

Zompiewolf 401

Chapter 401 Training Time! (1)

[I'm confused whether you were learning forging or philosophy?]

Astaroth chuckled as soon as they were out of the forge. However, Ashton wasn't laughing. Every word that came out of Vulcan's mouth was a lesson. As someone who went through all that shit to make a few cackling flames, Ashton knew Vulcan's words were more than a simple lesson.

Someone like Astaroth wouldn't realise the weight those words held. Nor did Ashton want to waste his time making Astaroth realise what he was missing out on. So, rather than correcting him and wasting his time, Ashton decided to get some sleep.

Being a tribrid wasn't easy. Ashton had to take care of nutrition for each of his genes, and he also needed to fulfil even the minuscule demands.

That's why although he wasn't required to sleep, he still wanted to rest his eyes for a couple of hours to give his mind a chance to relax and unwind. Especially after the time, he spent in the forge.

But it seemed fate had different things planned for him. The moment he exited the forge, he was greeted by Eula and her mother. Along with the household members and the captain of the guards.

Ashton was a bit surprised to see them there. Eula and her mother rarely ever left the secure walls of their mansion, and after last night's attack, he wasn't expecting them to come out so soon. But he was mistaken.

All of them had their gazes turned towards, some with gratitude while some with shame.

"Thank you for all you did last night." Eula mumbled, "Had it not been for you and your fellow mercenaries, it would have been the last day of my life."

"I would also like to apologise for the mistreatment you have been forced to endure due to the foolishness of some." Eula's mother said, "As the head of the household, it was my responsibility to take care of your team, and I failed miserably."

"It's fine; you don't need to worry about it." Ashton replied with a smile, "We're mercenaries. Living in harsh environments is often a part of the job. Unlike your beliefs, your coldness does not affect us in the slightest. If that's all, I'd suggest you retreat to the safety of your mansion."

Saying so, Ashton left them there. While his words might not seem cold, his attitude towards them was. They were anything but empathetic towards them before last night.#

Now that they realised their guards weren't as useful as they had thought, they wanted to show the mercenaries respect? Now that they knew they were fucked without the mercenaries, they wanted to treat them as living beings?

Nope. Fuck that. Ashton had made his call, but he still informed the rest of the team about the change, and their reaction was pretty much similar to his.

The behaviour they had been subjected to might have affected them before. But now they had gotten used to it. One day had passed. They just needed to endure it for another 13 and then be done with them.

A couple of hours later, Vimur and Laihud joined Ashton in the makeshift base that Vulcan made for them. Apparently, he had some material to spare after repairing the watch towers, so he made something for the mercenaries.

'The old man likes to act tough but cares about strangers.' Ashton thought.

[You know he did it for you. He isn't generous enough to give a shit about the rest of them.]

'Right...'

"I'm going to leave a shitty review for them." Vimur barked loudly, "No mercenary would ever want to work for these Evalines ever again."

"Now you sound like a Karen." Ashton sighed.

"Sounds like a what?" Vimur looked at him, confused.

"Like a little bitch carrying a shield," Ashton smiled, "By the way, what were you doing last night?"

"Laihud here was healing the fallen while I did what I do best-"

"Got d-drunk and then b-beaten up?" Laihud shyly mumbled.

Laihud had been shy and quiet since the day Ashton met him. But slowly, he was getting more and more open around him. The shy attempt at sarcasm resulted from his time around them. He still wasn't open with the rest of the team, but it was a start.

"Good one, Laihud." Vimur laughed while 'gently' patting the healer on his back, "You'll get rid of your shyness soon enough."

Ashton smiled back as well, "Did anyone from our team get injured?"

Laihud shook his head, "W-We knew how to protect ourselves, and V-Vimur also helped, so we were good. The guards, h-however, were not."

"Those fools panicked, and I'm not talking about, 'Oh I forgot my keys' kinda panic'. But the 'Oh man, the world's being devoured by the blackhole!' kind."

Ashton nodded while scratching his chin. The guards might not be likeable, to say the least. But they were still important, just like pawns in a chess game.

If managed well, they could make or break the game. On the other hand, having them panic at the slightest inconvenience was detrimental to their mission. Who knows what those fools would do in a time of dire need?

It was clear that these guards had no experience whatsoever. Maybe it was due to planet Eva being a peaceful place that rarely had wars. But Ashton couldn't ignore their uselessness anymore.

"We can have a repeat of what happened last night." After thinking for a couple of minutes, Ashton said, "Leaving them as they are would only do us more harm than good."

"I agree." Vimur nodded.

"I-I think so, t-too!" Laihud not-so-confidently spoke up.

"We need to teach them some basics. We don't know when the next wave of attackers will come our way. That said, it'll be wise to use whatever time we have to teach them a trick or two."

"Right." Vimur got up, "I'll inform the others about it. Laihud, you go and gather those pesky runts. Beating them up might be a good way to release this stress."

Chapter 402 Training Time! (2)

In less than an hour, all the guards assembled in the courtyard. Well, at least those whose condition allowed them. Since Laihud had healed most of them last night, the guards did not argue with him.

On top of that, they had already seen how strong the mercenaries were. If someone like them were offering the guards a chance to better themselves, they would be foolish to disregard it.

Vimur and Ashton were already waiting for them there. A couple of other mercenaries joined them as well. As for the rest of them, they decided to leave the guards to suffer. After how they have been treated, they had no desire to help the guards or anyone.

"Is everyone here?" Ashton asked Laihud while the guards formed a circle around them.

"Everyone t-that could move..." Laihud replied before hastily walking away. Being the centre of attention wasn't his cup of tea.

As Ashton looked around, he found quite a few spectators watching them from some distance. Eula, her mother, the servants, and even Vulcan were standing outside the forge smoking a cigar-thingy.

It was likely because, apart from Eula, most of them had not seen Ashton fight before. Even though they knew he was the one that ended last night's battle, no one had witnessed him doing anything.

"I'll be frank with you," Ashton said while pointing at the guards, "Except a handful of you, none of you idiots knows a thing about fighting. Forget about that. I saw how well you operate the turrets and other defences. The birds would have had a wonderful time dodging your bullets."

As he admonished them, not a single guard could even meet Ashton's gaze. They were well aware of what a disaster the previous night had been. Even those who performed decently did not have the courage to point out.

But some were infuriated by Ashton's words. However, they channelled that anger to fuel their thirst to get better rather than lashing out after hearing the truth. That was the case for most of them, except one person.

"I don't think you're being fair here." A blonde guy with a bruised cheek spoke up, "You guys are exceptional in the art of combat, but I doubt even you can fight if odds were stacked against you."

"This mother-"

Vimur was about the charge at him, but Ashton stopped him. He was waiting for something like this to happen. That was the sole motive behind his speech. There wasn't a better way to make someone understand their weakness than forcing them to admit it themselves.

"Let the man speak, Vimur." Ashton smiled, "I'm unaware of what odds you're referring to. Please, enlighten my ignorant self."

"We were outclassed and outnumbered. Ten to one, that was the odds. Not to mention, they even had better weapons than us."

Upon hearing this, Vulcan almost broke his own of non-violence against any creature but the Xyrans. His weapons were one of the best in the class, and this runt was saying those pesky invaders had better weapons than the guards?

"Outnumbered and better weapons..." Ashton scratched his chin, "I'll have to disagree about the latter part. Rather than blaming the weapons, why don't you admit you didn't know how to use them?"

Ashton continued, "Other than that, you think being outnumbered was the reason for your uselessness. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Fine. Let's do this then," Ashton shrugged, "Vimur, bring some weapons and what's your name again?"

"Ely Martis." The blondie replied.

"Ely, gather twenty brave guards like yourself and get in front. We'll have a duel--twenty of you against me. You'll be using weapons, and I won't even use my hands. Are those odds enough to recreate the 'odds' from last night?"

Ely did not speak a word. The expression on his face was similar to that of a deer about to become a lion's dinner.

His big mouth had gotten him in trouble once again. However, he couldn't back down now, not after everyone had their eyes on him.

"Fine by us."

Suddenly, a couple of dozen guards volunteered to team up with him. Maybe Ashton's words bruised a few too many egos.

"Great."

Ashton replied and proceeded to have his hands cuffed. Just to make sure the runts don't cry later. Vimur handed half of them some melee weapons while the rest were given ranged weapons.

The weapons were made for practice so they could use them as much as they liked and not hurt anyone too deeply.

Everyone carrying melee weapons charged at Ashton before the fight had even begun. It was a dirty move, but ethics were the last thing in one's mind in a real battle. Sadly for them, all it took to defeat them was a single stomp.

Ashton stomped his feet on the ground, and the shockwaves generated by it made all of them fall to their knees. After that, the spar turned into a soccer match.

Ashton's kicks were flying everywhere, and a guard had to be rushed to the infirmary with every kick. Even Vimur couldn't keep up with Ashton's moves.

After seeing Ashton's vicious moves, he would have assumed Ashton was playing with them to show off if he didn't know any better.

As for the guards carrying guns, Ashton's agility made it impossible for them to aim, let alone fire a round at him.

Thirty-six seconds. That's the time it took for Ashton to decimate the guards. Had his hands been open, it wouldn't have taken him more than ten seconds. So while in everyone's eyes, Ashton was a monster, he wasn't impressed with his performance.

'It shouldn't have taken me more than thirty seconds to beat them to a pulp. I seriously need to eat and rest more. Neglecting food and sleep was the wrong move.'

[Tsk tsk tsk, I expected more from you, Ashton. You're taking your genes and abilities for granted.]

'Yeah, I'll have to train some more. Time to have a spar with Atlas. But first...'

It was quite a task to find Ely amongst the grovelling guards. But Ashton eventually found him. The bruise on his face was more refined now, and it now resembled a tattoo of a shoe print.

"Do odds matter in every battle?" Ashton asked before offering him a hand.

"No, sir." Ely replied, "Only strength does."

"Good. Get yourself checked and be back within the hour. The lesson will begin by then."

Chapter 403 Beating The Sheet

Once everyone had calmed down a bit, the true lesson started. It was nothing extravagant and mind-blowing, and the lesson only consisted of general defensive and offensive techniques.

The best way to demonstrate the effect of the techniques, Vimur and Ashton decided to go for a rematch. Only this time, the use of abilities was not allowed.

For a moment, Vimur thought it was a chance for him to avenge his loss as the last time they duelled, he ended up in the hospital, and Laihud felt the same.

Ashton was strong, and Laihud had no doubts about it, but without his abilities, he couldn't see how Vimur would lose again.

"This time is going to be different, Ashton". Vimur smirked, "I can feel it in my bones."

"Of course, it's going to be different." Ashton smiled back, "This time, I'll kick your ass, both literally and figuratively. Now, if you've done barking, come at me."

Vimur charged toward Ashton with his fists curled up like a couple of wrecking balls. His rhino-like physique only gave more momentum to his charge as he sped up.

The run-up was so fierce that the guards behind Ashton immediately moved sideways. Any man would have done the same because stopping Vimur seemed impossible at the moment.

However, Ashton stood his ground. While everyone worried about him, he did not seem to be fazed.

The next moment, the two mercenaries collided. The shockwave afterwards pushed everyone away while a cloud of dust surrounded Ashton and Vimur.

"It's over... There's no way the white-haired mercenary would be walking off by himself after this." One of the guards mumbled.

"You are underestimating him too much," Ely replied, "Just shut your mouths and watch."

Having suffered a defeat from Ashton's hands, Ely knew very well that Ashton intentionally took the attack head-on. He could have easily dodged the attack, just like he had dodged bullets during their fight.

Ely might have said that, but the rest doubted his words. The guards weren't the only ones who thought Ashton was defeated, and Eula's mother and servants thought so too.

The only ones who weren't bothered at all were Eula and Vulcan. Eula had seen Ashton fight and knew he wasn't weak enough to lose a fight just like that. As for Vulcan, he wouldn't have taken Ashton in as a disciple had he been so weak.

In a couple of seconds, the dust settled down, and much to everyone's surprise, Ashton had not only managed to stop Vimur's attack, but he also did it with one hand.

Vimur's face had turned red as he struggled to push Ashton backwards. But just like their previous duel, he failed to do so.

"Not bad, not bad," Ashton mumbled, "You've gotten stronger than the last time. Did you level up or something?"

"Yes, I did..." Vimur replied through his pursed lips, "But I think it doesn't matter, does it?"

"No, it doesn't."

Having said his piece, Ashton let go of the force he had been holding on to. He turned so that his back was towards Vimur, grabbed the tanker's hand and flung him over the shoulder before slamming him to the ground.

Vimur's momentum ensured he couldn't fight back at any step of the way. It had been a while since Ashton used this move. But even so, it was just as effective as before.

The 'duel' lasted less than twenty seconds and ended with Ashton's victory. Most of them were left dumbfounded, but the duel made them realise why the mercenaries respected Ashton more than anyone else.

"That damned shoulder toss..." Vimur spat in frustration, "Who the hell even created that move!"

"Rather than blaming the creator, blame yourself." Ashton patted Vimur's shoulder, "Why do you always charge at your opponent? I could've predicted your move even before the duel began. Your fighting style is just that obvious."

,m "Tsk, I guess you are right. The 'Titan charge' has been my signature move for as long as I can remember. But I guess it's time to learn and adapt to newer things."

"I'm not telling you to change it completely. Just make it unpredictable, get it?"

Vimur nodded, shook hands with Ashton, and focused on training the guards.

Everyone was taught how to execute a perfect shoulder toss for the next couple of hours. Apart from a few dislocated shoulders and a handful of busted skulls, everything went fine.

On a positive note, after watching Ashton and the rest of them working so hard, the mercenaries who refused to help the guards earlier also joined the training sessions.

After the melee part of the training was over, the mercenaries began teaching the guards a thing or two about weapons and how to use them. Since Ashton did not know whatsoever about operating and using guns and other artillery weapons, he decided to stay back.

But Vulcan wasn't about to let his disciple slack off like that. He gestured Ashton to follow and disappeared inside the forge.

"... First, you tell me to take a day off, and then you call me back inside. What's the deal with you?"

Ashton complained, but his actions didn't match his words as he picked up the sticks and lit a fire.

"First, you don't get to question me." Vulcan smugly replied, "Second, you don't need to use the sticks anymore and third, wear an apron before going anywhere near the fire."

Ashton didn't argue and picked up an apron that was visibly too short for him. But when he touched the thing, it expanded to fit him perfectly.

"Magic, what a fascinating thing!" Ashton released an exaggerated gasp, which again got him smacked in the head with Vulcan's hammer.

"Time for your second lesson. Beating the sheet."

"Beating the shit... Out of whom?" Ashton raised his eyebrow and got hit again, "Ow!"

"Not shit, sheeeeet. A metal sheeeet!"

"That does make more sense..." Ashton replied while caressing his head, "Beating a sheet... It seems simple enough. Where is the sheet, though?"

"Right here," Vulcan replied before throwing a jet-black metal bar in Ashton's direction.

Ashton tried grabbing the bar with one hand, but as soon as his fingers came in contact with it, he realised how big of a mistake it was.

Although the metal bar was barely five inches long, it weighed more than half a tonne!

"What the fuck is this thing!?" Ashton blurted out.

"My people called it the Nyx metal. One of the seven rarest metals in the galaxy and possibly the universe." Vulcan replied, "Normal weaponsmiths can't even dream of touching this metal relic, let alone work on it. You should feel lucky you're getting to use it for your first attempt.

"I feel lucky it didn't fall on my foot or something..." Ashton mumbled, "Just look at the dent on the floor!"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Pick it up and get to work." Vulcan gave the instructions and walked away, leaving a perplexed Ashton behind.

"How am I supposed to hammer it!?"

"I didn't spoon-feed my biological children. What makes you think I'll do it for you?" Vulcan yelled without turning around, "Do whatever you have to, but I want it to be turned into a sheet by sunset."

"... If I could, I would have used your head instead," Ashton mumbled before trying to lift the metal bar off the floor.

[Not going to lie; I feel sorry for his children. Who knows what kind of atrocities they had to go through while he was around.]

"I'm wondering... what did they... do to make him... want to buy milk... Godamn, it's heavy!"

Even the undead genes on Ashton's face turned red when he finally lifted the bar off the ground. But his problems were yet to begin.

From what Astaroth knew about the Nyx metal, it was not only the heaviest but also one of the most rigid materials in the galaxy.

That said, working on such metal would be difficult for even the most experienced weaponsmiths. So for Ashton to even turn the metal bar into a metal sheet was going to be a feat he could be proud of for decades. However, Ashton was out of breath even before starting.

[It's a shame all those muscles are going to rot away... Tsk tsk tsk.]

"Shut it, will you?" Ashton retorted, "Now... What should I do next?"

[You've got to melt it first, I guess. Once the metal has turned a bit soft, you can start hammering it- wait, you don't have a hammer.]

"I don't need a hammer... Probably."

Using Seraph's crystal, Ashton lit up the forge and placed the black metal bar right in the middle of the fire. Usually, a person would need to use tongs to do so, but Ashton abused his fire immunity and did it with his hands.

Minutes passed, but the metal showed no signs of changing its form. The lack of change prompted Ashton to gradually raise the temperature of the fire till the metal bar turned red.

Once heat reduced the metal to a semi-solid state, he removed it and curled up his fists.

[Wait, you're not going to-]

"Why use a hammer when you have hands?" Ashton let out a sinister smile, "Let's begin."

Chapter 404 Silence Before The Storm

Clang, clang, clang.

The sound of hammering filled the forge. But despite his best attempts, Ashton could barely put a dent into it. The hardness of Nyx metal was no joke.

Ashton had no doubts he had probably broken his hands by now. But he kept going on, hammering away like a madman. Whenever his fists came in contact with the metal, violent purple sparks flew in all directions.

<User's Strength increased by 3 points>

<Seraph's crystal has absorbed additional heat.>

<Seraph's crystal has strengthened a bit more.>

These were just a few notifications out of what Ashton had received. Not only his strength but his stamina had also increased quite well. However, Ashton wasn't pleased with his progress in the slightest.

He did not care about his stats. What he cared about were visible results that he wasn't getting. No matter what Ashton did, it didn't seem enough.

'More heat!'

[Place it inside the hearth!]

Despite Astroth's protests, Ashton did not listen to what he said. Placing the metal in fire and then taking it out to beat it was time-consuming. Which, in turn, in Ashton's eyes, became a waste of time.

So, rather than following the 'traditional' way, Ashton decided to do it his own way. The way of a lazy brute.

He began heating the bar through a separate source. The source in question was the crystal embedded in his hand. Both his arms were engulfed by flames as he furiously began pounding on the metal bar.

Under the heat from the fire, Ashton's continuous punches and unbreakable determination, the metal bar eventually gave up. For the first time since picking up the metal bar, Ashton's efforts were proving to be fruitful.

Strictly following a rhythm, Ashton finally flattened a portion of the bar. His blows were unrestrained but not out of control. It might have taken more time than Ashton thought it would, but he finally got the hang of it.

The key to forming a sheet was consistency. But at the same time, mindlessly fisting the bar wouldn't yield results. He had to hammer it at regular intervals in a particular manner. As soon as he began following the rhythm, each of his strikes became ten times stronger.

Overcoming the hardness of Nyx metal was no longer a challenge for him. After some time, it felt like Ashton was playing around with the metal bar that was at his mercy.

Three and a half hours later, Ashton finally managed to turn the metal bar into a thin sheet. His hands were shaking wildly from continuously hammering metal, but only a smile could be seen on his face.

[... That smile on your face looks quite scary.]

'Yeah? I didn't know you were such a scaredy cat.'

A sudden noise of clapping took his attention away. Ashton turned around to see Vulcan standing there, and for the first time, he wasn't rebuking him... yet.

"Good job. I didn't actually believe you'll manage to pull it off. I guess I'll have to give you harder tasks next," Vulcan praised Ashton, but the praise soon turned into criticism as he began analysing the metal sheet.

"It's not a fine work, and the edges are thicker and uneven, and the sheet is full of flaws and your hand prints. Not to mention you did not use common sense to take a hammer from the closet next to the anvil..."

Ashton could feel a slap coming his way again. But nothing hit him. Instead, Vulcan walked up to him and handed him a hammer that looked similar to Vulcan's and patted his shoulder.

"You might not be perfect, but neither am I. The most important thing is to figure out your own way to forge, and as I see it... You have found your way to success. Congratulations, you are not a novice anymore. You're what I like to call an intermediate fool."

"I'm still a fool... Huh?" Ashton scratched the back of his head.

"What else do you expect? Your moronic butt couldn't even find the hammer I gave you, and instead, you began behaving like a primitive retard. It's a good thing your plan worked, or you would have been the one getting punched!"

[Joke's on you. He's into that. This fucking masochist.]

"..."

[You're not even going to deny it? Wow.]

At the same time, far away in space...

"What do you mean the plan FAILED? I even blackmailed the governor into switching off the security scanners and whatnot! AND YOU'RE TELLING ME YOU STILL FAILED THE MISSION?"

Everyone in the room was silent. Even the commander of Metal Sharks, Shing Fuyan, was there through a hologram.

Although he was of A+ rank himself, the gap between his and the Metal Sharks leader's power was too much. If they were to fight, the leader would wipe him out, and no one would know about it.

Despite being a quarter human, Shing Fuyan had always been a close subordinate of the mysterious leader. As soon as he learned that the leader wanted to capture Eula for some particular experiment, he immediately volunteered to get the job done.

The job was supposed to be quite an easy one. But despite that, everyone he entrusted the task to fail miserably. The leader might have been quiet till now, but Shing knew the leader's silence was the silence that came before a storm.

That being said, Shing Fuyan had no interest in getting on the leader's wrong side.

He even got out of his way and called in a lot of favour to ensure his pawns would succeed. Had it not been for him, Eleanor would have never been able to launch an attack on the mansion with so many armoured vehicles and explosives.

Fuyan even blackmailed the governor into helping them, and yet... The fucking bitch failed to take care of a bunch of newbies and a handful of mercenaries.

He had to do it all in secrecy because if anyone got a whiff of the situation... the results would've been catastrophic. Why? Because there were other factions in the Metal sharks who hated Fuyan for having 23% of human genes in him.

Had they been aware of his plans, they would stop at nothing to spoil them, albeit secretly. Upon failing the task, the leader would sever Fuyan's head, and the rest of the commanders would be happier than they had ever been.

"My... Apologies, sir." Eleanor mumbled, "We were going strong, but it seems someone inside the mansion is strangely strong. Strong enough to wipe out the entire infiltration squad by himself and deliver their severed heads as a warning-"

"Is that so?" Fuyan calmly nodded, but his eyes were still full of rage, "Guess what, I know someone who has been itching to sever your head too. I don't assume you're interested in meeting him, are you?"

"N-No, sir."

Eleanor appeared as if a snake had clung to her neck. Fuyan's message was clear. If she failed him again, she'd end up in a grave... Just like everyone who failed before her.

Fuayn calmed down a bit and asked, "Where's that invisible bastard you were talking about?"

"He's... Gone silent. The last time I heard from him, he was surveying his playing field around the mansion."

"Find him..."

"Yes, sir!"

"Remember, the leader isn't as forgiving as me." Fuyan snarled, "This is your last chance. Make it count, or you'll lose your head much faster than it took me to convince your shitty family to sell you off."

"Yes, sir! You will not be-"

Fuyan didn't even bother to let Eleanor complete her blabbering before disconnecting the call. It was the first time she had failed to complete a task, but Fuyan clarified that it had to be her last time.

Although she would like to say otherwise, she couldn't lose Fuyan's support. He was the one keeping the rest of the commanders in check. Had it not been for him, those bastards would have butchered her by now.

"Find out more about the bastard who ruined our plans." Eleanor snarled at her deputies, "I want to know everything about him!"

"Already did. Here's the list of all the mercenaries hired to protect Eula." One of the deputies handed her a file, "It has to be one of them. However, since we could not recover the corpse of the one who died, we can't confirm exactly who is behind-"

"Stop blabbering!" Eleanor yelled at the top of her lungs as she began going through the list.

It didn't take long for her to find the one she was looking for. She remembered the faces of those protecting the front wall during their attacks. Her photographic memory was a blessing in this case.

"This Reaper person. Check if anyone saw him around the front walls during the attack. Once you're done doing that, call Mr Phantom... I don't think we'll be able to do this without his aid."

"Are you sure about-"

"Just do what I told you."

Chapter 405 Mazton's Messenger (1)

The rest of the week in the mansion was peaceful. Quite weirdly so. Apart from a few minor skirmishes, the atmosphere around the estate was hushed.

The guards had religiously thrown themselves into training, and the mercenaries were having a time of their living bossing them around. The guards had formed various factions within themselves and supported several mercenaries.

The most popular among these factions was the one led by Laihud. His feminine looks, coupled with his shy and kind demeanour, had both males and females flocking toward him.

The most vulgar faction amongst the groups had to have been Vimur's. Within five days, Vimur had turned his faction of guards into complete warmongers.

It didn't matter if the enemy was weak or not. They headed straight into fights and returned with the enemy's crushed skulls. Maybe calling them a cult of warmongering drunkards was more suitable.

There were a lot of people who wanted to join Ashton's faction as well. But they failed. Why? Because Ashton wasn't interested in having a faction.

If he wanted an army, his summons and skellies were more than enough for him. Not to mention, with them around, he did not have to worry about being stabbed in the back.

However, much to Ashton's annoyance, even his harshness could not discourage the guards from trying over and over. That's why he had been holed up inside Vulcan's forge for most of the time. After all, it was the only place people could not force their way into, even if they wanted to.

Vulcan didn't mind it at all. After all, he had found someone to yell at 24x7. Not to mention all the free labour he got from Ashton.

As for his training, it was going smoothly. Ashton could create some primary weapons with his hammer and the gauntlet made by Vulcan.

Most prominent of which was a sword. At least it was supposed to be one by Vulcan liked to call it the Hammer of Worthlessness.

It might have been the first blade created by Ashton, but Vulcan did not show him any mercy once he began critiquing his work. Vulcan simply couldn't hold back once he began bashing Ashton.

"You can't even forge basic weapons. How the hell will you make sophisticated beings automatons?" Vulcan barked at the top of his lungs.

"...shouldn't we take it slow-" Ashton barely managed to get a word in but got reprimanded almost instantly.

"Slow? SLOW?" Vulcan shook his head, dismayed, "It'll take seven generations of dwarves to teach you if we take things slow! I don't know about you, but I'm sure as hell not sticking around this dastardly place for such an absurdly long period."

Before Ashton could get bashed anymore, there was a knock on the door. Earlier, no one wanted to disturb Vulcan. But since Ashton turned the workshop into his residence, guards and mercenaries have often visited the place.

"I swear... If it's those guards again, I might as well break my oath of non-violence!" Vulcan angrily muttered before walking towards the gates, "Melt the blade and remake the sword from scratch."

Ashton sighed and got to work. He grabbed onto the sword, and within moments the blade turned into molten Nyx metal once again.

[Tsk tsk, bet you didn't expect to be treated like this after leaving earth.]

Recently, Astaroth had been taking advantage of Ashton's docile state. He would bicker with him like usual, especially when Ashton was busy creating his own way of forging. Ashton would usually ignore him, but this time, he chose violence.

"Bet you didn't think you'd end up without a body when you left your homeworld?" Ashton mimicked Astaroth, "You want me to create automatons, then shut the fck up and let me learn!"

[The way you're going about it, I'll be the one doing the learning.]

"Don't you already know about it?"

[Ahem. I try not to remember the past.]

"If I had a brother who slept with my girlfriend, I wouldn't want to either."

[...go back to forging.]

Ashton chuckled and picked up his hammer. Although he still preferred using his hands, he had no intention of testing the limits of Vulcan's anger.

"Brat, you're off training for the day." Vulcan returned with a not-so-pleased expression, "The matriarch has summoned you."

"I already told her I'm not the head of security. If she needs something, she can call Laihud."

"Whatever it is, go and tell her yourself."

After saying that, Vulcan grabbed Ashton by the collar and threw him out of the workshop. Everything happened so fast that Ashton did not even get time to argue or fight back. But more than that, he was surprised how easily Vulcan tossed him out like a ragdoll.

"Damn, what's the deal with the old man? He's going senile or what?"

[Maybe he found out you have no talent in forging.]

"Bitch please, if I have the talent to tolerate you, I have the talent to conquer the galaxy."

[Firstly, ouch. Secondly, that's not going to happen.]

While having back and forth with Astaroth, Ashton entered the mansion. The guards and the servants, everyone acknowledged him in one way or the other.

One of them escorted Ashton to the meeting room. The room was nothing but extravagant. The antiques and decorations spread across the room made Ashton wonder how much money Eula's family had.

'With the shitty amount they are paying us, I didn't think they'll be this rich.' Ashton thought, "I should ask them to double the pay or something.

[Apparently, they have a business of antiques. Apart from that, Vulcan said he works for them, and we both know how valuable the things he created are.]

Ashton nodded as he sat down. A minute later, the chamber doors were opened again, and Eula walked in with her mother and a... Human.

"What's going on here?" Ashton asked.

"This gentleman arrived from Kernel tower this morning and asked for you," Eula answered, "Association Vice President Mazton sent him with some crucial intel."

Chapter 406 Mazton's Messenger (2)

A short, average-built, brown-skinned man with tired eyes sat in front of Ashton. His lips covered most of the lower part of his face, which did not go well with his large ears and chiselled jaw. He had curly, black hair dyed with scarlet-coloured roots and wore thick circular glasses.

"H-Hello! I'm Chitaur, and you possibly haven't heard about me. But I have heard a lot about you from the vice president." Chitaur said while extending his hand towards Ashton.

Ashton shook his hand and immediately returned to the topic, "You had some information for me?"

"Yeah! Just a moment..." Chitaur began rummaging through his backpack and, after a couple of minutes, reemerged with an envelope, "You'll understand everything when you read the letter, but the gist of it is... Phantom is on his way here."

As soon as Eula's mother heard Phantom's name, her face was drained of colours. While Eula just sat there still processing the news.

Chitaur wanted to say a lot more, but Ashton's expression made him quiet. Ashton was a bit annoyed at him because he revealed such information in front of the clients whose life was on the line here. How could someone sent by Mazton act so carelessly?

"The last time I heard, it was impossible to gather any intel about him. Then I wonder how Mazton got such crucial information." Ashton tried to alleviate the situation, "I don't mean to offend you, but you almost make it sound like he informed you about it himself."

"That's... Exactly what he did." Chitaur replied, "The letter in your hands was sent to us by Phantom himself."

The frown on Ashton's face was more profound than the Mariana trench when he read what was written on the envelope.

"To Mr Reaper (Ashton Fenrir)... From Phantom."

[Oh... The bastard knows your real name. Interesting.]

'His intentions are as bright as day. The fucker wants to provoke me.'

Either the Phantom was a fool, or he was confident in his abilities. Ashton couldn't decide what it was. But he opened the letter, and the surprises kept on coming.

It was a four-page long handwritten letter. The content of the first page was straightforward. It was an open challenge that he, the Phantom, would march into the mansion, kidnap Eula, and no one would be able to stop him.

What caught Ashton's attention was that the letter was addressed to him. Not the mercenary association, not Mazton, but him. The Phantom was openly mocking him, but at the same time, he was praising him as well.

In the letter, The Phantom mentioned how he had no intention of getting involved between Eula and the Metal Sharks as he simply wasn't interested in the bounty. However, upon hearing about Ashton, he changed his mind.

At no point did the Phantom say he was there for Eula. The only person he wanted to meet was Ashton and push him to his wit's end before 'assimilating' him into one of his countless selves.

"Oh, and before you think I'm bluffing... Read the letter in its entirety," The letter read, "I assure you, you will not be disappointed."

"What the hell is this..."

Ashton thought his shock resistance was high enough for him never to get surprised again. But he was wrong, terribly wrong. So much so that he did not have the will to read the letter out loud.

The remaining pages of the letter contained information about him that no one in space should have known. Going through the letter seemed like he was reading his biography.

"Ashton Fenrir, born and raised in prison. You got separated from your parents at age 5 (Earth years). Then turned and raised into becoming a cold-blooded killer by his 'mistress'. Little did she know she was sharpening a blade that would stab her in the back.

"Months passed, and you slowly got powerful and made strong connections. Once prepared, you denounced your mistress's authority over you and began serving the king instead. All the while working as a mercenary on the side.

"Your powers soon overgrew the limits placed on earth and became stronger while gathering allies. Then you proceeded to establish your estate, a little place called Livan. Pretty name, by the way. However, even that wasn't enough for you. After all, your hate for your... Creators was immense.

"You fought and won a war against your so-called mistress, protected your region from an outbreak of corpsification gas, fought a battle against advanced alien species and won.

"Then decided to explore space and ended up on Planet Euphoria; Left the place after successfully capturing the fourth seat and became a mercenary.

"You have quite a few achievements at such a young age. That's why I will make you a part of me. It'll be a shame to see a treasure like you, get wasted. That's enough for now, and I'll tell you more about yourself when we meet. Till then, try not to die, Baby Ash. Bye~"

The fact that his enemy knew more about him than anyone else in space made Ashton slightly uncomfortable. But it also solidified something... the letter mentioned a pet name only his father used to call him.

'Ash, it's a common pet name. I shouldn't dwell on such small things.'

Ashton shook his head and burned the letter to a crisp. The fire inside him was burning more fiercely than ever before.

'Celeste.'

'Yes, master?' The sorceress replied from within his shadow.

'Stick to Eula. You're going to be my eyes and ears around her. You know what I mean, right?'

'Yes, master.' Celeste replied as she merged with Eula's shadow.

After that was taken care of, Ashton turned toward Chitaur, "Is that all?"

"I think so." Chitaur replied, "It was a pleasure meeting you, Mr Reaper. If you don't mind, I'll take my leave-"

"Ah, I'm afraid I can't let you go." Ashton smiled as he got up.

"What do you mean?" Chitaur smiled nervously.

"It'll be a shame to let the enemy walk out, wouldn't it?"

As soon as those words left Ashton's mouth, he drew Balmond and severed Chitaur's head right in front of Eula and her mother.

Chitaur's headless body fell to the floor, staining it with his blood. At the same time, his head rolled over and ended up at Ashton's feet.

"W-What did you do!?" Eula's mother shrieked while hugging her daughter.

"Kekeke..." The severed head sniggered upon witnessing the shock over the ladies' faces, "You are sharper than you look, Ashton. Kekeke, how amusing!"

Chapter 407 Ashton's Army (1)

"T-The head talked!" Eula's mother shrieked, "How is something like this even possible?"

Even Ashton was a bit surprised. Although he expected something to happen, the situation in front of him was unlike anything he had expected. While reading the letter, Ashton used [Detection] on Chitaur.

It was a routine for Ashton to use [Detection] on any person he met. However, he wasn't expecting to see something weird, but he did. Chitaur did not have a name, and a blinking icon could be seen in place of his name that said <None>.

At that moment, Ashton knew something was off about Chitaur. The man wasn't what he was claiming to be. But that suspicion alone wasn't enough for Ashton to kill the man on the spot.

"Shut it, woman! Let the men have a chat!" The head barked before excitedly turning toward Ashton, "Now, where was I? Oh, yes, Ashton, how did you know something was off? Hm, hm, tell me, tell me. I made sure to leave no stone unturned when I took the form of the messenger."

Three strikes. That's what Ashton was waiting for. He would strike him down if he found three things wrong about Chitaur. He already got one, and now he only needed to find two more suspicious details about the person.

The second strike came in the form of Chitaur's expressions. As Ashton went through the letter, he couldn't help but notice how Chitaur was reading his face.

It was almost as if he wrote the letter himself and was gauging Ashton's response and drawing some satisfaction from Ashton's panicked expression.

The third and final strike was... Chitaur's failure to produce the required password.

As usual, Mazton and the mercenaries had set passwords for various scenarios. Sharing of intel was one such scenario where a password was required.

That was why Ashton asked Chitaur if there was something else he had to say. Ashton knew it was time to strike the messenger down when he failed to produce a password.

Even if he was wrong, the association wouldn't blame him because the messenger failed to produce a password, which was more than enough for him to act the way he did.

"Let's just say you're a fool." Ashton lifted the severed head and whispered, "What did you expect? You'll walk into the lion's den and then walk away without any harm?"

Suddenly the messenger began laughing and said, "You're sharp. It's good... excellent. It'll be fun to play games with you. But I must go now, and I'll meet you soon. That's my word, Ashton."

Having said that, the body, along with the severed head, turned into dust, leaving no clues behind.

The entire scene left Eula and her mother in shock. The Phantom... He was right before them, and no one could even recognise him. After all the security measures they took, he was able to invade the property and make a fool out of everyone.

Had it not been for Ashton's quick thinking, who knows what might have happened? Eula could have been killed or, worse, kidnapped under false pretence.

"Thank you for helping us out, Mr Reaper." Eula finally said something, "I-I don't know what else I should say."

"You don't need to say anything." Ashton mumbled, trying to pretend everything was fine when he himself was a bit shaken, "It's our fault for not being able to recognise him first."

He continued, "That said, we need to tighten the security right now. Please stay indoors till I make sure something like this does not happen again."

Eula nodded, and Ashton left the mansion after ensuring that Phantom wasn't hiding amongst the staff. Rather than returning to the workshop, he headed towards the training grounds where the guards were being trained.

[What are you planning next?]

'I can't do this by myself. My summons might be strong, but I cannot reveal that strength just yet. Otherwise, Phantom might get cautious.'

[And...?]

'His overconfidence is the greatest weapon that I can use against him. Just like I did it inside, I don't want to lose that advantage yet.'

[So you're trying to say since he isn't afraid of the guards or the mercenaries, you're going to use them and bait Phantom into thinking you have tightened Eula's security. But when he strikes, you'll use the summons to get rid of him?]

'Exactly. But I don't think Phantom will use his main body to attack us. At least not at first. He'll most likely use another clone or whatever that strange ability is in order to gather intel and attack only when he is sure of his win.'

[You sure know a lot about him just after one meeting.]

'Call it a hunch.'

[Your hunches are always correct. Well, most of the time.]

As soon as Ashton reached the makeshift training grounds, the guards immediately noticed him. Within moments, roughly seventy guards had surrounded him.

All of them wanted to know why he was there, but none of them was prepared for the response they got.

"A few of you wanted to join me," Ashton mumbled, "Do you still want it?"

The guards stared at each other, not knowing how to respond. But one after another, they nodded. All of them wanted to follow Ashton and get to the point where they could challenge him.

"Alright, but I'm not going to blindly take all of you in like the rest of the mercs did." Ashton declared, "You must prove to me that you're worth my time."

"How do we do that?" One of the guards asked.

"It's pretty simple." Ashton said thoughtfully, "Are you willing to die for me?"

"What?"

"I asked, are you willing to give up on your life for me? If yes, then we'll proceed to the next test. Or else, you can go back to training like you were. You have a minute to decide."

The crowd began whispering amongst themselves. The guards had not expected Ashton to take them in as apprentices like the rest of the mercenaries did. But they weren't expecting that Ashton would ask them to give up their lives, and it was something they had not thought about.

A minute passed and roughly half of the guards left. Although they wanted to get close to Ashton and learn more from him, they loved their lives more.

Ashton stared at the ones left and smiled, "Now that we have weeded out the cowards, let's begin the tests."

Chapter 408 Ashton's Army (2)

The first test Ashton had in mind was a simple one. The guards just had to stand still, that's all. He'll be firing three shots at them. If they manage not to move or flinch, then they'll pass the test and head to the next and final test.

However, Ashton forgot to mention one small thing. He did not know how to use a gun.

'It has to be a way to test out willpower.' A guard thought as he stood in front of Ashton, 'He won't hit me. So as long as I don't move, I'll qualify for the next round and maybe get a recommendation to become a mercenary!'

A recommendation. That was the second reason the guards were so hell-bent on joining Ashton's faction. They did not treat the mercenaries with respect early on because of the crap Eula's consorts used to fill their ears with.

But after getting to know more about the mercenaries, the guards could not ignore the opportunity anymore. A recommendation from a high-ranking mercenary of Kernel tower could make their lives ten times better.

Also, when the guards learned that the association's vice president handpicked the team of mercenaries leading them, they decided to do anything and everything to get in the good books of the mercenaries.

That being said, since Ashton was the strongest amongst the mercenaries, it was obvious he had to be the highest ranked amongst them. Therefore, his recommendation was naturally worth more than the rest of them, and that's why they wanted to join his 'faction'.

Ashton's continuous rejection only added fuel to their desire. The guards thought the only reason Ashton wasn't interested in establishing a faction was that he was well aware of the value of his recommendation.

Unfortunately, the guards couldn't have been more wrong even if they tried. Not only was Ashton a new entrant in the mercenary world, but he did not have the authority to hand out recommendations as it was a facility given to mercenaries once they reached rank 4.

On the other hand, Ashton was still stuck at rank 2 as he had not completed a single job till now. Since the guards did not voice their desires, Ashton was utterly unaware of why they were ready to die if it meant they could be around him.

"Oi, you!" Ashton called one of the guards, "You have learned how to fire these things, right?"

[You got to be the dumbest person here. No one in their right mind would want to join you now.]

"Um... Yes, we just learned it yesterday." The guard responded, "I mean, it's not like we couldn't shoot before, but yesterday we learned how to aim."

[...I take that back. All of you are equally dumb. Truly a match made in heaven.]

Ashton shook Astaroth's words out of his head and took the plasma pistol. Theoretically, using a gun was the same as using a crossbow. Since he had experience with the latter, it should be fine... Hopefully.

None of the guards said a word and watched on, and they didn't think it was their place to intervene in a test. In contrast, the guard who bravely volunteered to be the first candidate was too scared to speak up.

Initially, he had assumed Ashton was trying to scare them, but now he wasn't so sure about it.

"Those that possess healing abilities keep on stand by. Your friend here might end up needing it."
Ashton mumbled before pulling the trigger.

The bullet whizzed past the guard's left ear and hit the tree behind. It was a close call, so much so that it felt like Ashton was a sharpshooter shooting warning shots.

'Maybe he really was trying to scare us off-'

As soon as the guard thought that, Ashton took another shot. But this time, the guard wasn't so lucky as the plasma bullet hit him directly on the shoulder.

The guard fell to his knees, wailing in pain. A sizeable hole could be seen between his shoulder blades. Everyone was processing what had just happened there. Did Ashton intentionally hit the poor guy, or was it truly a mistake?

"The hell are you looking at?" Ashton barked at the healers, "You have a job to do, don't you?"

"Y-Yes!" The healers replied and immediately took the man to the infirmary after doing first aid.

"Alright then, who's next?" Ashton asked while playing with the pistol.

It seemed the guards were no longer as enthusiastic as they had been. After witnessing what Ashton did, most of them no longer wanted his recommendation.

In a matter of seconds, the crowd had reduced once again. Only 11 guards were left behind while the rest escaped before the lunatic shot them.

"I guess there were some cowards hidden amongst the brave." Ashton clicked his tongue, "Who wants to go next?"

This time, a guard stepped up and fearlessly stood in front. Ashton had not expected anyone to step up, and seeing someone made him smile.

[Your gamble paid off. You knew some cowards were hiding amongst the crowd, so you shot one of them to get rid of all of them. A good plan.]

'What are you talking about?'

[...you unintentionally shot the guard?]

'You thought I did it intentionally?'

[I should say a prayer for those who stayed behind.]

'You do that.'

In the meantime, Ashton shot three shots rapidly, one after another. The guard made it without a single scratch anywhere on his body, which was the same for the rest. This made Astaroth doubt whether Ashton was lying Before. But according to him, he got used to the gun afterwards.

"Congratulations, all of you passed the first round!" Ashton announced while cracking his knuckles, "We'll start the next round tomorrow. Is that okay with all of you?"

"Would you mind telling us what it is?" The guard who qualified first asked.

"A duel with me, of course," Ashton replied with a surprised face, "If you manage to last thirty seconds with me, you'll qualify. Quite simple, don't you think?"

Chapter 409 Creating A Combat Technique (1)

[Back to forge then?]

"There's no time for that." Ashton sternly replied.

Learning a new skill, especially one that would end up providing him endless weapons in future, was necessary. But not when war had been declared on oneself.

Vulcan wasn't running away anywhere, and neither was the workshop. For now, Ashton had to focus on dealing with the Phantom. Which, in his current state, might become a challenge.

[Then where are you headed now?]

"To train." Ashton nonchalantly replied while heading towards

[Define train.]

Ashton sighed heavily. In recent weeks he had been thinking about something. Ever since he left Earth, he faced situations where he had to flee instead of fight.

First on planet Euphoria and now Phantom was challenging him as well. At first, he couldn't understand why it was happening. After all, he had no doubt in his mind that he was progressively getting stronger and stronger.

Even on Earth, he had to evade some fights, but it was mainly because of the politics involved and not because of his weakness. But things were different now, yet he was being forced to back off more often than he would have liked.

"I was wondering why it was happening to me, and it dawned upon me." Ashton continued, "Ever since I reached a higher realm, I forgot about the things that got me here in the first place."

[What do you mean?]

"My tribrid genes. Ever since fighting the Hydra, I stopped fighting like a Zompiewolf. Instead, I subconsciously chose to fight like a Xyran or a space human would because those genes were 'superior'."

Ashton continued, "How often did you notice me fighting as I did back on Earth? Sure I used my summons now and then, but apart from that, my genes remained pretty much unused."

[Now that I think about it, you're right. If the foundation gets weak, no matter how lavish the mansion on top of it is, it's bound to crumble down sooner or later.]

"A weird analogy, but it fits in with the situation."

[Let me point out something else. Back on Earth, you also had to hide your genes so that no one got suspicious of you. But in space, no one would give a damn about you. No offence.]

"Exactly! I could have used my insignificance to go wild with the genes and test my limitations. Instead, I kept on wasting both my time and potential."

[It almost feels like someone intentionally made us forget about it. I mean, why would we forget about our most unique weapon? After all, there are a lot of humans and Xyrans in space, but there's only one Zompiewolf.]

Ashton nodded but did not respond otherwise. His head was already preoccupied with Phantom and his relationship with his father. Others might decline his proposal. Hell, they might even lock him up if he revealed his intention of capturing Phantom and not killing him.

Phantom had an immediate kill-on-sight order placed on him by countless crime-fighting associations. He was deemed to be so dangerous that no one wanted to take the risk of capturing him, only for him to escape from their grasp and wreak havoc.

That's why Ashton had to move in secret. Answers were more valuable to him than saving Eula and a few others. Call it unorthodox and selfish, but that's precisely what Ashton had in mind.

"I think no one would notice us here," Ashton mumbled and got naked.

[What the hell are you doing now!?!]

"You want me to shred my clothes when I transform?" Ashton stated matter of factly and began transforming.

It was the second time he had transformed into a zompiewolf, but it still felt weird. The gigantic wings on his back lifted him off the ground, but since he didn't want to attract unnecessary attention, Ashton stuck to gliding over the ground rather than full-fledged flying over the ocean.

[You can fly with that bulky body of yours? Impressive. What's next?]

"Now we fight."

After getting the hang of it, Ashton decided to train while flying. But for that, he required a strong training partner, and thankfully, he knew a powerful opponent.

"Come out, Atlas."

"You called?" The mutated Xyran arrogantly asked.

Atlas was the only one amongst Ashton's summons who did not respect him blindly. Instead, Atlas only admired his "master's" strength, and it would appear even he had sensed Ashton had gotten a bit rusty, which resulted in his arrogant behaviour.

Usually, Ashton would have slapped the hell out of him for talking rudely to him. But now wasn't the time to waste on shit like that. But he made a mental note to discipline the fucker soon.

"I can almost feel your itch to fight just by looking at you once." Ashton remarked, "Let's get rid of that itch, shall we?"

Atlas didn't reply with words but with action as he launched himself at Ashton, his battleaxe hanging over his shoulder.

Under normal circumstances, Ashton would have stopped the attack with ease. But since he was training to achieve a new fighting style, he found dodging to be a good response, at least for now.

But it didn't appear Atlas would let Ashton off the hook so quickly. Using trees as footholds, Atlas continuously kept changing his direction in an attempt to confuse Ashton.

'Damn it! I didn't think he would use the surroundings like this.' Ashton panicked.

Although he had managed to dodge the strikes so far, with each attack, Atlas was getting closer and closer to him. Seeing no other way out, Ashton summoned Balmond and decided to fight seriously.

Clank!

The next moment the blade and the axe collided and kept clashing over and over. The loud sound of metal slamming against each other inevitably fell on Vulcan's sensitive ears.

"Hmph! These guard brats got serious about their training for once." Vulcan mumbled before continuing his work, "Maybe the future isn't completely hopeless after all... Unlike that lazy disciple of mine. Where is that moron!?"

Chapter 410 Creating A Combat Technique (2)

The City of Contingency on earth had turned into a wasteland. No life could blossom in the once hustling and bustling region. The sky had long forgotten its actual colour. Even the sun could barely penetrate the thick foliage of black clouds.

Half of the Lycanian empire slowly became the feeding grounds of brainless undead. Well, it was wrong for someone to say the kingdom even existed anymore.

With the rise of the undead came the fall of the Kingdom of Lycania. The nobles who once worked under the king's leadership declared statehood. Which meant they were no longer a part of the kingdom, but instead, they were an independent state.

However, their premature reaction only did more harm than good. They were not prepared for the hordes of undead that came rushing towards their region in search of 'food'.

Countless states fell once the undead launched an attack on them. The nobles realised their Mistakes. But it was already too late. No one could help them now, even if they desired to.

If someone did dare to step foot into the region, they encountered creatures that only a sick twisted mind could imagine. However, that did not stop a few brave souls from venturing into the Unknown, and it was their desperate attempt to deal with a situation beyond their control.

While the rest of the regions were desperately trying to hold off the undead, Livan was the only sanctuary on the continent. They were flourishing even in the crisis.

Thanks to their partnership with Alucard, the vampires and the Giholos, they had enough strength to stop the undead from entering their region and push them back without incurring losses.

The technological advancements that the Giholos shared with Avalina were a blessing. The fire was the worst enemy of the undead, and since the Giholos had many laser weapons available, fighting the undead was a piece of cake.

But why were the Giholos helping the mutants? The answer was simple. Seraph was their god, and since Ashton, who possessed Seraph's crystal, lived in Livan, it was a sacred ground for the aliens. Therefore, they stopped at nothing to make sure Ashton's territory was unharmed in his absence.

While the vampires were responsible for protecting Livan, the werewolves and the Giholos headed out into the areas now referred to as 'Blight zones'.

Blight zones were the regions where the undead reigned supreme and had little to no other life present. The undead in these regions had morphed and evolved. Anyone who wasn't level 25 or above wasn't even allowed to enter within a 10 km radius.

"Anything new?" Sheera asked Virgil, who shook his head.

"We couldn't find any aberrant undead in the region. Just a couple of roaming hordes."

"Alright, the expedition ends here. Tell the recruits to prepare for departure."

Virgil nodded and left. As much the former king's guard hated to admit it, they could not depend on Giholos forever. It was their battle, not some alien species. But for that, they needed stronger warriors.

Unfortunately, ever since Contingency fell, there weren't a lot of ways for them to level up. That's why they had to enter the blight zones to train the recruits. Although it might not seem like the safest option, it was the only option they had.

"Still wondering about our beloved ruler?" Virgil asked with a smile, "If he was here, maybe we would have already won this battle."

"Maybe? He wouldn't stop until he did." A smile formed on Sheera's face as she was reminded of Ashton, "As to answer your question, yes, I was thinking about what he was up to these days. It's been a while since he left us."

"Bet he is kicking some alien ass right about now." Virgil laughed, "Come on, we must get out of here before sunset."

"Achoo!" Ashton sneezed loudly, "Who the fuck is thinking about me now?"

"Is running the only thing you're capable of now?" Atlas taunted.

Ashton did not bother replying since he was preoccupied while balancing himself midair. Unlike while fighting on the ground, Ashton didn't have a solid foothold to do anything. At least, that's what he made Atlas believe.

If he wanted to, he could use wind manipulation to make strong footholds whenever and wherever he pleased. But for now, he tried to fight Atlas strictly using physical abilities only.

'If I wanted to, I would have gotten rid of him easily using abilities. But what good would it do to me?' Ashton thought, 'The entire point of this duel is the reformation of my physical capabilities, nothing more.'

[Stop making excuses. You knew what you were getting into before flying around like a deformed bat.]

'Bitch, shut the fuck up before I hurt your ego beyond repair!'

[Silencing me won't stop the truth from spreading.]

'Like your ex's legs?'

[Oi, Atlas! Spank his deplorable ass red!]

'Yeah, yeah, I'll like to see him try. That said, I need to end it fast. The moron can go berserk anytime now.'

There was one thing that Ashton admired about Atlas, his endurance. Not only did he have strong offensive and defensive abilities, but the longer he fought, the stronger he got. It was the 'blessing' he received upon being resurrected by Ashton.

Just like before, Atlas was the first to attack. His roar was fiercer than before, hinting that he was going all out this time. Ashton couldn't catch up to Atlas when it came to strength; the countless bouts they shared till now were sufficient for him to know his limits.

'Intellect works where strength doesn't.'

Ashton thought and smiled before raising Balmond as if he was going to parry the strike as he had been till now. Only for Balmond to disappear a second before the two weapons could collide.

While it was too late for Atlas to redirect his attack, it gave Ashton the opening he had been looking for since the duel commenced. By donning [Blood Armour], Ashton pretty much nullified the damage from the hammer before punching a hole through Atlas' stomach.

[Skill: Wolf's mark has dealt additional damage to the enemy.]

[Skill: Revenge has reflected the accumulated damage to the enemy.]

[Skill: Blood Poison has poisoned the enemy.]

"Looks like I've still got it!" Ashton breathlessly mumbled, "Now, whose ass did you want to turn red?"