

Zompiewolf 521

Chapter 521 Drakon (1)

While Ashton was consumed with learning about territory management from Asta, a commotion broke out at the city entrance. Despite his wishes, Ashton begrudgingly closed the tab and made his way towards the gates.

"Ah right, it completely slipped my mind," Ashton mumbled as soon as he saw his skeletal warriors.

In his initial plans, he wanted to resurrect the lizardman before storming Nirvana. But the skeletons failed to find something suitable in the time frame, so Ashton dealt with Nirvana first.

After dealing with the situation, the thought of adding another summon to his arsenal completely slipped his mind. However, the skeletons didn't forget and kept looking for what their master desired, and finally, they found something in accordance with Ashton's needs.

The humans hadn't seen the extent of Ashton's powers and were scared before Ashton arrived and cleared the misunderstanding. But the humans were the only ones in awe of Ashton's abilities.

Although Priska had seen some necromancers before, none of them had thousands of skeletons under their command. Unlike the humans, Priska didn't budge at the sight of the incoming horde.

She had dealt with such hordes before and thought Ashton's skeletons were the same as any other. However, once she got close enough, she realised her assumption couldn't have been more wrong.

These skeletons were just mindless frames but could use mana and martial techniques. From mages to warriors to tanks and archers... the horde was nothing short of a proper army!

'Does the lord even has a limit to his abilities?' She questioned herself, and at that moment, her devotion towards Ashton increased tenfolds.

Priska had no doubts that following Ashton was the right choice for her and her people.

"Wait, if he had so many soldiers out there hunting for god knows what, does it mean-" Alina blurted out.

"Yes, master did not fight against Nirvana at his 100%," Viper replied.

That one statement left the newcomers in awe while those already familiar with Ashton's abilities smiled.

"Everyone, get back to your jobs. Nothing to see here." Ashton hastily waved everyone off.

The Ghosts realised what their captain wanted and ushered the crowd away from the gates. Ashton was willing to disclose his necromancy to them as he couldn't hide it even if he wanted.

However, his Precursor abilities were a different story altogether. The fewer people knew about [Association] and [Disassociation], the better it was.

Once the crowd dissipated, Ashton got to analysing the corpses his skeletons had brought along. Most of them were useless. Well, not entirely useless since they could be used for research purposes and as crafting material.

"Take the Gorillan and Monklin corpses to the Lab. Mera might be able to get some use from them," Ashton instructed the skeletons, "As for the four-legged creatures, send them to the forge. Baiter has been complaining about materials, so this should solve the problem for now."

Sadness was evident in the empty eyes of the skeleton who had brought the corpse Ashton had rejected. Still, they followed his instruction and dragged the bodies away.

"Now let's see..." Ashton mumbled while scratching his cheek.

After the clean-up, only two corpses remained. Both of which had piqued Ashton's interest.

The first one belonged to an 'endangered' species known as Throves. Their build was similar to that of a lizardman but were on the shorter side. But their size only made them more agile. Not to mention their intellect was relatively high, and they were used to living as a pack.

High intellect also meant they were more than capable of wielding weapons and could be trained to fight expertly. However, only a handful had ever been tamed by the werewolves.

Even then, keeping the Throves in check was troublesome as they often lashed out against their masters. Ultimately, taming and training them was deemed unprofitable, leaving them alone in the swamps.

A Throve's intellect was often the reason for their demise. Their pack mentality often led to skirmishes with other groups always ended in a massacre on both sides. Thus giving them the brand of 'endangered' species.

As for the second corpse, well, it belonged to a chimaera. From a glance, Ashton determined the creature was an amalgamation of more than seven creatures. However, its stats failed to impress Ashton.

It would seem the creature was the personification of the idiom, 'Jack of all trades, master of none'. Despite having devoured creatures with various specialities, the Chimaera couldn't retain any of their characteristic features.

However, something had troubled Ashton from the moment he saw the Chimaera. After all, it wasn't a creature that could come into being by itself. Someone must have created it but failed to maximise its abilities.

"A failed experiment, huh?" Ashton gently stroked the creature's face, "However, you might turn out to be more useful than your former master thought. Where did you find this?"

Although the skeletons couldn't speak out loudly, they were intelligent enough to write, and the skeleton mages could also use telepathy to converse with Ashton.

Apparently, the skeletons found the Chimaera while exploring the swamps. But unfortunately, it was the only creature in the cave, which meant whoever created him didn't bother covering their tracks and abandoned the Chimaera around the swamp.

"Since no one goes near the swamps, they must have thought the Chimaera would never be discovered." Ashton mumbled, "I might have to leave a few people to take care of this mess. In the meantime..."

At first glance, the Throve was a more suited candidate to revive. But Ashton knew raising a Throve-Lizardman hybrid won't be beneficial as their potential as a soldier would clash and deteriorate over time.

On the other hand, the Chimaera was a creature with endless potential. Ashton could always add or remove characteristics from the beast as per his desire.

Not to mention, since it was a Chimaera's nature to absorb stronger creatures to get stronger, Ashton wouldn't have a hard time merging the Lizardman and the Chimaera.

"Alright, I've made the decision," Ashton mumbled while placing the lizardman's head over the Chimaera's corpse, "Association!"

Chapter 522 Drakon (2)

The Chimaera's body twisted and turned into unrecognisable shapes. It felt like the corpse was resisting Ashton's power, which was strange since it was the first time Ashton had felt such strong resistance.

Every dead soul loathed being forced back to the domain of the living. Thanks to necromancy, the resistance was barely noticeable for Ashton.

That's why it surprised him when he was still facing indisputable resistance despite having the grim Reaper's powers.

"Damn it!" Ashton cursed under his breath and was forced to use his powers to the fullest.

Using [Association] skill inflicted wounds upon him, and it almost felt like hundreds of razor-sharp teeth were gnawing at his bones. As he forced himself, the painful sensation spread all over his body like wildfire.

Unbeknownst to Ashton, he wasn't just resurrecting the Chimaera, but even the creatures the Chimaera had consumed. The resentment within those creatures would make any necromancer rethink their decision to revive a Chimaera.

The creatures had been forced to become part of the Chimaera once. Following its death, they were finally at peace. But now, Ashton was forcing them to become a part of something sinister again. There was no way in hell they'd obey him without putting up a fight.

As if that wasn't enough, the Lizardman, a prideful race, also rejected the Chimaera. After all, they often saw Chimaera as an imperfect and weak creature.

In a gist, it might seem like Ashton was trying to resurrect and merge two souls; in reality, he was dealing with nine separate souls. It would have been suspicious if none of the souls objected to being vilified again.

"I am the emissary of death, damnit! OBEY ME!" Ashton yelled in frustration and took out Reaper's scythe to further boost his stats.

For a strange reason, as soon as Ashton equipped the scythe, the struggle within the souls lessened significantly. For a moment, he thought it was the weapon's power but realised that wasn't the case.

Being the Grim Reaper, Ashton could feel a soul's emotions. When he used the scythe, the souls ceased resisting, almost as if they were scared. Although he had had the scythe with him for a while, it was the first time he had sensed someone fearing the weapon but not him.

Naturally, he got interested in exploring more about the scythe and its relationship with the afterlife. But for now, he was content with resurrecting a new summon.

Within moments, his efforts were successful and in front of him was a towering beast with the head of the Lizardman. The rest of the body consisted of creatures from the swamp, walking on two massive dragon-like hindlegs and wielding two swords made of bone.

"I didn't expect it to look this intimidating." Ashton mumbled while going around his new 'creation', "At least the stats don't look as bad as I expected."

The Chimaera wasn't the strongest among his forces but was shy of achieving that position. With proper training and nurturing, it might become a force to be reckoned with.

Unfortunately, for now, the inexperience of the Chimaera from their past life made the new form ineffective in combat. The ineffectiveness must have conflicted with that of the Lizardman, which reduced the overall stats.

"I can't use you in battles directly." Ashton stroked his chin, "Your new body is of a monster that doesn't know how to fight like an intelligent being."

Just then, Sven willingly appeared before him, kneeling. As soon as the Chimaera saw Sven kneeling, it followed suit.

"Eh? I raise a Chimaera or a mimic?" Ashton snickered before turning his attention toward Sven, "What's this about?"

"I would like to train the new soldier if you approve, my lord," Sven replied without raising his head, "I am confident in my ability to teach-"

Just then, the rest of his summons joined the fray. Surprisingly, even Atlas jumped at the opportunity, which was highly unexpected as he was known to be a loner.

"What do you think you all are doing here?" Sven sternly remarked, although angered, he did not want to show his wild side before their Master.

"Just doing what you are," Celeste replied and rushed to hug Ashton's leg, "Master, let me have him. I'll make him a good boy like you made a good girl out of me."

Her hands slowly ventured eerily close to Ashton's nether regions, which promptly earned her a smack to the face. But Ashton regretted his involuntary action after seeing the bitch in heat just enjoy being hit.

"Ah... yes! YES!" She began shaking violently as if she... found some relief. [panda `n?v? | boxnovelfull.com](http://boxnovelfull.com)

"Fucking masochist," Atlas scoffed before bowing before Ashton, "Lord, it's no secret that I am the strongest amongst your servants. That point alone should be-

"There," Raven interjected, his dagger about to be plunged into the titan's neck, "All your strength wouldn't matter if you get killed before you can act. Speed is always the determining factor in a battle. The quicker you attack, the sooner you win. I rest my case, my Lord."

Before Gokung could do something, Ashton raised his hand, ending the infighting, "Stop your nonsense before I smack all of your asses."

Celeste looked excited about the proposal, but Ashton ignored her and continued, "All of you will train him. After all, absorbing skills is his primary ability. Am I right, Shadow Chimaera Drakon?"

Drakon, pleased with his new name, nodded vigorously. Absorbing one's flesh wasn't the only thing he was capable of, but he could also mimic someone's skills as long as he could figure out how to execute those moves.

His innate ability of [Mimicry] was why he knelt before Ashton after watching Sven do the same.

"Great, so it's decided. All of you will train Drakon in [Valhalla]," Ashton announced before turning towards Drakon, "I look forward to testing your skills after a month."

That following day, it was time to leave earth behind. Goodbyes were always tough but also necessary to move forward. Even Alucard personally showed up to bid farewell to the hero of Livan, and so did Hana.

Following Ashton's departure, the leaders of three communities were set to have a conference to cement their partnership further and work together to boost earth's reputation in space.

Priska and Otiga would remain on earth to look over the earthlings and guide them. After much debate, Ricochet decided to stay on Earth with Nora.

Ashton didn't question him but gave him the task of discovering the mastermind behind creating the Chimaera.

While everyone was preparing to leave, Ashton, Anna, Anna's parents and Avalina were having a family lunch. Alucard and Hana joined them in the festivities.

Montagu was sad his 'princess' was leaving him again, but after being choke-slammed once by Anna, he was back to his usual jolly mood.

"I'm warning you," Montagu mumbled while shoving greens down his throat, "you better take care of her and her needs, or else no matter where you are, I'll hunt you down and-"

"Get your behind kicked back to earth." Anna interrupted, and the entire table broke down laughing.

"I must say," Alucard said, "When I first saw Ashton, I would have never dreamed he would grow so much. You might not be my son-in-law anymore, but I am just as proud of your achievements and Avalina."

"I wouldn't have gotten so strong without your guidance in my formative years-" Ashton replied but was interrupted by Kass.

"Captain, the ship is ready to depart."

"Got it. Start boarding everyone else. We'll be there soon." Ashton replied as everyone left, leaving him and Avalina alone for some time.

"Do you have to go?" Avalina mumbled, and he nodded.

"But you don't have to worry," Ashton replied while hugging her, "With the advanced communicators Priska brought with her, I'll always be a day away from you. Just one call, and I'll teleport to the Eastern Palace and be at your service instantly."

Avalina hugged her son tightly. Deep down, she knew Ashton had more responsibilities to worry about than just earth and his family. As a mother, taking care of the earthy problems was the least she could do to ease his worries.

"Fine, be a free bird." She mumbled before kissing his forehead, "But remember, if you ever need something, we'll be right here for you."

"I know, ma. See you later, and don't overwork yourself!"

Chapter 523 A Hero's Welcome

They saw an unfamiliar sight as the Ghost task unit approached Kernel Tower. The Tower had always been a busy place, with thousands of ports for the spaceships to station. (Author's note: A task unit is a group of 3 to 5 ships, so it would be better to use the term here.)

But it was the first time anyone had seen the docks overcrowded. Not a single port was idle, which made Kass frown as she had been wanting to get her hands on some Polerine Beer, the Tower's trademark drink.

"For Ubtao's sake!" She cursed loudly under the name of the elven god of mobility and progress, "Why does everyone have to visit the Tower now!?"

"You really need a drink, don't you?" Ashton chuckled, but Kass's irritated stare made him immediately change his tone, "Did you forget about our private docking port?"

A permanent docking port was one of the many benefits Mazton had awarded to Ashton after 'he' defeated Phantom for the first time. That's why no matter how crowded the Tower was, there would always be a spot for him and his crew in the Tower.

Simultaneously, Kass's eyes lit up, and she raced towards the upper floors. As they hovered around while waiting for clearance, Ashton closely inspected the abnormal amount of ships.

Judging from the logos and flags printed all over them, the ships had arrived from around the Orion belt, from the busiest sectors to the sectors from the darkest regions.

"Something big must have happened for so many civilisations to gather at one spot," Ashton commented.

"Maybe they are celebrating something?" Laihud chimed in, trying to hold back his laughter.

Everyone in the crew had already been alerted about the happening within the Tower by Otiga, and even Kass knew about it. But instead of acting casually, she went a bit overboard.

Surprisingly, Anna was in on the plan as well, which meant Ashton was the only one left wondering what was going on inside the Tower.

"Seriously?" Ashton raised his eyebrows, "What kind of festival do you think a bunch of mercenaries would be celebrating? If anything, they're more likely to have gathered for a funeral."

"Oh, they are celebrating someone's death, alright," Vimur unintentionally blurted out.

"What?"

"Ignore him, Ashton," Anna quickly jumped in for damage control, "That muscle head doesn't know what he says half of the time he opens his mouth."

Anna's intentions were pure, but her interruption only further alerted Ashton. By then, it was clear everyone was hiding something from him, but instead of confronting them, he decided to play along and see why they were behaving weirdly.

As soon as the ships were docked, Ashton found the place uncharacteristically crowded.

'For a private dock, this place does not look private at all.' He thought.

[Sometimes, your stupidity can be so annoying.]

'Et tu, Brute?'

Before the two could continue their conversation, Ashton saw Mazton approaching him from the corner of his eyes. He seemed happy as he rushed over to Ashton and wrapped him in a bear hug.

"HAHA! You did it! All of us here are forever indebted to you and your team for doing the impossible!" Mazton exclaimed, not letting Ashton down. boxnovelfull.com

"Go easy on me!" Ashton replied before pushing Mazton away with relative ease, "What's going on here?"

Soon they were joined by Lordd Testickles and other representatives from around the galaxy. It was Ashton's first time meeting them, but they had known him for quite some time.

"What else? We're here to celebrate your victory over Phantom!" Testickles proudly announced, and the crowd began cheering on Reaper's name.

The mercenary world was sent into a frenzy when Otiga claimed Phantom's bounty on Ashton's behalf. The news overjoyed everyone, but only Phantom's countless victim's families wept tears of joy that day.

Ashton might have defeated Phantom for personal reasons, but that day he had made a place in the hearts of countless people. It was no wonder everyone wanted to see their hero.

Despite all that, their hero was left utterly baffled. Although Ashton knew killing Phantom would have specific effects, never in his life would he have imagined it would be on such a scale.

Noticing everyone's eyes filled with admiration towards him was a feeling he could live off for the rest of his life. However, there was someone who wanted to meet him personally.

Hundreds of guards, dressed in gold and silver uniforms, rushed into the dock. As if on cue, everyone bowed before nothingness leaving Ashton and his crew utterly confused. Thankfully, their bewilderment didn't last long as a golden-skinned man materialised before them.

Ashton was quite handsome, but the man in front of him had to be the most attractive man to have ever existed. However, it wasn't his appearance that caught Ashton's attention but the colour of his skin.

'He is one, isn't he?'

[Yes... he's a wingless Xyran. I'll explain everything later, but for now, greet the fucker and get it over with.]

?1~coM "Reaper, I would like to introduce you to the President and the founder of Kernel Tower, Lord Flintmace." Mazton introduced the two, "Sir, this is-

"Who doesn't know the hero of the Orion Empire." Flintmace interrupted, offering his hand to Ashton, "Mr Reaper, it's a pleasure to meet you finally. I have heard a lot about you and your selfless actions from Mazton here."

"Likewise, Mr President." Ashton smiled before accepting Flintmace's hand.

However, Flintmace immediately pulled him in for a hug before whispering in his ears.

"It's a pleasure to meet you as well, Lord Astaroth. It has been a while." Flintmace then let go of Ashton and smiled.

"How do you-"

Before Ashton asked the obvious, Flintmace interrupted, "Unfortunately, I have to leave on an urgent business but rest assured, we'll have a long and important chat once I get back. Meanwhile, please enjoy the celebrations. After all, you're our guest of honour."

Just like that, Flintmace disappeared without leaving a trace behind. But his words left Ashton in panic.

'How could he know about you?'

[I have no idea... We'll get our answers once he returns. Hold on to your wits till then.]

Ashton silently agreed and went about greeting everyone as Mazton introduced him.

Chapter 524 Successor

~Boom~

The night sky was laden with sparkling fireworks, and the entire Tower had turned festive. Mazton had opened the bar for free drinks for everyone regardless of their rank, talents and worth to celebrate the occasion.

It went without saying the bar was more crowded than ever. Ashton saw Vimur and Kass enthusiastically indulging in a drinking game from a distance. At the same time, countless others placed bets on them.

"Laihud, I didn't expect this from you!" Ashton playfully yelled as Laihud placed a bet on Vimur.

The healer shyly smiled and moved away from the crowd.

Usually, the dwarves were known for their love for alcohol, whereas the elves kept their distance from such substances. But the sight contradicted that belief.

Kass, an elf, was chugging all the booze she could get her hands on. In contrast, Vulcan was holed up inside his room, probably working on the gift he had promised Ashton following his victory over Phantom.

The party's objective was to make connections, and boy, did people want to connect with him.

Ashton couldn't decline them either for the Earth's sake, as he required all the help he could get to develop the planet. But that didn't mean his social battery couldn't run out.

'Thankfully, they took the hint and left me alone-'

While Ashton enjoyed his drink, he felt someone tap on his shoulder.

'Me and my cursed tongue-'

"Irina, Verina, what a pleasant surprise!" Ashton smiled before offering them his hand, "It's been a while."

Despite running in the same circle, it had been about a year since he last saw the twins, but they looked as stunning as ever. But not everything was the same as both had grown a lot while Ashton was preoccupied with Phantom and all that jazz.

"It has," Verina replied with a charming smile, "and you've become quite a hotshot, Mr Reaper."

"Heard you were on earth for a while," Irina muttered, "how are things back there?"

"It's all good now," Ashton replied, "You'd be surprised with the progress we have made there. That said, both of you should visit Alucard sometime, he won't admit it, but he misses you dearly."

The twins enthusiastically nodded, "We have been planning to for a while but never get the time to-"

"You can get there right now if you'd like."

The twins were confused by Ashton's words. Maybe he meant he could arrange a ship for them or something. Noticing their perplexed emotions, Ashton rephrased his words.

"You can return to Earth this very moment. Only if you'd like to, of course."

"How many drinks have you had so far?" Irina scoffed. Even Verina couldn't help but smile.

Ashton had to be drunk for spouting such nonsense. Even if they were to travel at lightspeed, it would take them six to seven weeks to travel to Earth, yet he claimed they could get to Earth instantly?

Before Ashton could prove them wrong, he saw Anna, and all his thoughts left his mind.

"Close your mouth. You're drooling." Irina playfully remarked, but Ashton paid no attention to her words.

"Can you blame him?" Verina chimed in, "She looks stunning!"

Anna was dressed to kill, and judging by every man's lust-filled eyes, just one word from her and the men would turn the entire Tower into a graveyard.

"Aren't you enjoying me a bit too much?" Anna whispered after planting a kiss on Ashton's lips.

"Oh, we're just getting started," Ashton replied.

Without taking his eyes off her, Ashton could feel the jealous eyes pointed at him. How can a man get so lucky in his life!? His limitless power was enough to make everyone cautious, but now he had to flaunt his one-in-trillion kind of beauty in front of everyone!

Preposterous!

[Ashton-]

'I know.'

The man they had been waiting for was finally there. Flintmace smiled in Ashton's direction, and he replied in kind. There was something different about him other than the colour of his skin.

Despite being a Xyrans aware of his secret, Ashton couldn't feel a tinge of ill-will reflect from Flintmace's eyes. It honestly freaked Ashton, as he couldn't get a read on a person for the first time in his life.

[Relax, maybe we are being overly cautious of him.]

'You're kidding? That's an S-grade being! One wrong move, and we'll get wiped out in a second.'

[Exactly, and yet he hasn't. What does that tell you about him?]

Ashton went silent for a moment. Asta was correct; had Flintmace desired to kill him, not even a god could save him.

If Flintmace did that, sure, there'd be people who'll raise questions, but realistically speaking, would anyone even try to stand up against someone like him to avenge a B-grade nobody like him?

Yeah, not likely.

Unfortunately, that meant that Ashton would have to go along with whatever Flintmace had planned for him.

The crowd went silent as soon as Flintmace assumed the podium.

"I would like to thank everyone for joining tonight's festivities. But more than that, I would like to thank Reaper and the Ghosts for their extraordinary achievement."

The drunk crowd erupted into cheers. Even the VIPs didn't hold their tongues back, and who could have blamed them? With Phantom's death, a huge burden had been lifted off their shoulders.

Flintmace raised his hand, and everyone quickly settled down, not wanting to test his patience.

"But Phantom's defeat is old news and not the reason why I'm standing in front of all you wonderful and capable people." Flintmace smiled broadly, "There's another important announcement I would like to make."

Following Flintmace's words, everyone's attention was strictly on him.

"As all of you know, every Tower master has a right to pick their successor as never to leave the tower without a leader," Flintmace mumbled while walking up to Ashton, "It is my responsibility to carry out the tradition, and at this moment, it's my honour and pleasure to announce Reaper as my successor to the Tower!"

Chapter 525 Forgotten Ally

Everyone was stunned, from the guests to the mercenaries. Even Mazton had no idea Flintmace would do such a thing. Being a Xyran meant he would live a long life, so why would he name an heir so soon?

Flintmace had been the Tower's President for more than two centuries, and during that time, he had never shown any interest in finding an heir, let alone randomly announcing one.

As the attendants slowly came to terms with Flintmace's decision, not everyone was happy—especially those who had been eyeing the spot for quite some time.

Despite Reaper's achievements, he was still a novice in the industry! How could Flintmace so blatantly appoint Reaper as his heir without consulting with anyone?

"Even if he has the right to do so, it doesn't mean the rest of us shouldn't have a say in it."

In reality, they could complain all they wanted. But their words won't mean shit. After all, most attendees were more than pleased with the news and even if they weren't, who in their right mind would challenge Flintmace?

Even those with a teensy bit of intelligence realised Flintmace's true intention behind appointing Reaper as his heir.

The bounty on Reaper was still live, and even with the protection of the Orion empire, the Tower and the Gold water, the threat was still very much real. Some Phantom fanatic might pop up and take revenge on Reaper for killing a 'righteous' man.

By making Reaper an apparent heir, Flintmace had eliminated the possibility of an attack on him, at least the attacks motivated by money.

While Ashton could still be killed, no one would be bold enough to claim the bounty as it would reveal the person who did the deed. Even if the person claimed the reward, they would not live long enough to enjoy the fruits of their actions.

After all, killing the Tower's heir would spark a war, and no one would want to go against the Tower's army. Not after what happened the last time someone challenged the Tower.

In other words, anyone who hurt Ashton with the desire to claim the bounty would feel the wrath of the entire mercenary world because Reaper was now the 'crown prince' of the mercenaries.

Although everyone had their opinions, Ashton had no idea what was happening. But even then, when Flintmace offered his hands, he accepted and was guided to the stage.

"That said, I realise Reaper still has a lot to learn, and till the day he's confident in his abilities, I'll continue overseeing the Tower." Flintmace continued with a beaming smile.

"In the meantime, I'll urge Mazton to prepare Reaper for his role so when the time comes, he'll be a competent leader for all of us. Don't worry; I'll be around for a long time to ensure my beloved successor smoothly transitions as your leader. That's all."

Surprisingly the crowd broke into cheers once again. The ones in Ashton's support far exceeded those against him. As such, those not happy with Flintmace's decision could only bite their tongues and witness everything unfold.

As for Ashton, well, let's say he and Astaroth were having quite the conversation—a conversation where both of them were utterly clueless.

A few hours passed since Flintmace's announcement, and the celebrations were over. While everyone had retired to their rooms, Ashton and Mazton went along with Flintmace as there was a lot they needed to talk about.

Flintmace's quarters were located at the topmost floor of the Tower. Despite being the association's vice president, even Mazton had only been to the top floors a handful of times, and each time it had been a time of crisis.

That alone signified the importance of one being invited to the upper floors.

[Be on guard.]

'As if that's gonna help.'

Ashton was firmly trapped within Flintmace's vice grip. Had he wanted to, Flintmace could quickly end him, but after what he did during the ceremony, Ashton believed Flintmace had other motives.

What motives?

He wasn't sure of it, but it certainly didn't involve killing each other. Hopefully, his questions will be answered soon.

"Have a seat," Flintmace casually waved his hand, and lounges appeared out of thin air, "now that we're comfortable, ask away!"

Ashton glanced towards Mazton, unsure if he should reveal his biggest secret in his presence. It seemed Ashton was thinking out loud because the moment his eyes lingered towards Mazton, Flintmace smiled.

"Don't worry about him," he said, "my dearest Mazton already knows about Astaroth and you."

"You don't look surprised," Mazton chimed in with a smile.

"Honestly speaking... nothing about you two surprises me anymore." Ashton shrugged, "But I- we would like to know how you know about our... arrangement."

"I was hoping you would ask that," Flintmace sighed and disrobed with his back turned to Ashton, "I assume this would be enough to walk your memory, General."

Ashton immediately noticed the wide gash on his back, right where Xyran's wings should have been. Other than the apparent wound, Flintmace's torso was covered in at least a hundred smaller ones.

Between those wounds was a tattoo that Ashton had seen before, but for his life, he couldn't remember where until Astaroth spoke up.

[Mark of Heavenly Liberation? Why don't I recognise you-]

"Your memory is still hazy, general. Truthfully, I'm surprised you remember the mark of your army at all, haha!" Flintmace chuckled before covering himself.

"Wait, you can hear him?" Ashton asked in horror.

"Only if he allows it," Flintmace replied before thumping his chest thrice and slamming the ground with his right fist, "Major Flintmace, reporting for duty, sir!"

[Xyran salute... I never thought I'd ever be on its receiving end again. Flintmace... I have heard of the name before. Wait, aren't you the seventh son of the archangels?]

Flintmace nodded, "Yes, sir! Although my loyalty towards you forced the council to exile me."

"So that's why your wings were taken away?" Ashton mumbled, to which Flintmace nodded.

"Luckily, I survived, but I'm afraid the rest didn't." Flintmace sighed, "After you were branded as a traitor, we refused to point arms against you, General."

"Your entire army was either exiled or executed on the spot. My punishment was much lighter than the rest due to my status as the seventh son... the rest were not so lucky."

[Mace, I-I apologise for my transgressions. My irresponsible actions caused all of you much pain...]

"Not at all, General." Flintmace grabbed Ashton's hands before continuing, "If anything, your actions revealed the true face of the Xyrans to us! There's nothing you need to apologise for!"

Ashton voluntarily stepped out of the driver's seat so the Xyrans could continue talking their hearts out. As they kept chatting a lot about Xyrans and their history was revealed to him, things that Astaroth's blurred memories had blocked out.

According to Flintmace, out of Astaroth's ten thousand soldiers' strong army, only forty-nine people were exiled, and the rest were executed on the spot.

Anger rushed through Ashton's veins the moment he heard about the atrocities everyone supporting Astaroth had to face. Hundreds of thousands were killed because they refused to believe someone like Astaroth could betray their kind.

"I'm aware you want to take revenge against them, General, and please ignore my harsh words, but... you're pathetically weak to do anything to them as you are." Mazton finally said, "We need to get you stronger than ever."

Flintmace nodded, "Mazton is correct, sir. That's also why I chose your host as my successor, as it would allow us to train him without raising suspicion."

"Train me!?"

Chapter 526 Educational Beating (1)

"H-How... are you this strong?" Ashton panted.

Mazton stood before him, not a single bead of sweat on his head, while Ashton was sweating buckets.

Despite going up against countless A-grade beings, Ashton couldn't even last ten seconds against Mazton. The fight taught him many lessons, one of which was... the grade of someone is of no consequence as long as one can't execute his moves flawlessly.

It was Flintmace's idea to let the two spar, and he only had one motive for suggesting the spar: shattering Ashton's ego. Ashton wasn't even aware of it, but after defeating Phantom, he had begun thinking A-graders couldn't so shit against him.

When Flintmace suggested sparring between the two, Ashton's exact words were something along the lines of, "It's too easy."

Back then, Flintmace only smiled and didn't say a word. Maybe he knew it was time Ashton got a reality check.

"Remember, use any means necessary to defeat Mazton," Ashton recalled Flintmace's words, "That's your first task before your actual training commences."

Back to the present, Mazton walked up to Ashton, his hands behind his back. Looking at the current Mazton, Ashton wondered what had happened to the jolly man he once was.

As soon as the spar began, his demeanour changed as if some other personality had overtaken him. This version of Mazton was much combat focused and strict.

"Not too easy now, is it?" Mazton taunted, "Or should I lower the difficulty more?"

Ashton was frustrated. But it was time to acknowledge his mistakes for assuming every A-grade being was the same—the vastness between the realm of A and S graders.

If Ashton were to compare their skills, Mazton was standing at the top of Everest while he was sulking in the ocean's depth.

"Fine," Ashton gritted his teeth, "Let's go all out!"

If he couldn't defeat Mazton alone, he would overwhelm him with numbers. Mazton jumped back as Ashton's summons lined up before him. Ashton spared no expense and even called Guilt to help him out.

Since Guilt and Drakon both were A-graders, the fight should turn in his favour, or so Ashton thought.

"Now, this is getting exciting." Mazton clapped before clenching his fists, "it's been a while since I used my hands in a spar. I hope they didn't get rusty. Come on, show me what you got, side characters!"

Everyone jumped at Mazton, but Ashton's smile turned into a frown when he saw Mazton swatting away everyone. Drakon, Guilt and Atlas were the only ones left standing as vanguards, while Sven and Celeste were sent back to [Valhalla] in a single punch.

"Now, Raven!" Ashton gave a psychic order, and Raven, hiding within Mazton's shadow, jumped out, dagger ready to pierce Mazton's shoulder.

However, instead of being surprised, Mazton smirked. He was well aware of Raven's presence from the moment the assassin blended with his shadow. As soon as Raven appeared, Mazton ignored everyone, grabbed the assassin's neck and squeezed it till Raven's head exploded.

Ashton was dumbfounded, and so were his summons. None of them could believe the strength Mazton possessed.

"Let's get rid of the small fries, shall we?" Mazton took a deep breath and roared!

His screams left the arena in tatters. Even the protective barrier couldn't hold up against it. As for the summons... they got ripped apart instantly.

Ashton was left in a daze, his ears constantly ringing from Mazton's wide-area attack, despite having a high tolerance for being stunned. Mazton's movements went unnoticed in his chaotic state, and it was already too late by the time he noticed him.

"No chance in hell!" Ashton exclaimed, holding his scythe.

No matter how strong Mazton's attack was, it wouldn't mean shit if he couldn't land it.

"Interesting choice of weapon," Mazton praised Ashton, "unfortunately, even the scythe would be of any use to you."

Mazton's comment left Ashton confused, and Mazton being the nice guy he was, ensured Ashton had no doubts after their spar ended.

To Ashton's absolute bewilderment, Mazton's punch connected with his torso, forcing him through the barriers and into the spectator's area. A barrier that could seemingly withstand the force of three nukes shattered in one blow!

Ashton's mouth kept spewing blood like a broken faucet. His chest would have been wholly shattered if he wasn't wearing the [Hydra scale armour]. Medics immediately rushed to aid the fallen mercenary.

Thankfully it was a private session, or whatever respect Ashton had cultivated amongst his peers would have shattered instantly.

Through his blurry vision, Ashton noticed Mazton running towards him. He overestimated Ashton's defence and used a third of his full strength in that punch...

"I'm terribly sorry, Reaper! I went overboard with the attack." Mazton mumbled while scratching his chin, "I'll make sure this is the first, and the last time something like this will happen."

"How..." Ashton wanted to ask him something, but the pain was too much.

"Don't talk now," Laihud mumbled, "otherwise your wounds might reopen."

"It's f-fine now." Ashton winced in pain, but his desire to know MAzton's answer shut off some of the pain, "How did you m-manage to hit me... while I was phasing-"

"Seriously, that's what you're concerned about now?" Mazton shook his head before laughing, "Very well then, I guess I could tell you about it."

While the medics were fixing Ashton, Mazton sat down next to him and explained whatever he wanted to know. He first explained to Ashton the different realms of strength among A-grade beings.

The gist was that there were roughly three hundred levels between A and S grades. While one would reach the A-grade around level 150, they'd have to reach level 450 even to be considered an S-grader.

That's where the difference between A-grade beings came into play. For example, Phantom was probably between levels 150-180, and that's why Ashton could defeat him.

While Mazton stood comfortably around level 214, which meant he was much stronger than Ashton's initial [Detection] skill had revealed.

"It's because the system established by Xyrans is to conceal their true strength." Mazton explained, "Unfortunately for them, people like Flintmace and me can also exploit these loopholes."

"I see." Ashton replied, "Now for my final question. How did you hit me while-"

"Think about it yourself," Mazton shrugged and got up, "think of it as your homework also, General, please don't help him this once."

[You got it.]

"Oi!"

Chapter 527 Educational Beating (2)

The days changed, but Ashton's losing streak remained the same. Had his goal been to defeat Mazton, his losing streak would have made some sense. But he couldn't even land a single hit on him.

Sometimes Flintmace would join them as a spectator, and every time he did, Mazton would go extra hard to cut the spar short. Ashton used every trick in his book to help make Mazton falter, but every time he would lose.

"Got your answer yet?" Mazton mocked Ashton before offering him a hand, "That aside, you are slowly getting better. At least you can block my jabs."

"Want some more salt to rub on my wounded ego?" Ashton smiled and massaged his blackened cheek.

Mazton slowly increased his power levels throughout the week to keep Ashton at bay. However, he would probably never admit to it. Therefore, it showed that Ashton had progressed through their short but fruitful spars.

That said, Ashton still needs to figure out how Mazton was able to hit him in his Grim Reaper state. Even after spending countless nights reading the skill description repeatedly, he had no idea why Mazton was an exception to the Scythe's innate ability.

The description read:

'After equipping the Scythe, the user could phase through any attack directed at them. This ability can be triggered once every three minutes.'

Unless Mazton's attacks were literal attacks, which they were, Ashton's body should have no problem phasing through his menacing punch.

'If only I can dodge him once, I might be able to sweep him.' Ashton thought while assuming a fighting position.

As usual, Mazton wished for his ancestral god's blessing before engaging in combat. At first, Ashton thought it was a bit weird, but he soon realised a man like Mazton could draw strength from any medium he deemed fit, even devotion.

Before he knew it, Ashton began admiring Mazton's battle rituals, but unfortunately, he didn't know of a god who would hear his pleas. After all, the gods he grew up learning about turned out to be space pirates and a bunch of intergalactic genocidal dictators.

[Referring to Xyrans as intergalactic genocidal dictators, I like that thought! As for your Progenitors well-]

'Stop yapping, and let me focus.'

Just then, Mazton rushed at him; his fingers clenched in a fist. Usually, Ashton would have his mind occupied by the thought of defending himself. But after trying that method for a week, Ashton knew it was time to change tactics.

If he would get hit by the punch either way, it'd be better to learn a thing or two about Mazton's attack technique in the process.

Within moments, Ashton felt a familiar sensation spread throughout his body. Pain wrapped its tentacles around him, embracing him like a long-lost twin. But even in pain, Ashton was smiling.

"I told you not to hit him in the face," Flintmace chuckled, "Now look at him! He's lost his mind!"

"Shush it, drama queen." Mazton covered his mouth, trying his best not to laugh, "He's fine. He's laughing because he finally found the answer he had been looking for all this time."

With that, Mazton walked up to his 'apprentice', offering him a hand, "So, what is it?"

"The blurriness around your fists..." Ashton softly spoke, "it's space manipulation, isn't it?"

Mazton smiled and snapped his fingers, and just then, the space around his finger distorted. It almost appeared as if someone had grabbed the area around the finger and twisted everything like a sheet of paper.

Ashton's guess was correct. It wasn't that the Scythe was failing him, but Mazton's ability to manipulate space. Essentially, the Scythe could only protect its user's body as long as it was in its original state.

However, whenever Mazton's fist was about to connect to Ashton's phased physique, the strong aura around Mazton's punch would distort his body in a way so that the Scythe won't be able to continue phasing his 'new' morphed body anymore without sacrificing the safety of the rest of his torso.

In other words, one could think of Ashton's body as a lake. When the tiniest of nails is vertically put into the lake, it won't create a ripple effect; hence, the lake would remain undisturbed. Therefore, Ashton would be able to phase through the attack.

However, when a stone is thrown into the lake, it creates ripple effects. In order to contain the ripple effect and not cause damage to Ashton's entire body, the Scythe forced itself to sustain the ripples in a tiny portion.

Mazton's space manipulation technique was the ripples the Scythe had to contain, which could have two outcomes.

One, do not block the strike and let Ashton's entire body bear the pain and potentially damage him irrecoverably. Or two, contain the attack force in a small portion, leaving the rest of the body unaffected.

The Scythe chose the latter option as it had a higher survival rate for its owner.

"Impressive," Flintmace applauded a mummified Ashton, "Despite being a Xyrans, it took me a day to reveal the secret of Mazton's ability, yet you managed to accomplish it in a week! It would seem General Astaroth did not make a mistake after all."

[Oi! I might not be your general anymore, but show some respect to your elders!]

"Hm... I would've if Xyrans abided by such pre-historic norms." Flintmace smirked before turning his attention to Ashton, "As for you, Reaper, although you have figured out Mazton's ability, you still need to knock him off his legs."

"One step at a time," Ashton mumbled while struggling to get back on his feet, "Uncovering your secret took precedence over knocking you down. Now that it's been taken care of, the second half of your 'test' will be cleared soon."

"Overconfidence-"

"No, it ain't overconfidence, but dedication." Ashton smirked, staring at Mazton, "I won't stop trying till I take you down, my good sir. It might not be today, tomorrow or within a month, but I will get what I set my eyes on one day, and that's inevitable."

Chapter 528 Empowering The Ghosts (1)

Besides being beaten black and blue, Ashton had another job: expanding his faction's power.

By the time the Ghosts reached the Tower, ONI officials had sorted most job applications into categories. Despite their best efforts to shortlist deserving candidates, the number of applicants after the initial weeding stage was still beyond ten thousand.

From production to strategies and from combat to support, each category had at least a thousand applicants, excitedly waiting for the news of their selection or rejection.

As if that wasn't enough, the news of Ashton's successorship sparked another wave of applications coming his way. It was to the point he could no longer procrastinate it.

"After registering the Inhumans as mercenaries, our numbers have increased to 53, sir." Leon reported, "I understand we need better and stronger forces, but our funds are limited-"

"Don't worry about money," Ashton interrupted while wiping off some sweat, "I have more than enough to spare if it's for the faction. Just make sure to hire talented people. As long as you do that, I have no qualms about the expenditure."

"As you wish, Captain. Oh, by the way, this is the list of combat and production applicants you requested. You can handle their employment, ONI and I can take care of the others."

Ashton slumped on the bed as soon as Leon was out the door. While creating a faction, he had no idea it'd be so hectic, or he would have appointed someone else as the Captain and solely focused on training his butts off.

[You made your decision, now you've got to face the music.]

'...what?'

[It's an idiom, you idiot!]

'I already have too much going on with me. Please don't force my remaining brain cells into labour.'

[What kind of labour-]

'I swear-'

[Alright, alright, chill!]

"Malekith, lock the doors. Don't permit entry to anyone except Anna." Ashton mumbled, and instantly a tiny humanoid holograph appeared standing on his chest.

The holographic AI was called Malekith, named after the dark-elven god of warfare and tactics. Having a conscious AI as a butler was something anyone could afford, and Ashton was one of them.

There was a significant difference between conscious AI and programmed ones, which also showed why the latter kind was much cheaper to acquire than the former.

While the programmed AIs were designed to do a particular job by being coded specifically for a job, The Conscious AIs were, in essence, a person in a digital body.

One could also say conscious AIs were nothing but digitised lifeforms that weren't programmed but birthed by a person... usually a deceased person.

Malekith was one such AI who shared the persona of a god and was gifted to Ashton by Lord Testicles on behalf of the Orion Emperor.

The money spent acquiring a Malekith-like AI could effortlessly force a civilisation into bankruptcy. For the Empire to hand it over like a gift was enough for Ashton never to let go of such a strong ally (read: Sugar Daddy).

It wasn't like the Emperor wasn't interested in fostering such a relationship with him. First, the gift of the fastest ship in the galaxy and now Malekith, Orion Empire's intentions were obvious.

The Empire wanted Ashton as an ally and a confidant; it was the only explanation for why they generously commemorated his most minor achievement.

Not that Ashton was complaining, as Malekith was a multi-purpose AI. There was nothing he couldn't do as long as he was given the appropriate tools to accomplish a task.

While lazing on the bed, Ashton was hit by a sudden idea. Judging by his broad smile, it had to be a good one.

"Say, Malekith, are you up for a test?"

"You might be my master, but I'm still a god." Malekith calmly replied, "That said, I'm aware how mortals like to test a god's power to solidify their belief in the supernatural. So yes, I am prepared to show you the might of a god-"

"Take this list," Without wasting a beat, Ashton shoved the tablet with the list of applicants into Malekith's hands before slipping into the blankets, "Please rearrange the list based on power levels and innate abilities that might come in handy."

He continued, "Also, if possible, mark the candidates you think I should employ without fail. Along with a note on why you think so. As for me, to ensure you have a peaceful environment to work in, I'll take a short power nap!"

Before Malekith could respond, Ashton covered himself in the blanket to avoid taking any responsibility.

"Out of all the mortals, why did I get stuck with him?" Malekith mumbled before scanning the list, "Incompetent, incompetent, oh look! Another useless creature! Pah~ I would rather exile these fools than employ them."

Meanwhile, a figure shrouded in spatial darkness stared at the blank screen in front. The man snapped his fingers, and the repeat telecast of Flintmace's announcement played.

The man had been watching the same thing every waking moment for a week. Once, Flintmace's close aide was now stuck in a maximum security prison far away from the galaxy.

The light from the screen revealed the man's blue skin as he kept twitching in his place. It felt like the mere sight of Flintmace filled him with anger.

Thankfully, the blue-skinned man didn't have to see him much or even hear about him. Being in prison had its perks. However, the news of Flintmace's sudden plan was too big not to reach his ears.

Wanting to know more about it, the man spent whatever 'caps' he had earned during his time in prison to get a monitor and news subscription, just to see a backstabber's smiling face.

"Look at the bastard..." The man grumbled, "How dare he smile after what he did to me, to us. You'll never learn, do you?"

He got up and shut the screen before casually walking to his cell door. As if on command, the doors opened automatically, with a guard standing there to welcome the prisoner.

"Lord Asmodeus, how can I be of service?" The guard bowed before the man.

"Get me a ship," Asmodeus snarled, "It's time to reclaim what we, the Precursors, gave away... with the One-Above-All's blessing."

Chapter 529 Empowering The Ghosts (2)

Shian bent his tall and muscular body near the forest wall, holding his breath, trying not to scare his prey away. With his trusty energy bow by his side, he intended on finishing the creature in one swift move as it would earn him the most points.

The shot had to be perfect. Releasing the arrow early would only injure the deer-like creature and make it flee. That was the last thing Shian wanted, as someone else would enjoy the fruits of his labour.

However, if he delayed the shot, the creature might easily dodge it. As if that wasn't enough, the Hirunas had a keen sense of hearing, which meant from the moment Shian pulled the bowstring, he would roughly have half a second before the Hiruna charged away.

'I can't take any chances,' Shian thought, 'It has to be a perfect strike.'

The tree behind Shian fluttered with the wind, catching the Hiruna's attention. Shian held his breath as the creature stared in his direction, as even the smallest amount of sound or movement would alert the prey.

After a second or two, content with his observation, the Hiruna returned to grazing the field. As it lowered his head, Shian sprung to action, releasing the arrow. The arrow whizzed past through the foliage of leaves and struck the Hiruna straight in the neck.

The creature collapsed as soon as the arrow struck. However, no blood dripped from its wound as it disappeared into nothingness.

"Alright, Shian, that's enough." The speaker buzzed as the forest disappeared, similar to the Hiruna.

Shian sighed before leaving the simulation chamber to look at his score. Despite giving his best, he ended up in the eleventh position.

'Damn it, I was too slow.' he sighed, his eyes didn't leave the scoreboard, 'I knew joining the Ghosts wouldn't be easy, but this is ridiculous!'

The scoreboard displayed the time taken by each applicant to kill a Hiruna. Although Shian only took 3.46 seconds, the ones above him took less than two seconds.

That said, dozens of them failed to clear the quest and were on their way back to being the mercenary they were before. Shian found a semblance of joy as he was able to qualify despite not ending up in the top ten ranks, as he expected.

Standing before him was a crowd like no other. Every mercenary affiliated with the Tower was present to test their mantle against the tests planned by the Ghost lieutenants.

Even the soldiers from Orion Empire were not an exception, just like the Gold Water mercs. Everyone wanted to have a part of the Ghosts' newfound success.

While countless others were still being tested, the doors leading to the corridor were flung open, and Reaper's trusted lieutenants walked in. However, everyone's attention was focused on the lady leading them.

Wearing a red tank top and black leggings hugging her waist, Anna was a sight to behold. Her beauty made jaws drop wherever she went, but her combat skills were equally astonishing.

After all, she had shown her skills to the applicants right before the selections began. It was to boost everyone's morale and show them the talent a combatant under the Ghosts should possess.

"Stare all you want, but do not dare to make a move on her." The man standing next to Shian mumbled, "The things she'd do to you will unlock a new kink within you and believe me, you won't like it."

Shian jumped back, surprised by the man's friendly demeanour and the weirdly close distance between them, "Who the heck are you?"

"Rodrick Krets, at your service," The man elegantly bowed before kissing Shian's hand.

"OI! Back off!"

With every passing moment, Shian's urge to kill Rodrick increased tenfolds. Who was the weird guy, and why the hell did the fucker have the urge to keep touching random people!?

"Is everything alright here?" Vimur approached them, and only then did Shian realise everyone's eyes were on him.

"Ugh, yes, sir! We were just- where the heck did he go?"

Shian pointed where Rodrick should've been, but there was no one there. Before Shian could say something, Anna joined them. Just by her expression, one could tell she was annoyed.

"What's wrong?" She asked Vimur.

"We got a daydreamer here," Vimur chuckled while pointing at Shian with his thumb, "No need to worry, though. I'll take care of everything here."

Anna nodded before heading to the next area where the mages were being tested. But not before scanning Shian from the corner of her eyes.

"Now then, those who managed to kill the Hiruna in less than five seconds, follow me." Vimur announced, "As for those that didn't, I would like to thank you for wasting your time. See ya!"

Vimur's words were met with silent hostility as the wound of not getting selected was already deep, and the rhino's words only rubbed salt in them.

Laihud promptly stomped on Vimur's feet before correcting him, "Please don't be discouraged. Even though you might have failed this time, the Ghosts will have more openings in the future! We'd love to see you again when the time comes! Thank you!"

As usual, the soft-spoken healer had a way with words. While delivering discouraging news, Laihud also gave them hope for the future. Just like that, Vimur's words were already forgotten, and the mercenaries left the room without a fuss.

As everyone left, Vimur's eyes were fixated on Shian's. The fucker hadn't turned his face away from Anna's direction, even though she was nowhere to be seen.

It was a usual occurrence for them, as Anna was a succubus, so random stares made sense. However, Vimur knew something was off with Shian. He couldn't pin it, but his gut was almost screaming that something was seriously wrong with the bastard.

'If the bastard had not scored well in the test, I'd have thrown him out without hesitation.' Vimur sighed, 'I believe I have to do something about him, and soon.'

Chapter 530 This Is Business

While the Ghosts were preoccupied in the Tower, quite an exciting scene was developing on Earth. The vampires and the werewolves were face to face with the wealthiest group of merchants operating in the galaxy for the first time in their lifetime, and it wasn't anything they had expected.

Otiga and Ricochet immediately recognised them by the massive logo on their ships. The symbol represented the solar system the merchants were based in. It was also a precautionary measure against being attacked by rogue organisations and to signify their power.

Upon realising a crowd had gathered in front, a group of people disembarked from the spaceship, led by a seven-foot tall cannonball-lookalike alien. The merchants wore expensive clothing, unlike anything the earthlings had seen before.

One could say the grandiose clothes made them appear as if they were angels sent to Earth by god to serve them and make the planet a better place.

While calling them angels would be off the mark, the latter part was genuine. The Illuminary Merchants were there to make the Earth a better place, but for their benefit.

Ricochet and Otiga approached the visitors without wasting any time. After all, the sooner they stated their business, the sooner everyone would return to their usual tasks.

"How can we be of assistance, gentlemen?" Ricochet extended his hand to greet them, only to have a tentacle wrapped around it.

"Ah, you must be this planet's representatives! How good it is to meet you!" The alien spoke in his squeaky voice, "The name's Conkruid, and I'm here on behalf of the Illuminary merchant association to discuss the development prospects of your beautiful homeworld!"

"Huh, that was awfully quick of you," Otiga said with a friendly smile, but her mind was running in overdrive.

It hadn't been that long since the news of Ashton's success had spread across the Orion system. Although she had expected some merchants to arrive, these people arrived much sooner than they could have.

It could only mean one thing, the Illuminary merchants were already en route to Earth before Ashton achieved 'greatness'. The question was, why?

As far as she knew it, Earth should not have any resources other civilisation could be interested in. Yet, for the most influential financial group to arrive there meant they knew something she wasn't aware of yet.

"I would expect nothing less from Lady Shadow!" Conkruid heartily laughed, "Your intuition hit right in the mark, but what I said remains true. The Illuminary merchants are here for our mutual benefit, and we bear no ill intention towards Earth or its people."

Otiga decided no matter the merchant's intentions, it would be unwise to push someone like them away. To be honest, she felt confident that pushing them away would send the wrong message to the rest of the community.

Such a scenario might portray Earth as an unfriendly planet for business, which was the opposite of what Ashton desired. Despite Ashton's accomplishments, his planet was still viewed as a backward planet.

Hence there were limits to how much Otiga could counter the merchant's offers. That would have been the case had it not been for Ashton's close relationship with the Orion Empire and being the next Tower Master.

Conkruid might not admit it, but establishing close ties with Ashton would make their reputation go up by leaps and bounds. As they helped Ashton, the Empire and the Tower would look favourably on them and might even make them official partners.

Otiga smiled on the inside. At the moment, Earth was more important to the merchants than it was to its people, and she planned on exploiting that knowledge to the full extent.

"We all know how this goes, so let's get down to business, shall we?" Otiga boldly suggested, crossing one leg over the other sensually.

Her experience as an ONI's director had taught her quite a few things, including the power of seduction. Be it negotiation or interrogation, feminine charms rarely fail to pay off.

Another benefit was that she knew all about Conkruid's species' common fetishes. Fetishes, which Otiga planned on carefully exploiting for the duration of their meeting to get a preferable deal for the Earthlings.

Conkruid chuckled while gawking at her legs, "Getting straight to business is a quality all merchants appreciate. Ahem, we suggest starting with the five-step terraforming technique to establish control over the unchartered territory of the planet-"

"Why not use the Six-step? It'll be more stable and easier to administer and oversee. Don't you think?" Otiga smacked her lips.

Ricochet, who happened to be sitting next to her, was getting increasingly uncomfortable. In the entire time he had known Otiga, he had never seen her behave so brazenly before.

He knew first-hand what Otiga was doing, but that didn't mean he was immune to her charms. Thanks to Otiga, he felt something rising between his legs even though her words and actions were not directed at him.

'If Nora saw me like this, she'd rip little Rico off and shove him in my mouth-'

Thankfully the painful thought was enough for his blood to rush back to his brain and save him some pain. Little Rico lived to see another glory-filled day on Earth.

"Of course, the six-step process would be more efficient, but considering the logistics-" Conkruid tried interjecting, but the words escaped his mind when confronted with Otiga's charms.

In the end, not only did he agree to terraform the secluded parts of Earth using Otiga's preferred method, but he settled to do it for half its price. The remainder of the meeting went similarly.

Conkruid would pitch an idea, and Otiga would suggest an upgrade and get him to agree on ridiculous demands. In exchange, Earth would have to give trading rights and preferential treatment to the Illuminary Merchant organisation.

In a gist, before one could do business with Earth, they would need to get approval from the Illuminary Merchants first. In a way, Conkruid would become the finance minister of Earth.

At the end of the day, both parties were pleased with the agreement and made it official! Although Terraforming would take up years to complete, Earth was officially no longer a backward planet from that moment onwards.