangler, I choked the life out of the living mana.

The red lines receded from the other runes and the singe marks healed. As they receded, the mana within the well filled to the brim. Pulling the mana back into the well would result in a weakened grimoire. It couldn't hold enough mana. I needed to do more than reign the mana in. I needed to wield it as my own and warp the ritual for my own needs.

I balanced the chaotic force, allowing it to leak into the runes once more. This time, I bended the volatile forces within the ascendant mana. Like channeling mana through the runes of my armor, I channeled mana through the runes on the floor. Instead of destabilizing the ritual, I made the energy organize the runes in my own image.

As the mana passed through the carvings, they changed. The clear, precise lettering turned coarse and violent. The crimson mana crept outward from the well, altering the entire ritual. It was a slow, calculated change this time. I wasn't letting the mana run wild anymore.

Breakthrough achieved! Ascendant Manipulation(lvl 47)→(lvl 62)

The changed ritual reflected my own mana instead of Torix's more stable magic. His magic was a cold, analytical kind of power. Mine was a frenzy and fire. It was like an endless hunger, waiting to dig its teeth into anything it touched. I used that hunger, making it my own.

Lightning arced from the changed runes, saturating the runes with the energy. As it spilled further and further out, the mana became harder and harder to control. The pace of its growth slowed until every inch further out was a desperate struggle. My hands shook as my armor shivered. More of my mana poured, surpassing my ability to generate it.

Breakthrough achieved! Overcharge(lvl 4)→(lvl 29)

Blood poured out of my skin, the liquid evaporating into the electric energy. Once inside the well, it fed the growing demands of the ritual. Time passed slower as the growing toll on my body became evident.

Strips of my armor peeled from my skin, melting into a black liquid that fed the ritual. My teeth loosened, turning soft as butter. The well at the center of the ritual poured the red mana over the side.

The mana crawled over the surface of the ritual. It filled into the etched runes, turning them a dark red while the rock itself remained crimson. This second layer of the ritual demanded even more mana, begging for more of my flesh. I relented, giving the ritual what it needed. Torix floated over me now, laughing like a maniac,

"This really is quite the bloody spectacle. I've never seen the creation of a grimoire become so interesting!"

My skin melted. My bones softened, bending under my own weight. The arcane chains lining my flesh disintegrated along with my gums and cheeks. Blood leaked from my

eyes, ears, and mouth. More time passed, and Torix cast a glowing green spell onto my back,

“This shall heal you, giving you a bit more mana to work with.”

At that point, I neared death. The ritual consumed me, devouring my body like some hungry parasite. It gorged on my blood and feasted on my flesh. For the first time since maxing out my Pain Tolerance, a dull ache formed throughout my body. That pain grew as my health lowered below ten percent. The glowing green light of Torix’s healing spell strengthened as he murmured,

“Hold it. Hold it. The ritual won’t kill you. It’s simply taking as much as you’re willing to give it.”

And I gave the ritual everything. Every piece of my mind, every corner and shard of concentration, it fed into the incantation. I maintained the ritual with all that I was. The second, deeper layer of the ritual covered the entire room. As it did, the room turned into a lake of blood. The pain turned into a throbbing. The throbbing turned into sharp, burning waves of agony. I hissed,

“How does it even hurt? I have maximum Pain Tolerance.”

Torix struggled out his words, “The ritual isn’t working like normal...Aren’t you excited?”

As sweat poured down my face, I rolled my eyes, “That’s easy to say when you’re not the one melting.”

Torix let out a short, hoarse laugh before we dug deep into our roles. He healed me, giving extra mana and health while I focused on keeping the spell intact. Well, that and not dying. For more help, Torix supplied me many buffs. Torix grabbed healing and mana potions from his dark portal too. He even sacrificed several summons for extra mana and health.

As Torix grasped for more health and mana for me, I grasped for more control of the ritual. The greater the crimson infestation spread through the runes, the greater the toll on my mind. My body suffered with it. My knees buckled. My back bent. Despite the

sharp suffering, my head remained unbowed. I controlled the will of the ritual, fine tuning it with a will like steel.

I got a hold of the ritual over time. It became easier and easier to make the ritual operate. Once I got a handle on maintaining the ritual's growth, I focused on restructuring it. Any inefficiency, any imperfection, I ironed it out. As I used the mana for honing the ritual, controlling it became easier. Aspects of it suited me more, turning the incantation into a better conduit for my mana.

By the time the ritual stopped using all my health regen, I altered it completely. It couldn't be called Torix's ritual anymore. It was my own.

Once the ritual was set in place, the runes soaked up the mana. They built mana in the ritual, dispersing it throughout the cavern. By the time the ritual reached its apex, thunder echoed off the walls from lightning arcing in the distance. The air blurred with the electric force of mana. A near unbreathable density saturated the cave, like the mana was becoming physical.

Breakthrough achieved! Overcharge(lvl 29)→(lvl 54)

The voice in my head whispered throughout the mana. It begged for destruction. It begged to devour. Just like before, I silenced it. The mana reminded me of the ambient mana used by the Lord of Worms. The mana thickened until it choked a normal person. This mana was no different.

Here I had thought the mana was a voice in my head. Instead it was the unrestrained voice of the mana I made, wanting destruction and ruin. With my superior control of mana, silencing it proved simple. With this volume of super charged mana, the task became far more difficult.

At my breaking point, I fell onto one knee. As I did, the ritual finally ended. All the built up mana poured back into the well, filling it as a giant sphere of the mana coalesced. Like a miniature sun forming above me, the sphere of glowing mana condensed further. The sun reformed into the outline of a grimoire.

A shockwave of energy forced Torix and me back as the blinding light faded. The leather bound book flopped into the well before I pushed myself off the ground. As I looked up, Torix stared down at me. His body pressed into the stone. He coughed,



“I’m fine. Go grab the grimoire.”

I laughed a little before pushing myself onto my feet. My mental endurance showed itself as a few seconds of reprieve was enough to function again. Using that inhuman persistence, I jogged up to the grimoire.

The thick book was a maroon color, with a black lock bolting it shut. As I tapped the soft looking leather, it rung like metal at my touch. Underneath the leather, a layer of metal acted as reinforcement for it. The book’s weight and durability came from that metal.

At the center of the front cover, two circles were on it, each symbol intersecting. Within the intersecting circles, the book was pitch black. It was the kind of black that soaked in the light around it. Outside the black, the shining leather was pristine. Outside of those features, it looked like a normal book.

As I observed it, my health returned to normal. Guessing how to use it, I poured a bit of my mana into the seal. The lock popped open, revealing the pale pages within the book. I ran my fingertips across the parchment. The paper was harder than my armor. A thin sheet of something covered the pages and weaved through the fibers of the paper.

I grabbed a sheet of the paper and jerked at it. The paper didn’t tear. Hell, it didn’t even crumple. Torix pulled himself from the roof during my inspection. He floated towards me, leaning towards the book from my side. He cupped his chin,

“Curious. This is the most durable and one of the thickest grimoires I’ve ever seen.”

I shrugged, “That’s good...It seems like a solid book...I mean, that’s nice and all, but I don’t think it was worth all that trouble.”

Torix leaned away from the grimoire, “That would be true if the grimoire didn’t act as a conduit for magic. With it, you can avoid the trouble of setting up a ritual every time you need a complex incantation. You flip to the page you need, and the grimoire will guide your mana for you. That’s if you have the incantation made, of course.”

I turned the pages of the grimoire. Halfway through the booklet, the pages were black instead of the pristine white of the beginning pages. I pressed my hand into the page, but nothing happened. I tapped the page for a moment before scratching the paper. The black markings etched off, revealing a pristine white underneath an inch of the black paper.

I couldn't tell how the paper was so thin, yet it let me carve so deep. I etched a simple magic rune before channeling some mana into the page. The runes I carved into the page glowed. The runes floated off the page before I pressed the back of my hand against the floating runes. They etched into my armor, an easy method of changing them. An evil grin crawled up my lips, "This is exactly what I need."

Torix frowned, "For what?"

I turned to him with an evil grin, holding the grimoire in my hand.

"For carving the eldritch runes into my armor."

Chapter 86: The Final Piece

Torix pursed his lips, "How exactly does the book allow mastery of those runes?"

I lowered my hand, the grimoire slapping against my side, "There's a bunch of reasons. For starters, the eldritch runes are smaller and more intricate than the magic runes. Writing them on the page lets me create denser inscriptions."

Torix let out a hand towards me, so I let him inspect the grimoire as he said,

"That isn't enough to give you some breakthrough in the subject I fear."

I weighed my hands back and forth, "That isn't the only thing this book lets me do. Writing on the book is less awkward than writing on myself. The booklet lets me save certain inscriptions too. If I need to alter the runes for burrowing, then I can make that happen on this booklet. I can specialize my runes."

I raised one hand, continuing, "I'll be able to revise models and mass produce them. I can hook up the entire legion with new rifles empowered by enchantments."

Torix's eyes opened wide, "You could mass produce other basic enchantments for rings and the like as well. With the extra Eltari, our fighting forces would no longer be struggling with quarantine. We'll be able to fight against the infected areas from different fronts."

I nodded, taking the grimoire as he finished inspecting it. I opened a page, carving out a simple rune. On the other page, I carved out another simple rune. I channeled mana into one page, and the rune floated upwards, glowing red. I did the same with the other page, and the runes floated beside each other. They became one incantation.

I clapped the grimoire shut, "See that? I can make inscriptions and fuse them. I could make a whole alphabet of different phrases then mix and match them for different effects. No matter what the situation was, I'd be able to handle it."

Torix glanced at the ritual room he had created, "You could replicate this entire structure within the confines of those few pages." He leaned towards the thick tome in my hands, "There are no limits here."

I nodded my head. I turned towards the outside of the room, "I'm going to go make the runes for the steel legion right now. Getting them a bit more oomph should be our priority. After that, the Eltari's armor will hopefully be finished. I'll make them a few enchantments as well."

Torix walked back and forth, gesturing with his hands, "I'll organize the legion for setting up the process. You'll be able to go through the entire upgrade within a few days. Once that's over with, we'll do the same with the Eltari. With the added firepower, overwhelming the quarantine zone will turn into a reality."

He looked up to me, "By the time Yawm awakens, he'll have no stronghold and no eldritch to save him. We'll crush him with our raw numbers. Hah, hah! As a necromancer, I relish in the idea of it. We'll smother him like a bird with broken wings, trapped on an anthill."

I nodded my head, "Fuck, why stop there? I'll give enchantments to some of your summons. I'll become an enchantment factory all by myself."

He and I walked out of his lair, discussing the details of our new plans with excitement. The more we discussed it, the better the plan seemed, like a sudden godsend against Yawm. Up till then, we didn't have some concrete plan to take him down. We were running on faith. All of a sudden, we didn't have faith anymore. We had a plan.

With that plan as our guide, we set out on doing it. Over the next week, Kessiah trained the new Eltari by teaching them simple combat skills. Torix organized the legion for my runic additions. Althea scouted the enemy, discovering where each of the four followers were and what they were doing. I carved out a dozen complex runic additions, mimicking the additions I made to Althea's rifle.

After that, the runic enhancement started. A single soldier would walk up, and I would channel mana into my grimoire. Then I set up all twelve of the enhancements, placing them onto the appropriate gear. I made the armor stronger. I made the rifles fire farther and faster. I made the jetpacks on their backs reduce their effect on gravity.

On their dog tags I gave them attribute enhancements in endurance and constitution. Each steel legion trooper carried a steel ring as a sign of their commitment to the legion. On those rings, I gave them enhancements for strength and intelligence. On the Kevlar beneath their armor, I gave healing enhancements and made their armor lighter.

For three days, I worked night and day doing this. I needed no sleep. I needed no rest. I was a machine, creating the enchantments like clockwork. I handled a hundred an hour, pushing through the mental exhaustion with my iron clad will. Once I finished with the legion, the Eltari were next.

They were given steel rings enchanted with speed and silence. They made less noise during flight, enhancing their abilities for guerilla warfare. Upon their newly made dog tags, I reduced their mana costs and gave them access to a few simple spells. It allowed them to learn either a dominion, augmentation, or origin spell, depending on their affinity.

They progressed from untrained villagers into a fighting force within a week. Kessiah whipped them into shape, giving them a basic breakdown on fighting and tactics with Schema. She may lack my technical finesse with fist fighting, but she could teach the basics. Within two weeks of the Eltari arriving, we gained nearly two thousand extra troops while upgrading our own.

My unique skill that helped with crafting, Thaumaturge, raised over sixty points during this time. As it raised, the effects of the enchanted gear increased as well. Knowing this would happen, Torix organized the enchantments in order of importance. The Eltari went last, getting my strongest enchantments. Basic foot soldiers guarding the quarantine zone went first. This wasted none of the needed stats.

Over the next week after that, Torix and I organized strike teams for fighting against the infested areas. The Eltari gained levels at a rapid pace, turning from liabilities to assets. The legion gained levels as well, turning them from useless grunts into reasonable fighters.

During this time, I gained the skill Tactics, raising it over forty levels. My skill Strategy raised as well, letting me organize the troops. I couldn't match Torix's prowess in either area, but I acted as an efficient commander who fought with the others on the ground. I helped protect weaker teams and assisted them in leveling faster.

It didn't take long before we began punching holes in the quarantine zone. As the speed of our assaults ramped up, I no longer guarded the weaker squadrons. The average level in the legion raised from 213 up to 334. Combine that with the runic enhancements, and we turned the entire force from zero to hero.

Once their operations fully functioned on their own with few casualties, I was finally free. I was going to clear rifts. It wouldn't be every other week either. With all the information Althea and the Eltari gained, organizing the missions simplified for Torix. He no longer relied only on piecing together patches of information from his minions. He had solid, reliable data from a damn near invisible spy.

Avoiding the followers was an easy affair now. After I helped with all the logistics work, I looked forward to some old-fashioned violence. With a waning patience, time closed in on the date. When the day came, a cloudless, sunny sky showed a broad, blue sky. It was a day more at home during Summer. If it wasn't for a biting cold and leafless trees, I couldn't even tell the difference in seasons.

The cold and the wind brushed against my armor as I walked towards Torix. He was going to brief me on what was to come for the day. Althea already spied near the rift along with the Eltari, giving us an idea of who was coming. All the followers were far and away from the rift. They only had a few named ones guarding it. This let me act with impunity.

Enjoying the prospect of letting loose, a glowing grin traced my lips as I walked into Torix's lair. From the lair, Torix's beetles built an underground network of tunnels. They had spread them all throughout Springfield. Whenever Yawm finally came out, his minions would be caught in these tunnels. The legion would use them as trenches and cover. The framework for stopping him was coming together.

The source of that framework was this unassuming, suburban building. I stepped inside Torix's lair, papers spread all throughout his room. Numbers, formulas, runes, the papers on the walls carried all that and more.

Red rope connected different papers and images of the followers, detailing their weaknesses. Organized lists of their minions followed near them, along with their alliances. Torix left no stone unturned in his pursuit of killing them. The followers weren't quite as thorough.

We were lucky in that regard. From Althea's spying, we discovered that most of Yawm's minions underestimated us. Earth being a backwater world was a viewpoint shared by more than just the FearFighters and the Enigmatta. As a result, the followers' response was too little and too late. The rapid cycling of our troops meant they couldn't keep up, though they didn't make much of an effort too.

The source of that rapid cycling, Torix, hunched over a holographic desk. A detailed, blue, and three-dimensional map was shifting as it was fueled by information. As Torix's obelisk received data, the positions of the followers updated along with red lines tracking their trajectory. As they changed positions, Torix updated the mission feeds of troops. It meant the followers were running in circles instead of slaughtering them.

Juggling all this, Torix fiddled with his status screen while glancing at the 3-D model. In this environment, his abilities shined. His charisma assisted with keeping morale high and ensuring the soldiers obeyed him. His intelligence and skills let him think up plans and execute them flawlessly. His willpower enabled him to continue this, and him being a lich meant he never needed food or rest.

If anything, he looked even more excited than the first day he started. He glanced up to me with a grin,

"Ah, Daniel, right on time. Did you read the debriefing I sent you?"

I nodded, “Yup. I’ve got about two hours to finish this rift up. After that, I’ll need to update a few squadrons with some speed enchantments.”

Torix glanced back the map, then at his status. He adjusted the message, sending it before turning to me, “What is your Thaumaturge skill at now?”

“Seventy-four.”

He raised an eyebrow, “Did you hit a breakthrough earlier?”

I shook my head, “Nope. It’s just been a busy week.”

Torix gripped his hand into a fist in front of him, “It’s been exciting. It’s about to get even more exciting after we clear out the last two high danger rifts remaining. We’ll be killing one of the followers, Elijah. Oh how I look forward to playing with his corpse.”

I clanked my fists together, “I look forward to making him into one.”

Torix nodded, sending me a message. My interface updated with the route I would follow to reach the rift. Torix raised a finger towards the air, “You’ve got all that you need now except one thing.”

I raised an eyebrow, “What else is there?”

“You need one other person to come with you. This person hasn’t been as busy as he should have been either.”

I nodded, reaching out with Tactile Cognition. Beneath us, someone hid inside the floorboards. Only one person was dumb enough to do something like that, so I frowned. That frowned devolved into a grimace, “Why do I have to take him along?”

Torix squinted his eyes, “Because I can’t handle babysitting him anymore.”

Hod’s head burst out of the floorboards, “Hod surprise Harbinger. Hod coming to help clear rift.”

Hod raised his arms as I sighed. I dragged my hands across my face, “Are you serious?”

Torix rubbed his hands together, “Oh, I’m dead serious.” He cackled. “Do enjoy the company.”

I turned to Hod, grimacing as he pulled himself out of the floor. Once up, Hod struck a pose like a lame, outdated disco dancer,

“Hod sorry if Hod steal all lady friends during mission. Hod can’t help Hod’s self.”

It was going to be a long rift.

#### Chapter 87: Escape

Torix waved us away, “Good luck disciple. I’m sure Hod’s presence will offer many advantages.”

I groaned as we walked out of Torix’s lair. After mentally cursing Torix, Hod and I walked out towards a nearby manhole. Before leaving, I opened my spacial ring and pulled out my grimoire. I pointed at Hod,

“I’m going to update some of your gear. Mind giving me your steel ring and dog tag?”

Hod shook his head, “Hod not bothered.” He handed me the ring and necklace, “Hod hate not helping. Dry man not want help from Hod. Gray man not want help from Hod either. Hod grateful Harbinger let Hod help.”

I sighed, “It’s not that they don’t want your help, it’s that they’re scared you’ll destroy the mission and them too. You’re kind of like a toddler being given super powers. Powerful? Maybe. Useful? Eh, not really.”

Hod’s chest deflated as he leaned down, “Harbinger hurt Hod feelings. Hod sad.”



I shook my head, channeling mana into the grimoire, “Tweak your perspective a bit.” I pointed at him, “I did say you were powerful. That’s much more than most soldiers. What you need is to just focus on learning to use that power effectively.”

I turned back to my grimoire, “I think of it as your fatal flaw or something like that. Overcome it, and you’ll be helping more than just about anyone else.”

Hod’s chest puffed back out, his mood lightening, “Hod think on what Harbinger say. Hod confused, but Hod sort it out.”

From my grimoire, a complex, intricate enchantment floated from the grimoire. I placed the dog tag over the enchantment, the tiny font fitting around Hod’s name on the dog tag. Lifting the steel ring, I placed a different enchantment onto the ring. I handed them back to Hod,

“These should help. All of them are enchanted with intelligence. I figured that’s what you needed the most.”

Hod took them from me, “Hod thank Harbinger.” He put them on, the dull look on his face easing some. He raised a finger, “Hod even smarter now.”

I stood up, “Well, it’s a work in progress. It isn’t like I’m not getting you much more than fifty points of intelligence anyways. Hell, I had to wait this long before I could put a dent in your intelligence anyway.” I waved a hand towards the manhole, “It should help at least. Come on, let’s go kick some ass.”

I stomped the edge of the manhole cover, flipping it upwards. It turned like a coin toss before I punched it. My hand flew backwards as the manhole cover shot towards a car. It slammed into the metal, leaving the metal cover bended out of shape. I leapt down into the sewer before Hod followed. As I fell onto concrete floor, I pounded my feet into the pavement.

Shooting down the tunnel, I relished in using Phaser. Having sat at a desk bored me to death, and babysitting legion members wasn’t much better. Spawns of Yawm were nothing to me now. Watching the soldiers kill them bored me even more than killing them on my own. Absorbing them didn’t even dent my armor evolution anymore either.

Avoiding deaths helped bolster morale and motivate the troops though. It was a necessary task at the time. As I traveled through the sewer tunnels, there was no need for restraining myself anymore. I bounced off telekinetic augments, launching myself around curves. I warped gravity to enhance my speed. I dove through walls, gliding through the ground and concrete. It was liberating.

Hod kept up with a struggle. In an environment like this, the Earth Glider skill helped with traveling much more than flight did. Despite Hod's better build for speed, I outpaced him as I maneuvered through walls and around curves. If anything, combining Phaser, Earth Gliding, and some other unique skill would be my next mythical skill. Mobility was useful and too fun to pass up.

Soaking that feeling in, I reached near the rift in ten minutes. Hod caught up a few minutes after. Once we were there, Hod and I stood beside a ladder leading up the manhole. I raised both my hands at him,

"Hod. You must be quiet now. If you make too much noise, then we're fucked. Once we're inside the rift--"

A message from Torix appeared on the upper left corner of my vision. I opened it.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill(12:08 pm 11/27/00) – One of the followers is going through the town and decimating the tunnels I created. He's heading your way. I don't believe he'll go into any rift, so be quiet if you can.

I turned to Hod, "We have to go, now."

I reached out with Tactile Cognition. A map of what laid above visualized around me through hearing. I closed my eyes, focusing on that map. There wasn't enough information for me to see what was going on. Even with my gravitational sense, I needed more sight and the wind to get a good picture.

I jumped up, flying up the slim tunnel leading outside. As I reached the manhole cover, I created a pad of telekinesis. The pad absorbed the impact from jumping, dispersing it as a blast of wind through the sewer. I lifted the top of the sewer pad, keeping a slow crawl before peeking outside.

The ground rippled beneath us and around me, quaking the concrete. A wave of sound followed, destroying a portion of the sewer. A blast of heated air funneled down towards me before I glanced down. Silent as a shadow, Hod waited right beneath me. I pointed outside, and he nodded. Lifting the manhole cover, I came out of the sewer.

It was a normal part of town for the most part. There was a gas station to my left, situated beside an intersection of highways. Further down that was a tunnel leading beneath a set of train tracks. A used car lot was to my right, away from the gas station. Weeds cropped up from between cracks in the road and concrete, showing the lack of maintenance here.

The only unusual thing about it was the sea of blue fire behind the tunnel and train tracks. Hod grimaced, “Evil burning beetles. Evil not know about Harbinger and Hod.”

Heated air brushed against my cheek, “Let’s hope so.”

I dashed towards the rift on my mini map, keeping in the shadows and alleyways of buildings. Hod followed behind me. I lightened myself with a gravity warp, and I used telekinetic pads to disperse the impact of my footsteps. I was still much louder than Hod. It came with the build I had though.

After four blocks of skulking around, we reached the rift. Laying within a cluster of bushes at the center of a park, creeping formations of stone rose into the air. It was like a leafless tree of stone. A bird flew over the one of the stone branches, and the nearest branch wrapped around it. Teeth of rock bit into the bird before it melted into the stone.

Stone Eater(lvl 646) – This species devours stones before using the minerals to coat their outer skin. Their teeth are made of the strongest minerals found, allowing them to chew through even metal with ease. Combine this innate durability with extremely effective camouflage, and the monster can kill sentients of a higher level if they are caught unaware.

Once the victim has been killed, stone eaters will eat the prey through assimilation. They remove their rock shells and fuse their own flesh to their victims. If the prey isn’t dead, it can become an unwilling parasite, living on the monster without being able to move away. Stone eaters have been found with many struggling creatures, creating abominations.

With your armor being too hard to pierce and your flesh too dense to eat, stone eaters will struggle against you.

Killing the thing wasn't the problem. Killing it without making a concert's worth of noise was the issue. Before I thought up a way of handling it, Hod turned towards his left. He sprinted into the gas station before a loud splat echoed from inside it. A crunching emitted from inside before the sound of popping bones and splitting skin took over.

Hod ran out, blood and guts hanging from his beaked mouth and red covering his eyes. He looked at me like a predator assessing prey before turning back towards the stone eater. Dashing forward, he stayed light on his feet. A black fire left where his feet stepped. Once it burned away, the filthy concrete was a polished white where his feet had been.

He reached the balls of stone tendrils. Three of them whipped towards him, but Hod swiped his darkened talons. Streaks of pitch black remained after the swipe. As the rock tentacles streamed towards him, they chopped against the black rocks. Weaving around his own weapon, Hod glided on his feet before slicing through more of the stone branches.

Almost like a dancer, he dodged their attacks while making them run into his own shadow streaks. The black cut through the rock without any hassle, and the tree was missing half its branches in seconds. Hod raised a hand, his fingers molding together. A sword of shade coalesced from his fingers before he cleaved through the tree.

I charged towards the monster, stabbing my arm through the stone skin. The tree drained of its essence before landing. Hod turned to me with a savage grin on his face,

“Good Harbinger.”

I nodded, “Good Hod too.”

As I sapped the tree, the opening of the rift appeared. A portal of stone led into a pitch-black descent. Hod leaped into the portal without any worry, more excited to kill than anything else. He reminded me of an eldritch of about level 1200, but trained for combat. That made him destructive as hell. He got that way over the past few weeks. Torix taught him control of his transformed state.

While still rough around the edges, he wasn't some mindless monster anymore. He also avoided mana saturation, stopping himself from poisoning his body. The intelligence enchantments on his gear aided his form in that respect. After clearing out the next two rifts, his level would make him one hell of an ally too.

Looking forward too it, I jumped into the rift. The black mana wrapped around me like normal, consuming my vision in black. The icy sensation bled into my armor before the metal soaked it in. A stream of warm air splashed against my face as I crashed against the ground. I looked around. Behind me, a tunnel of stone opened to the black chasm of the rift's opening.

The other side of it was the new world. It was made of rock like I thought it would be. The sky was red with black, dirty clouds. Rivers of lava coursed across the landscape, bathing it in orange and red light. The black and red stone looked like volcanic rock and rust. Despite the harsh landscape, life was abundant. From the crimson sky to the ground, creatures moved.

A few yellow mice walked up to trails of lava. Covered in spines like porcupines, they rolled up to the streams of magma before facing their bellies towards the heat. After a few moments of bathing in the heat, their stomachs glowed. Beside a string of three of these mice, a glowing horn pierced one of their bellies. The little mammal was pulled into the magma as the other mice scattered away.

A few feet down, another group of mice bathed in the heat. Another glowing knife shot out towards a mouse. This mouse turned around in time, its spines deflecting the knife. At the end of the horn, several malformed mouths covered a crystalline carapace. These mouths snapped towards the mouse. The little hedgehog launched several of its spines into the creature's open mouths.

Lava gushed out of the crystalline lava swimmer as it retreated into the magma. Far above these lava streams, jellyfish floated on the plumes of hot air. As sparks flew up, the jellyfish snatched up the sparks, eating them with tiny suckers. Hod stared at the jellyfish as I spoke,

"Can you talk like that?"

Hod growled, "Yes."

I gripped a fist, “Alright, cool. Let’s kill these monsters and get the fuck out of here.”

Hod pointed at a rock, “Hod eat?”

I raised an eyebrow, “You mean monsters? Yeah, sure, go crazy. Just don’t let that mana poison you again.”

Hod placed his hands on his hips, “I won’t hurt myself again.”

I blinked, surprised at how well he spoke in his new form. It didn’t handicap him any. If anything, he acted smarter, like a different person. Eldritch energy had that effect on people I suppose. He sprinted towards a rock that split open, revealing tentacles covered in teeth and rock. It was like a ball of death. Before Hod reached it, I stomped my foot into the ground.

I propelled forward, the ground shattering beneath me before I reached the rock first. So far I’d used Volatile Carnage against weaker foes. I’d yet to use it against an enemy worth killing besides the sandworm. It was so large I could hardly tell the damage I was dealing. Eager to test it out on something closer to my level, I reached the monster first.

With another stomp, I turned my charge into momentum for my punch. I channeled that energy up through my core before slamming my right fist into a telekinetic pad lying on the monster’s stony skin. My fist blew backwards, transferring the force into a telekinetic cannonball.

That telekinetic bullet exploded into the monster, blowing the upper half of it away. Using the blowback on my right fist, I turned on my heels before driving a left hook into what was left of the monster. It vaporized, leaving only a little portion of the corpse left.

Satisfied at the effect of my mythical skills, I pierced my arm into the little bit of creature remaining. It sapped away before I glanced at the stream of white light beaming from the bottom of a mountain. A labyrinth of stones surrounded the pillar of white, siphoning into the sky. The limits of the rift were set, unlike with Hod’s world.

Those limits set themselves by the tendrils of white light curving around the rift’s edge. Clouds once more floated in and out of the rift’s edge. I still didn’t know how the rifts worked, at least not exactly. Sure I understood how they worked in a practical sense.

Run in, take core, dungeon gets destroyed. Simple. How it transferred the world? What it was transferring? I had no idea how to answer any of those questions.

A wave of heat diffused from the tunnels behind us. A wave of light, bright as the sun passed over us. With it came a wave of heat like a solar flare. Hod sliced the air, blocking with a shadow shield. I covered my slit and ears, protecting my senses. After the wave passed, I analyzed my health. Nearly a tenth was gone, which was less damage than I expected.

Beside me, sand melted into black glass. Closer towards the rift's opening, the ground melted into magma. Hod growled,

"The evil found us. Harbinger and Hod run. Now."

## Chapter 88: Hide and Seek

Before sprinting away, I checked around me. Whatever it was that was chasing us, it was powerful. If anything, it was a follower. They found us because we left something behind. Whenever Hod ran up to slice apart the stone eater, he left polished footsteps behind him. That must have given the follower the evidence they needed for coming in.

Out speeding one of them wasn't very likely either. To get away, we would need some kind of distraction, and we needed to cover our tracks. With that in mind, I turned towards Hod,

"Hod, fly away instead of running. That black fire is leaving tracks behind us. We'll meet up near the dungeon core in three hours."

Hod glanced towards the ground, heaving a breath. He hit himself on the forehead, shaking his head in disgust,

"Hod apologize. Hod not mean to lead them to us."

"Shit happens. It's fixing it that matters right now." I pointed at a group of the ruins near the white beam of energy firing into the red sky, "We'll meet there. Good bye."

He opened his muscled arms, feathers of black reaching outward. He stomped onto the ground, propelling himself upwards before he shot off into the distance. The sound of rumbling ebbed through the stone tunnel that held the rift's entrance. Lava covered the entrance, muffling the sound of a follower landing.

Before they got out of there, I turned and sprinted away. As I did, my feet cracked into the stone. I left footprints as obvious as a trail of slime behind me. My mind raced for solutions. If the follower was faster than me, I was dead if this continued. Veering off into a cluster of rocks, I stomped my feet until I reached a tunnel leading beneath the rocky ground.

Instead of going into it, I jumped up before walking on the air. It was the same tactic I used for crossing the sandworm's desert. A problem presented itself. I was slow as a snail. It was like I was running over trampolines, bouncing from one step to the next. It would get me somewhere eventually, but it wouldn't get me there quickly.

Sweat poured down my forehead as an enormous explosion echoed behind me. I wasn't far enough to be out of sight yet. I turned, glancing at the tunnel. A massive plume of dust and blue fire covered the entire entrance. There was no way the follower could see me yet. I still had a chance.

Beneath me was a stream of lava. The thought of bathing in liquid rock never appealed to me before, but all of a sudden it didn't seem like such a bad idea. I bounced on the air, diving straight into the lava. A hellish heat surrounded me from all directions. The problem wasn't that I couldn't sustain the damage. It was that my blood was evaporating inside me.

As the blood expanded, it bent my armor and exploded out the sides. As it did, the crystalline faced monsters shot into my insides. Using the Earth Glider skill, I shot through the earth before entering rock again. The friction of the stone rubbed the rock off me. I impaled my armor through my own body, killing the crystalline parasites.

Despite all this, not even a tenth of my health was gone. It refilled again after I cleared out my guts. I molded my armor to get the crystal magma fish away, another explosion quaked the ground. Using Tactile Cognition, I learned that the follower already blew up the decoy I used before.



This told me two things. The follower's destructive potential matched Kessiah if not exceeded hers. Second, this follower was fast and angry. They didn't waste time like Elijah or Ajax. If so, that meant it was Etna.

I guessed because Torix gave us all a rundown on the four followers and their traits. Etna was a fire based mage that used burst damage and massive explosions for her damage output. She was the second strongest follower, right behind Ajax. Being over level 4000, fighting her would have meant death.

So the dive into the magma had been the smart decision, oddly enough. It left no visible tunnel into the ground behind, and I was able to dig deep enough to mask the sound of my burrowing. Seeing as she was a heat mage, Etna could probably see us using thermal senses. With the ground and a stream of magma above me, Etna sensing me was impossible.

On the other hand, Hod was a different story altogether. The ground rumbled above me. A kinetic explosion radiated from behind me. The wave of force rattled my bones and armor before another bombed where I was. Another came my way, but I kicked upwards with all my might. It was the same kinetic dampener tactic I used against the sandworm.

The damage lessened before the rock beneath me turned hot. With Tactile Cognition, I gained a sense of my surroundings. Beneath me was a lake of magma. I could dig no deeper. With no way to go but to run. I slid through the ground with all my might.

More explosions rattled above me. Each time they passed through me, the surrounding rock rippled like an earthquake. The sheer might of the explosions amazed me. I had no idea how she found me, but I kept racing away. Blood poured places it shouldn't as the ripple of crushing energy lessened.

As I burrowed further away, the explosions dampened. They no longer cracked my teeth and fractured my bones. As I traveled further, I distanced myself from the source of the explosions. This gave me time to think. Etna didn't know where I was. She was just launching explosions near the tunnel from earlier.

The fact I was so far away yet she still did some damage to me was amazing. I mean I was a tank through and through. I had health you could expect from a level 3000 fighter for fucks sake. I suppose my health never dipped below the halfway point during her

assault though. This follower likely lacked the durability that several of the other followers too.

Hod and I may be able to get out of here by taking full advantage of that. Meeting up with him was a must though. Doing anything against her while alone was a death sentence. With that in mind, I surveyed my surroundings.

As I escaped from Etna, I ended up going the opposite direction of the dungeon's center. I turned myself around, making sure I kept a reasonable distance from me and the follower. As I traveled through the dirt and stone, progress was slow. With nothing to see or hear, I grew bored after only a few minutes.

Earth Glider worked better through the sand than it did through this hardened rock. Sprinting above would be my best bet for escaping this place in a reasonable time. The longer we stayed here, the more likely this follower would call for support anyways. What if a guardian blocked the exit for us when we came back? I didn't want to ever know that answer.

So time was of the essence. I shot myself out of the ground, landing on telekinetic pads that moved the wind. Off in the distance was the stream of white energy from the dungeon core. Another glowing pool of orange was near that. It was a massive, fresh lake of lava. Etna made it with all her tectonic fire blasts.

I didn't even know what she looked like. After seeing what she left in her wake, she probably looked like some horrific monster. A tiny blip of orange floated over the glowing pool of orange. It must be Etna. From above, keeping an eye on us wouldn't be a problem. Her position gave me a damn hard choice to make.

I could burrow through the rock with Earth Glider. This stopped Etna from seeing me, but it made me slower. If she called for another follower while I was going at half speed, Hod and I were fucked. The other option was running at full sprint. The chance of her seeing me was far greater.

The catch was that even if she called for backup, they may not make it in time to guard the entrance. The choice tumbled in my head for a bit before I made my decision. I would do both. I sprinted at full speed, keeping a gravity vortex above my head. This lightened my footsteps and let me run faster.

Whenever I reached an opening, I dove into the ground and burrowed past it. Once I reached another cove or giant rock to block me from her sight, I shot out of the ground. This stopped me from giving away where I was, but made me faster as well. In order to curb a minutes off my travel time, I incorporated a few tricks as I ran.

I created gravity wells that would slingshot me around curves. As I stepped, I gave myself firmer footing by dispersing my steps with telekinesis. I jumped in and out of the ground with Earth Glider, moving through the transitions with ease. I quit being so stingy with my mana too. If I needed a strong pull of gravity, there wasn't a reason not to use mana to make it happen.

That proved true for telekinesis as well. With such a massive mana pool, I flared my ascendant mana while within the ground. If the cover was big enough, I surged the mana above ground too. With the enhanced strength, my options for telekinesis widened.

I grabbed far off ledges with telekinetic tethers, letting me pull myself over obstacles. I would stomp against walls many feet away, letting me reach over gaps. I jerked myself with both my arms and legs, extending myself with telekinesis. This quieted my running since I wasn't on the ground as much.

If somehow gravity and telekinesis weren't enough, I molded my armor to fill in the gaps. With all these factors coming together, I floated over the terrain, gaining speed as I went. As I gained more speed, I molded my armor into a more aerodynamic form.

The technical difficulty involved weighed on me though. Balancing all these techniques and skills strained me to my limit. Veins pulsed on my forehead and sweat poured from me. As I ramped up my consumption of mana, my runes arced lightning from me. As the energy pulsed, the coursing energy dispersed.

Sure, that sounds cool and all, but it means energy was being wasted. The runes couldn't keep up with my mana production anymore. As it overflowed, the energy dispersed in its raw form. Even with a nigh perfect runic combination, the flood of mana overwhelmed them. It was like a damn letting flood water pour over it.

Wasting that energy irked me. It was like some sudden, arbitrary limit was being placed onto my mana. I suppose the runes did seem a bit stressed before I even killed the sandworm. Combine that with a much greater flow of mana, and the runes couldn't keep up. Wasting that energy sucked though.

Instead of letting it disperse, I redirected it into my armor runes. I overcharged them, condensing the dispersing mana. I forced the red electricity back into the runes. The energy spilled over. Overcharging resulted in spikes of speed that were impossible to control. That wouldn't work. As I traveled further, Etna fired off towards the dungeon core.

My mind raced with a singular thought – shit. The implications flowed through my head. All of sudden, I understood what she was trying to do. If she took the dungeon core, then the dungeon would reform. The overseer would come, reform the dungeon, then a sentinel would stand guard. If she went outside the portal, then Hod and I would be stuck here until another rift form.

That's if one did. Her blistering speed outpaced mine, like a missile beaming through the air. It was like a clock ticking. Time was of the essence now. Being subtle would get me trapped in this hellhole for who knows how long. I needed speed and I needed it now.

With those facts pounding against my skull, I brainstormed for some solution. Almost a third of my mana was just dissipating. Solving that would strengthen me a bit. Without the follower of Yawm surveying her surroundings making noise wasn't a problem anymore either.

I got a crazy idea then. I would overcharge my man and release it in timed bursts. During each of those bursts, I would send myself flying at a high speed. It would be like lobbing myself over and over.

With that in mind, I channeled the excess mana into my runes. It was like ice skating for the first time, any shift in balance causing me to bust my ass. After a minute of working with it, I overcharged the runes till they hissed with the unstable energy. Whenever I dispersed it, I slammed my feet into the ground.

The rush of acceleration pulled on my skin. My stomach sank as the rocks beneath me grew smaller. Up high I soared, like a stone shot through a cannon. If it wasn't for my Aerial Strike skill, I'd have fumbled through the air like a total dumbass. Instead I shot through the air with a serene grace.

Now the landing was a different story. I smashed into the ground like a meteorite. I pierced into the ground for a few feet. The kinetic force dispersed after that, ripping the

earth around me apart. Pushing myself from the compacted earth around me, I looked around. I created a crater the size of bus with my landing.

I didn't have time to dwell on this new method of transport, if you could call it that. I overcharged my runes again as I picked up speed again. This time I unleashed the force onto a telekinetic pad beneath my feet. Just imagine giant, telekinetic snowshoes. That's what my telekinesis was doing.

The rock wasn't hard enough to absorb the impact of my feet as I jumped. I widened that zone of impact with a telekinetic augment. It was exactly what snowshoes do to snow when you wear them.

With more grip beneath me, I shot through the air with wild abandon. My armor held, staying firm despite the ridiculous demands I placed on my armor. After crash landing again, I set back into another run. Whenever I jumped this time, I molded my armor into a more aerodynamic shape. I was like a metal bird cutting through the air.

Whenever I landed this time, I widened the impact with yet another telekinetic pad. A fracture formed up my shin, like kicking a coffee table as hard as you kick a soccer ball. My pain tolerance stopped me from crying as I didn't fall. My muscles cramped and my bones bent, but I didn't fall.

I kept running forward before overcharging and leaping once more. The process turned fluid after a few more leaps. With each deafening boom of my leaps and landings, I gained skill and understanding. Instead of overcharging my runes completely, I restricted the flow a bit. This allowed me to leap more.

As I flew through the air, I charged my runes instead of being overwhelmed by flight. This meant that when I landed, I could leap once more. As I leapt again and again, I felt like the hulk, jumping from one place to the next.

Unique Skill Gained! Fuses the skills Overcharge, Aerial Strike, Ascendancy Mana Manipulation, Discharge, and Soul Siphon into the unique skill Meteoric Rise! 500 points possible, 227 points earned. Half of unearned points rewarded, 137.

Meteoric Rise(lvl 1) – By utilizing explosive bursts of your mana, you gain the ability to jump extreme distances. Allows fluid use of vast leaps to cover distance.

The skills linked into place, turning into a solid, reliable method of movement. By the time I unlocked the skill, Etna reached the dungeon core. The follower was nothing but a tiny blot of orange over the stream of white energy. That orange shined until it was a like star right beside the ground.

A moment later, an immense plume of fire erupted from the ground. The pulse of energy forced clouds away, like the impact of a tiny nuclear bomb. An invisible wave shot passed the entire dome, a blast of wind following in its wake. After the wave passed and the fire dispersed, a black bird flapped its wings near Etna. Fire covered the black bird as streaks of shadow flowed behind it.

It was Hod.

### Chapter 89: An Unexpected Trap

My stomach sank as a wave of nausea poured over me. Hod was a good friend. He annoyed me at times...well, all the time really, but he was funny sometimes too. This fucking piece of shit Etna was trying to kill him. I wouldn't allow it, more out of principle and spite than kindness though.

That meant I had to reach Hod before she finished the job. With my new movement skill, Meteoric Rise, I closed the gap much faster than before. I still wasn't fast enough to save Hod though. Every time I landed, I lost almost all my momentum from the jump prior. To keep pace, I exploded off my feet again.

That meant I slowed down each time I landed before speeding myself back up. It was like revving a car engine from 0-60 miles per hour over and over again. I wasn't getting the amount of speed I could be getting.

As the glowing blot of orange moved in closer towards the burning bird, desperation sunk in. There wasn't any options here. Hod needed me to save his ass. As I came closer to the ground, I changed my pattern of flight.

Up till now I landed on my heels before bursting back into the air again. Taking a risk, I dived towards the earth headfirst. Worse still, I used a gravity vortex to speed my descent. The ground grew in my vision, tiny specks turning into massive boulders. At my peak velocity, my head smashed into the ground.

Except it wasn't a smash, I slid into the ground. Faster than I've ever ran, I sliced through the rock. Angling myself back, I shot up to the surface. Right before I shot out of the stone, I discharged my mana. Like bombs detonating beneath my feet, I accelerated back into the air, even faster than before.

It was like I was traveling through an ocean of stone like a dolphin made of metal. With each leap, I gained in speed. Over the next five leaps, I bounded through the air faster than a car could travel. The ground passed by me before I neared the pillar of white energy.

Etna was holding Hod up by the neck. As I assumed, Etna was a woman. What I hadn't expected was how stunning she was. Voluptuous and glowing orange with fire for hair, she glanced at me. Her thick lips smiled, suggestive and wild. She dropped Hod, letting him fall down. Where she touched him, his skin was peeled back.

I jumped up, reaching within shouting distance of her. With a passionate voice, she amplified her voice with mana, "You are the other toy trapped here?"

I stayed silent as I landed into a plateau of rock. I intended on using them to my advantage. You see, Etna floated over several rocky planes with giant canyons crawling out between the plateaus. Using them for cover meant the walls of rock made me hard to pin down, and they might dampen her detonations a bit.

Above me, a massive core of heat swelled. Underneath the ground, I discharged my mana. Ripping through the stone, I propelled myself like a landshark. I shot out of one of the plateaus before reaching the falling Hod.

The plateau I left behind disintegrated. A gigantic pool of magma was left behind. Even with all my resistance, I doubted my ability to survive that. What mattered right now was that Hod was alive though.

I slammed into the plateau, dispersing my impact with a widened telekinetic field. A wave of wind blasted Hod, reducing the speed of his fall before I created a gravity well above him. I steadied it, keeping it beside him as he fell. This slowed his descent before I caught him in my arms.

Blood leaked from his mouth and eyes. Hod heaved for breath before I glanced up. Etna grinned with glee at us, clapping her hands,

“Hah, you survived! It’s been a long time since someone has.”

I stretched oppression out towards her, condensing it into an elongated tentacle. I hated her. I wanted her to choke on her own blood. This was a game to her, something she did for fun. Etna raised her hands, the mana welling into her slender hands,

“It was fun. Goodbye.”

Oppression coated her in agony. She howled raising her arms and firing the destructive bolt of energy upwards. Like an apocalypse laser cannon, a behemoth inferno ejected from her hands. The titanic wave of heat shot through the sky, leaving ozone and lightning bursts in its wake.

Before she stabilized, I shot off the plateau towards the dungeon core at the center of all the rock plains. As I did, Oppression no longer coated Etna. With the grin tore right off her face, she grit her teeth and screamed like a banshee,

“No one hurts me but Yawm. Do you hear me?”

She kicked her feet and slammed her palms down, streams of fire sending her forward,

“No one but him!”

I slammed into the ornate pillar that held the dungeon core. I glanced at Etna, and she went right towards me, blindingly bright. I crawled up at the last moment before she collided with the pillar. Slicing straight through it, she left a tunnel of magma behind her. I crawled towards the core, dead set on taking it as she whipped back around towards me.

The air whistled as she gained speed. I glanced at her as she kicked on her feet once more. An explosion radiated along with a shockwave behind her. I threw up Hod, and planted my feet into the stone pillar behind me. Standing sideways, I timed my hook as I twisted on my heels.



At the end of my strike, I slammed it into a telekinetic pad. The bounce back moved me just out of Etna's way as I struck her. Sending her sideways, she crashed into a giant wall of rock the pillar. I made a gravitational vortex beneath me as I ran up the pillar sideways, my feet keeping traction with spikes.

Hod fell against me as I sprinted up the pillar. Once I reached the top, I peered down at her. A giant blob of lava covered the side of a mountain. The lava splattered in every direction as she detonated the entire side of the plateau. Etna enhanced her scream, amplifying her voice to a ridiculous extent,

"Just stand still and let me kill you."

I didn't give her the time of day as I reached the core. I reached my hand into the stream of white, pulsing energy. The cool, icy sensation was a welcome relief from all the heat. Interrupting my reprieve, Etna charged another fiery blaze in her palms. Before I could reach the core, she unleashed destruction.

I was one hundred percent certain that I was dead. Her massive beams of destruction had decimated mountain sides. I couldn't tank them, at least based on what I knew about my tankiness. Even if I somehow survived, Hod was dead well before the bolt of doom landed on us.

Before it struck, something odd occurred. Instead of obliterating us into a fine mist, the gigantic energy cannon split in two. The white beam of energy radiated by the core was stronger and denser than her own energy beams. That meant her fire cannon divided into two streams of calamity.

After the cannon dissipated, Etna lowered her hands. Several strands of her fire hair fell over her face as she heaved for breath. The vibrant grin warped into a furious grimace as she saw Hod and I still alive. I laughed at her displeasure as I ripped the core out of the stream of white.

The stream withered and waned before disappearing. The squares of blue appeared off in the distance, altering the fabric of the dimension. Etna's nose and brow scrunched up as she screamed like a baby. She dashed towards me again, fast as sound. I could dodge, but if Etna passed me, Hod would be erased. I couldn't let it happen. No, I wouldn't let it happen.

I torqued on my heels and generated as much force as I could. Using a gravity vortex beneath my feet, I weighed myself down and pulled the ground up. I braced my left arm with several struts of molded armor. I held my breath, gritting my teeth as I readied for the impact. Etna just smiled, expecting my disintegration.

I and my armor grinned back as I unveiled my last surprise. During the wait, I overcharged my armor. My runes saturated with the chaotic mana, waiting to release a nasty surprise. As she reached me, my fist reached her. They collided in a monumental explosion, the overcharged mana releasing right on time.

Like a tank bullet firing through my fist at point blank range, my bones trembled. My skin rippled, the metal armor cracking. Blood splat from inside my mouth as the kinetic force turned my insides to mush. My shoulder socket crunched and popped and snapped. My spine cracked. My teeth split. Blood vessels ruptured all throughout my body.

And yet, I stood. I stayed standing after the impact, my arm still attached albeit butchered from the inside. I slid back less than a foot from Hod, blood leaking from the wounds on his neck. Etna had fallen. She tumbled against through the air, scraping the pillar once before smashing into the ground.

A satisfying thud echoed on the ground before a ripple in space time formed beside me. The overseer walked out, glancing around. He opened his status screen, the vast plain condensing into a dungeon as the blue squares rippled past.

He turned towards me and Hod, “Worse for wear this time?”

I heaved a breath, blood leaking from my mouth, “I can’t handle your shit right now. Just let me out of here.”

The overseer laughed a little before a sentinel stepped out of a nearby, violet portal. As the overseer left, I pointed at the edge of the pillar, “One of Yawm’s four followers is right there. If you want, you can kill her.”

The overseer shook his head, “Schema has dictated no direct interference for fear of corruption or death of a sentinel and overseer. I’m sorry Harbinger, but I must follow those rules.” He tapped the side of his head, “Otherwise I will be terminated.”

I frowned, a bitter taste in my mouth. It didn't make sense why someone so powerful couldn't just handle the problem right now. The overseer continued as he messed with his status screen,

"Don't fret. She will be trapped here until another rift keeper is created. That could take quite a while, years even. She should have called for help instead of trying to kill you both off here. Now she will be trapped here for a very, very long time."

The overseer walked through his portal towards a different world,

"Use this as an opportunity to strike at the other followers before Yawm awakens."

I sighed, molding my armor to fix my joints and bones back into place. My health regenerated at a rapid pace as the sentinel opened a portal towards the opening of the rift. A part of me wanted to go and see what kind of damage I did to Etna. If I could kill her, then I would get a massive boost in experience and levels.

The problem was Hod and the other followers. It was difficult to tell if they were coming. There wasn't even a time delay in this dungeon for some reason. Either that or it was too low to even mention. If I hadn't really hurt Etna and just stunned her, then jumping down was certain death. If I didn't get Hod some help, he was dead too.

In the end, being greedy for levels was just too risky. I jumped through towards the opening of the rift. The cool breeze splashed against my face like a surge of pleasure. The constant, groggy heat drained me more than I realized. It wasn't until I stepped back onto Earth that I appreciated the winter.

I didn't relish the cool for too long. Hod needed help, so I dashed towards a sewer. My new form of travel, Meteoric Rise, would probably turn Hod to mush as well, so that was out. A good old fashioned run was the only practical way of helping him. As I dashed through the sewers, hod's pumped up form deteriorated.

Without the shadow covering him, the full extent of his wounds revealed themselves. They weren't pretty. Burns dug down to the bone in some places, with plenty of muscle and pus showing over a large portion of his body. Feathers singed on his sides. He was missing at least a quarter of his skin, if not half of it.

Blood leaked from all his wounds, the damage over time exceeding his ability to regenerate. My own regeneration almost always made those effects irrelevant. For other, less resilient builds, the effects were devastating. Hod's ragged wheezing proved that more than enough as I shot down the sewer tunnels.

Once I reached the steel legion, I jumped out of the sewer by headbutting the manhole cover. The plate of metal flopped into the air, before I dashed towards the medical center. Torix could be off doing something random. The medical center was far more reliable. With that in mind, I reached the west side of the camp.

Inside a pharmacy, the steel legion set up a tiny hospital. Running past several of the medical cots, I ran up to one of the steel legion's doctors. He wore power armor painted white with red crosses on them. I remember enchanting their armor with intelligence and healing amplification runes. Those inscriptions crawled down the arms and chest, around the medical signals.

As I placed Hod on one of the cots, the doctor raised a hand, "Wait a second. Get two cots. He'll break through one."

I reached out an arm, pulling a cot towards me as I held Hod in one arm. Tall as he was, he was thin as a rod. Being too heavy for a single cot surprised me. He felt so light as I set him down. Moments later, the doctor pulled out a syringe full of black liquid. The doctor shot it into Hod's neck.

The black energy crawled down his neck, turning Hod's wheezing into strained breaths. Seeing my concern, the doctor pulled out a clear tube from beneath the cot as he said,

"We've tried adrenaline into the Eltari when they're like this. Doesn't work. We can process the insects that Yawm uses and just inject it straight into their bloodstreams. We don't know the long term side effects, but-

He squeezed a clear gel full of red bubbles onto the wounds that bonded to him. The doctor looked up at me, "Those side effects would be hard pressed to beat out dying."

I grimaced, "Yeah. Dying's a pretty nasty alternative. Having all the Eltari turn into zombies would be worse."

The gel stopped the bleeding. As the red bubbles touched his skin, they dispersed into his muscles. Wherever they dispersed, the pale muscle would turn from pink to red. The doctor finished putting the gel onto the Eltari before pulling out a few bandages. These weren't cloth bandages though. They were like transparent food wrap.

The doctor wrapped the plastic stuff over the gel, locking it against the skin. He only did this to places without any skin. Once he finished that, he stepped away from the bed. Grabbing a saline packet, he hooked up a needle towards Hod's arm. Once the saline was set, the doctor paced back behind the pharmacy counter and pulled out a blue vial.

He attached it to the saline packet, coloring it blue. Once he finished, he sat back into a chair, his sigh muffled through his intercom. He gave me a short salute,

"I'm going to be able to tell my kids one day that I saved a friend of the Harbinger. What a day."

I turned around, no one else in the medbay. Surprised at how empty it was, I glanced back at the doctor, "Thanks, but I'm wondering...why isn't anyone here?"

The doctor looked around, "Oh yeah, I guess that is weird isn't it? It's crazy how crazy stuff can be, but then I won't even notice until someone points it out. Makes me feel out of place."

I tapped the edge of the cot, "What's that crazy stuff?"

The doctor hit the side of his helmet, "Oh wow, sorry about that. I just never thought that I'd be seeing the Harbinger in person. Still kind of nervous. Anywho, Torix sent all the other doctors out with the active teams. Some of the followers have been coming really close to camp. They've almost found us a few times."

The gel on Hod's wounds turned into muscle, veins, and whatever else he needed. I looked at Hod as the chatty doctor continued,

"So the big man himself divided us up. The vast majority of the entire camp is attacking the quarantine or setting up checkpoints. We're going out on a full assault."

Hod's breathing stabilized. I wondered if I could use some cybernetic enhancements in the future. It might be another way of giving myself a boost. Making a mental note of it, I turned to the doctor,

"How are you being supplied?"

The doctor tapped the edge of his helmet, the glass plate over his eyes popping up. Parts of the helmet folded back, uncovering an old, smiling face, "By eldritch that the necromancer controls. You've seen the beetle colony I'm guessing?"

"Yeah."

He leaned towards me, keeping both his hands up,

"They haven't only been making tunnels. Torix has been having the beetles expand into several places outside. They've been clearing out forests and farms, gathering the legion some supplies. Now they're carting those supplies for us as we move forward. No one's going hungry. We're well fed and well rested."

The doctor shook his head, "All this time I thought he was sitting around while we did all the work."

The doctor leaned back into his chair, a cheeky grin on his face, "Boy was I wrong."

I frowned, "So was I. Thanks for letting me know all this. It's good to get an idea of how the troops see the situation."

The doctor stood, reaching out a hand, "It's good to see the Harbinger has a soul and can even bring people to a doctor."

I grabbed his hand, giving it a firm shake as I stood. The doctor met my eye, "All we need from you is to kill whoever Yawm is. We'll handle the mess you leave behind. It's what we do."

I nodded back, "That's all I need."

I walked out of the hospital, leaving Hod in his care. I didn't really know how long Hod was going to be out, so I sent a message to Torix. It explained what had happened and how the follower was trapped in the rift. I even included a little bit of my own thoughts at the end about what I thought we should do.

Considering how many troops Torix was juggling, doing a bit of thinking for him was a favor. As I waited for a reply on what to do next, I ran towards the outer edge of the forest. My plan was to work on developing my next mythical skill. This one wouldn't be as technical as Volatile Carnage either.

As I reached an open field in the forest, a message appeared in my inbox,

Torix Worm, of Darkhill(9:17 A.M. 11/28/00) – While I doubt Etna will remain within that rift forever, disabling her for any length of time is a great boon for us. Of all the followers, she was creating the greatest disruption in our current campaign.

For now, let Hod rest up until he's back on his feet. Three days should give him the appropriate recoup, both on a mental and physical level. Once Hod's fine again, find and destroy the last high danger rift. That will be the last dungeon that's about to burst out. With those out of the way, we can focus on culling Yawm's forces.

You exceeded my expectations as well. Capturing Etna in the rift saved hundreds of the legion. If we are fortunate, she might even go insane on that desolate world. Either that, or maybe even starve.

We can only pray for such good fortune.

I closed the message, sighing out with relief. Having to travel back would have been a waste of time that I didn't have. Not wasting anymore of that time, I stepped into the center of the forest clearing. The light green grass opened up a plain about the size of four city blocks. At the edges of the plain, a line of trees created a clear, clean outline of the area.

It was perfect playground for what I had planned. I pulled out my obelisk before writing a blueprint for my next mythical skill. It would be a fusion of Phaser, Meteoric Rise, and Earth Glider. I already came close to using the skills together during my

chase and fight with Etna. Polishing my usage of the skills might result in them coming together.

With that in mind, I charged my runes. The mana shot through my system like adrenaline, a rush of energy coming with it. Once the runes reached their cap for holding the energy, I urged the mana into them. As the runes saturated, the air around me hummed. I ran up and unleashed the force into a kinetic field, making sure to disperse the impact.

The ground rippled as I shot into the air. Once high up, I morphed my armor and prepared for my descent. By the time Hod woke up, my goal was to be faster than him flying. Once I was, I'd turn myself into a three ton bullet. I was sure smashing into someone at that speed would kill most things, monster or not.

Once I got this next mythical skill, it would be time for making a legendary one. As I reached the peak of my jump in the air, I turned towards Springfield. The suburbia bled into the cityscape and yellow forests. The quarantine zone wasn't a straight circle anymore. In several places, the forcefield stopping the insects had caved into the zone. We were winning.

At the center of it all was the gray haze covering the world tree. Within that gray cloud, a green radiance peaked out from within. At timed increments, pulses of the tree sent out earthquakes. They came with greater and greater frequency. Now they were an hourly occurrence, something no one even stopped and wondered at. They were the norm now, and the reason for them was clear.

He was coming.

## Chapter 90: The Coming Tide

I would be ready for him. As I fell back to the ground, I molded my armor. Sleek and aerodynamic, I sliced through the air then the ground. After racing through the ground, I dispersed another burst of energy, firing back into the air. Each time I did, I built momentum and speed.

It was kind of like going higher and higher on a swing set. Each time I dipped down, I mitigated my loss in momentum. As I went out of the ground, I added to my momentum. Over a few minutes, I ended up soaring through the sky, higher than I'd ever been.



It was an amazing thing. I always wondered what flying was like. I never flew on a plane or anything like that either. This was incomparable to that because there wasn't anything buffering me from the wind and sun. It reminded me of running when I was a child. I could be running so slow, yet feel so fast.

Even though I wasn't supersonic or anything, this was faster than I'd ever run before. That made the sensation and rush palpable, like riding a bike for the first time. As I embraced that feeling of freedom, I found myself grinning. This was fun. Shooting in and out of the ground, seeing a view of the forest for miles, and the flow of movement, it all appealed to me.

I enjoyed using my strength. I cherished it. I worked, putting blood, sweat, and tears into forging my mind and body into a tool. Appreciating the pay off was an important part of the process, at least for me. It kept my motivation high.

With that motivation, I homed back in on learning. I dipped in and out of the ground like a landshark. I kept myself flowing, intent on turning the ability into an instinct rather than a thought process. As minutes turned into hours, and the hours turned to days, I forgot about what I was doing. It was a trance.

My mind turned numb at the task, parts of it becoming second nature before everything clicked. The spike in awareness came with a flood of clarity. It reminded me of the difference in a new fighter and an old one. The new one was choppy and mistimed his shots. He couldn't think as he fought. An older fighter could punch without any thought. It was like breathing to him.

Now movement, no matter the complexity of how I did so, was like breathing to me.

Mythical skill gained! Fuses the three unique skills, Phaser, Earth Glider, and Meteoric Rise into a single skill, The Coming Tide. Points earned: 105 | Points Possible: 300 | Points rewarded: 98

The Coming Tide(lvl 1)– Some things cannot be stopped. You are among them. Enhances movement and reduces debuffs to movement. Effects in combat movement as well.

As I sliced into the ground, I turned the direction of my travel. It was a smooth, guided turn. The shift wasn't abrupt or uneasy. I slowed myself down, grinding my hands against the dirt before flinging myself from the ground. I reformed back into my normal

self, my armor altering like liquid. I walked on the ground for the first time in several days.

It was weird. My steps felt foreign and out of place. Scratch that, it wasn't what they felt like. It was what they didn't feel like. It wasn't like telling my feet to move. It was like I wanted to go somewhere, and I just moved without thought. IT wasn't like an autopilot either. It was more a result of a supreme and utter control.

As my feet thumped against the ground, I cracked my neck and rolled my shoulders. I jumped forward. I submerged in the ground. My armor molded without any thought. All the augments, adjustments, all of that faded into a background noise. Surrounded by the dirt in all directions, I grinned.

I stomped on the ground, shooting myself out of the ground. I landed on the ground before taking three steps forward. On the third step, I let myself go into the ground. I fell to the earth as if it wasn't there. My armor, gravity vortexes, and telekinesis allowed me to do so. Even in the middle of a fight, I could adjust my height in stone and earth, letting me dodge attacks.

It would be a powerful tool, not even mentioning the ability to overcharge my runes. After playing with the skill for a bit, I raced back towards the camp. Three days were done, meaning Torix and Hod might be waiting for me. I checked my inbox, the first time I had done so in days. There were four messages. Three were from Torix, one from Althea,

Torix Worm, of Darkhill(8:00 A.M. 12/01/00) – Hod has fully recovered. You may come back towards my lair whenever you are ready to leave. The sooner the better, however, since Hod refuses to stop his pestering.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill(1:18 P.M. 12/01/00) – I can handle it no longer. Come at once. If you wish for my sanity to remain intact, you will do so. I've given him many of my summonses for his amusement. They never hold his attention for long.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill(3:21 P.M. 12/01/00) – Why did you bring such an incompetent into our ranks? I understand he holds a unique skillset and a high level, but is it truly worth it? I believe not! How am I supposed to even function with him here...

That is to say, please help me.

Althea Tolstoy( 4:37 P.M. 11/31/00) – Where have you been the past couple days? I hope I didn't make you mad :> Oh yeah, I've really been missing our lunches together! The rations are terrible

With my new mythical skill, The Coming Tide helping me, I could read them all without missing a beat. The messages from Torix made me laugh while I flew through the air. Althea's message was surprisingly adorable, but you wouldn't catch me dead telling anyone that. Regardless, I closed the messages, traveling towards the town at a blistering pace.

Before I reached it, I handled one last task with my status. I checked out my tree points, and I had just enough for another rank in obliterator. Not wanting to go without the free stats, I put the points into the tree as I flew through the air. As I finished putting them in, I got my reward.

This perpetual cycle of recreating yourself is what separates you from the masses. You have zero fear of failure. This is because you understand what Failure is. Failure is facing your weakness. Once you've faced your own weakness, you may fight it. Otherwise, you will never know.

1,500/2,500 milestone reached! II Obliterator unlocked (Tier 3) +75% of total experience gained for levels and skills. This bonus is multiplicative with previous bonuses, not additive. +6 attributes rewarded for every 5 levels over level 1,000.

With it came extra attributes and the bonus experience multipliers. Those multipliers were probably why I was able to learn this new mythical skills so quickly. With the extra 144 attribute points from the added tier in Obliterator II, I put my attribute points into endurance. I didn't even stop moving as I hit select.

My mind sharpened, and the ascendant mana pouring through my runes enhanced once more. With this new excess, the speed of my travel heightened more than I thought it would. I outsped birds with ease as I dived in and out of the earth. Wondering why the flow of mana increased so sharply, I opened my status screens,

Level 1362

Strength – 1294 | Constitution – 1598 | Endurance – 3299

Dexterity – 412.2 | Willpower – 2000 | Intelligence – 753.4

Charisma – 98 | Luck – 250 | Perception – 193.7

\*\*\*\*\*

Health203,436/203,43674,161/min or 1,236/secPhys Dam Reduction –  
98%Stamina93,040/93,040 1,051/secElemental Res – 98%Harbinger of  
Cataclysm14.63 Billion/56.6 Billion74.3/per min(conduit)Plasma Res –  
98%Oppression Damage- 15,000 + 80%hp/minRad Res – 98%Phys Dam Bonus –  
13,642% | Total Damage Bonus 20%Mental Res – 98%

My health regen increased by over a tenth. At this point, that meant over a hundred more health regen a second. Wondering why my regen spiked, I opened my perk screens. I figured it out after a minute of searching.

The level 1000 willpower perk increased my health regen since I reached 2000 willpower. That meant my health regen jumped up again, just like last time. All my other stats increased slowly by comparison. The two levels I gained from the last dungeon were hardly worth mentioning for that reason.

I would need some ridiculous bonus before I felt it again. The last rank in the obliterator perk was my best bet for that. With three mythical skills now, gaining a legendary skill might not be far off anymore. If I could get it, then the completion bonus would be ridiculous since mythical skills capped out at 1000. I might be able to finish the Obliterator tree and start chopping away on Titan Slayer.

With that in mind, I looked up from my status screens. I flew up into the air, well over the trees, and Springfield spread out before me. It was a warzone.

Giant beetles stood behind steel legion vehicles and troops, firing green bolts of energy. The green plasma shot out into the yellow forests, splashing into trees with a vibrant emerald in the distance. Troops fired plasma rifles that streaked with blue flashes. They melted flesh, halting regeneration.

Those blue bolts came from trenches lining the streets, just inside the containment field. Eltari flew through the air above the assault, dropping bombs or diving into the spawns and named of Yawm. From all sides, the forest's grip waned. The yellow wasn't growing anymore. Patches of the forest browned, dying as the troops cut through the roots and left the forest to burn in a green fire.

All of the suburbs had been taken over. The dense, lush cityscape was all that remained now. The followers couldn't or weren't handling the problem. Without Etna's explosive assaults, Torix's blitz sped up with epic results. At this rate, it wouldn't even be a week before they reached the world tree.

A delighted smile raced up my face as I stared at the sight. I landed in the middle of an empty encampment, all the tents empty and no one walking nearby. They all busied themselves with slaughter. It was a refreshing feeling, knowing morale was no doubt high. Even if an army is facing giant monsters, they won't give a fuck if they're beating them.

I leaped over the buildings and burrowed under them, weaving through obstacles before landing in front of Torix's house. As I did, I kept a giant telekinetic pad beneath me. This compressed the area beneath me, creating a circle of deepened earth surrounded by cracks. Hod raced out of the room at the sound.

Across his face, three beetles tried chewing through the metallic plate. He raised his fingers, several larvae chewing on his fingers. Hod whined,

"Hod need Harbinger's help! Dry man no help Hod."

I rolled my eyes before jogging up. I jerked the beetles off him, letting them bite into my armor. Their teeth shattered against my skin as we walked inside. Torix went back forth, the lines on his map ever-shifting. He sent out message after message, typing out messages onto his status screen and sending them.

He didn't even use his real hands. He had two extra arms made of blue mana that did it for him. He walked towards a ritual site where he placed a palm on an egg. A flash of black and purple mana shot outwards, blowing a few papers back before Torix stepped back up towards the map. The red lines shifted before he sent a few more messages.

From behind him, a jet black beetle crawled out of the egg and expanded. A giant sack of green dragged against the wooden floorboards. Torix walked up towards the beetle

placed a palm on the beetle's forehead. A flash of darkness followed. The eyeless beetle nodded, scurrying off towards a giant tunnel leading to the basement.

I blinked a few times before Torix turned to me,

"Thank Schema you're here. Another second of Hod's interference and I'd have snapped."

Torix always looked thin, like a dried-out corpse. He covered himself in an elegant, soft robe of black and gold that kept him from being gross. Combine that with two cobalt colored fireballs for eyes, and Torix struck an imposing figure. That figure degraded during the three days I spent learning my mythical skill.

The robe was disheveled, lacking the pristine clean Torix normally maintained. His eyes were more like blue coals than the normal fiery circles. On his face was a manic smile though that contrasted the exhaustion showing everywhere else. As he paced up to me, a spark of fear shot up my spine. It was like a mad doctor coming at you with a scalpel. Talk about spooky.

He pointed a finger at me, "You had better have a good reason for taking so long."

I nodded, "I do."

Torix spread his arms, "Well...What is it?"

A mischievous grin appeared on my lips, "I got my next mythical."

Torix clapped his hands, "Well then, I suppose that will do. Is that your fourth one already?"

I raised three fingers, "Nope, only three so far. I'm hoping for a few more soon."

"Good. Now, you and Hod will finish off the last dangerous rift near the center of the world tree. I've waited until all of the followers were preoccupied. After one of their own disappeared, they've been far less disruptive. I believe you've given them something to fear. Now I'm abusing that fear."

Torix turned towards the map, walking with purpose, “I told the troops one of their own has slain a follower over two thousand levels above himself. You’re being looked to as a symbol of the resistance, partially for your humanity and partially for your feats.”

I frowned, “Sucks some of those feats are lies.”

Torix shook his head, “They aren’t quite lying, however. They are the truth presented from an angle. Regardless of your misgivings about them, they are fulfilling their purpose. With each passing moment, our troops are leveling as the enemies forces are waning. It’s as if we’re cannibals feasting on the corpses of our enemies.”

Hod raised a hand, “Except Eltari. Eltari not cannibals if eat human.” He leaned forward as if he was saying something profound,

“Humans ugly though. Hod doubt Eltari ever eat human. Human too much like metal too. Hod does not understand why Humans all covered in metal.”

Torix and I stared at him, trying to decipher his sentence for a moment. I pursed my lips, “Hod...the legion and I are both wearing armor. That’s not our actual skin or anything, except with maybe me. I’m not normal though.”

Hod’s hands lowered as he gasped, “Humans have no metal skin?”

Torix pinched the bridge of his nose, “Answering your questions is like driving a nail through each of my fingernails. The word hatred, quite frankly, can’t explain what I feel for you. It’s something darker, more malignant, like cancer.”

Hod nodded, “Hod understand Dry Man anger. Dry Man thirsty because Dry Man is dry. Hod forgive Dry Man. Hod get cranky when Hod thirsty too.”

I laughed as Torix raised both his hands to his face,

“If I had a working heart, it would shrivel and die knowing you exist.” Torix turned to me, “Take him away from me. I can handle no more.”

I grabbed Hod and dragged him out of the house,

“Yeah, I can’t blame you. Anyways, keep kicking ass here and I’ll do the same out there.”

Torix nodded, his frustration fading into a slight smile, “I expect as much from you.”

After getting Hod out of the house, I turned towards Hod. Despite Hod’s lack of mental prowess, his speed was undeniable. While not as quick as Althea, he was a close second in our group. Kessiah could outrun all of us in theory, but the ground would just melt under her feet. It would be like trying to jump on water.

Curious about figuring out how fast I was now, I asked,

“Want a race?”