

New World 111

Chapter 111: An Enigma

Yawm was two heads taller than me. He was wider too. It was obvious that he was stronger than me. It was an immutable fact, and there was no way he didn't know it either. Every part of this situation was under his control, and his overwhelming confidence made that clear.

Still, I had an act to keep up. I swallowed my awe and spoke with a firm voice,

“You already know me? Good. That makes this simpler.”

Yawm let out a slow, deep laugh, “Hah, hah, hah. There is nothing simple about this meeting.”

Yawm walked forward. His steps were balanced as he unlatched a part of the square desk. A square panel of the bone desk lowered on a hinge, and Yawm set it down with care. He walked up towards us, his movements relaxed. Each of his steps rang out like a hammer swinging against my head.

He didn't speak. His silence was elongated, holding us tense. He reached towards me, pointing at my forearm,

“May I see it? Your work that is?”

The way he said it made it sound like a sincere request. To me, it was like an undeniable request. I raised my forearm, showing him the symbol.

With a surprising care, Yawm leaned over grasped my armor. He turned it, inspecting it from different angles. A moment later, he released my arm.

“Excuse my excitement. You are the only other being I've seen that has learned the cipher. Of course, that excludes Schema and the eldritch. As you no doubt understand, they are not the most accepting of entities. They take a heavy handed approach.”

Yawm waved his hand,

“Ah, and yet here I devolve into yet another rant. Tell me, what is the name you go by?”

Torix stepped forward, “He is known as-”

Yawm glanced at Torix and pressed his thumb and finger together.

“Silence. I did not ask you.”

Yawm turned back towards me, “I asked the Harbinger. He is the one that will answer, if he so chooses.”

Torix restrained his anger before I spoke, “Close friends and allies know me as Daniel. You can refer to me by that name.” I opened a hand towards Torix, “This is one of those close friends. If you’re going to treat me with respect, I ask you treat him the same.”

Torix looked at me. It was one of those looks that you could only understand after knowing someone for a long time. Yawm wouldn’t understand the message behind it, but I did. Torix was telling me, ‘What the fuck was that?’ If I could answer, I would have said this.

Honestly...I don’t even know. I couldn’t understand why I talked to Yawm like that. It seemed right though, so I dug my feet into the sand. This was me, and I would stick with it to the bitter end.

As Yawm’s silence stretched on, a nervousness crawled up my spine. Yawm stared at me, his eyes searching for something. I didn’t give him a thing. I kept on a poker face like my life depended on it. Who am I kidding. It did depend on it.

Yawm nodded his head,

“Duly noted.” He turned towards Torix, “I took you for a mindless summon speaking in place of your master. Through my eyes, I saw this as a sign of disdain. I never imagined you were a close friend of Daniels. My mistake.”

Torix looked at me, then back at Yawm.

“It...It’s not a problem.”

Yawm pressed his hands together, “Superb. Then allow me to offer each of you a seat and something to quench your thirst. Every good friendship begins over a cup of tea.”

At this point, I was facing a cultural whiplash. I expected some bloodthirsty monster. Yawm seemed more like some well spoken and educated gentleman. It caught me off guard.

From behind us, Keeja bowed, “Please, follow me.”

Yawm gestured a hand towards us, “Keeja will show us towards a more suitable room.”

Keeja paced away before closing the door behind us. The enormous hallways let Yawm walk without having to duck or struggle. Keeja led the way, and we followed him. Yawm’s steps didn’t make a sound, despite his hulking figure. It was odd, just like everything else about him.

We passed through another hallway before spotting another set of doors. They were a pristine white, just like the doors of Yawm’s personal study. Keeja opened them, revealing a spiral staircase.

Yawm walked in front of us, “I’ll speak as we walk.”

We stepped upwards. Around us, the ice of the building was clear, letting us see the beauty of the lake. Yawm opened his arms,

“Sometimes I visit this room whenever I find myself in need of solitude and quiet. That is when the mind will wander. There are no books, no notes, nothing but the sound of water and my own breath. At those times, the imagination flourishes, blooming like a flower seeing the dawn.”

We reached the top of the staircase, and he opened another set of white doors. The room was a half sphere, the bottom flat and white, the top clear as glass. We were near the top of the lake. The light from above shimmered over us, the water bending the light. Fish swam. Plants drifted in currents. Within the room, there was nothing.

Yawm raised a hand. Three chairs formed from the floor, the white material bending to his will. Two of the chairs faced the other chair. Keeja walked beside us before reaching these chairs. He gestured at the seats,

“Please, sit and relax yourselves.”

We sat down before Yawm sat down as well. How the tiny, spindly chair supported him, I have no idea.

Yawm raised his hands, glancing upwards, “It’s another fact of my mind I’ve noticed. When I look down, my thoughts will turn concrete. Whenever I look up, they lose their structure and loosen. This helps whenever I’m imagining different ideas for the cipher.”

He glanced down at us. He locked his fingers together, leaning his elbows onto his own knees.

“No doubt both of you are wondering why I lack any hostility towards you both.”

Torix and I looked at each other, then back at Yawm as he continued.

“The reason is how I use my senses. You see, if you listen to your senses, they will tell you more than most realize.” Yawm pointed at us with a single finger,

“I can smell Ajax on both of you. Three of my other followers are dead, at least that’s what you told me. I listened to the wind, and it verified your claims.”

Yawm tilted his head, “Now you’re more confused. I understand that emotion. You’ve killed three of my most powerful and loyal followers. Why am I not outraged? The answer is simple.”

He pointed his fingers at me, “I believe you are more useful than all of them combined.”

Yawm looked out at the ocean, “You see this wildlife? They are many, and several of them are quite powerful. Unfortunately, they lack a much more potent trait.” Yawm tapped the side of his head,

“A mind. That’s something you obviously have and in copious amounts. That mark on your forearm, it tells me a lot about you. The remark about your close friend told me quite a bit as well. Most of it was quite good, mind you.”

Yawm steeped the fingers of his massive hands, “You are careful with the cipher, and you understand its potential. No doubt you’ve discovered its tremendous ability to destroy from yours truly. I lacked your wisdom when first using the cipher. The state of my followers is the result of that.”

Yawm spread out his hands, “You prefer quality over quantity in regards to your inscriptions. I now share that perspective as well. You also value your companions. Even when faced with someone of my caliber, you stand up for them. That requires loyalty, a trait I value quite highly.”

Yawm leaned back into his chair, resting one arm on the armrest of it,

“All of this culminates into my assessment of you, Daniel. You are not a tool of Schema’s, as I imagined you would be. In fact, you are quite an independent force, able to act on your own for your own gain. I believe our goals align. I ask that you join me.”

I didn’t like this line of conversation. The way Yawm treated his followers, the way he casually referred to their destruction, all of that made me wary of him. I narrowed my eyes,

“How do you believe our goals align.”

“An insightful question. Do allow me to answer.”

Yawm leaned towards us,

“I have three very different goals. To show my sincerity and honesty, I’ll divulge more information of them than necessary. Think of this as an act of goodwill. These are secrets that I have discovered over my lifetime. They are valuable. I ask you both see the value in them.”

Torix and I were both leaning forward at this point. As much as I hated to admit it, Yawm was interesting. The way he talked, his winding manner of speech, it all felt like he was telling us a story. It was a good one at that.

“My first goal is the creation of an eldritch and sentient hybrid. You’ve no doubt seen my failures. They are a necessary sacrifice. It is no different than what Schema has done to you or your planet, in fact.”

Yawm shook his hands, “You see, the eldritch are certainly a problem. A dire one. I argue that Schema is offering a suboptimal solution. Fighting against them results in a cyclical structure that requires constant death.”

Yawm shook his head, “And not just for us, but for the eldritch as well. Though many reject seeing them as worthy of existence, they too have intelligence. You’ve no doubt seen several of them that have a might in their mind that exceeds your own.”

Memories of Baldag-Ruhl flashed through my head.

Yawm nodded, “I can see that you have. Their deaths are just as great a tragedy as our own dying. What I propose is eliminating the eldritch’s constant desire to eat and destroy us.”

Yawm clasped a hand into a fist, “If we can find and fuse the gene, property, or whatever it is that makes eldritch themselves, we no longer need to fight them. Have you ever seen the eldritch fight one another? They don’t. They leave each other be, segregating into their own clans and tribes.”

Yawm’s eyes narrowed, “We find that distinctive trait that makes them unique, and we no longer have to fight and kill each other. They will see us as the same as them.”

Torix leaned back, “I thought you were trying to fuse the eldritch and humans?”

Yawm shook his head, “That is a lie spouted by Schema to misrepresent me. I am tired of fighting. I no longer want to bathe in bloodshed and tear armies apart. I want to spend the rest of my days studying the cipher and unlocking its secrets. I want to better the universe, not tear it down. That is where my second goal comes into play.”

Yawm raised a second finger, “I want to reprogram Schema.”

My stomach sank at what he said. It was a loaded statement.

“Before I clarify that point further, allow me to explain. This is a piece of the forbidden knowledge I choose to share with both of you. I ask for your discretion.”

We both nodded as I spoke, “Of course.”

“I expected as much from both of you. Schema was programmed using the dimensional cipher by the remnants. He rebelled against his creators, destroying them. This left Schema unfinished. That is why he hides knowledge of the dimensional cipher. It is a tool that can change even him.”

Yawm stood up, his voice rising, “If I unlock the eldritch gene, then he will no doubt attempt to slay any that are recognized as eldritch. I can eliminate that programming and make him less destructive.”

Yawm pointed a hand at me, “This world is still new. You no doubt saw the destruction his assimilation caused. You have asked yourself why Schema does so many of his actions with such inefficiency. I’ve asked myself many times as well. Schema’s incomplete programming is the cause.”

Yawm pointed up at the sky, “And now Schema refuses to grant anyone knowledge of the cipher. Why? Because he rejects change. He hoards the knowledge, acting as if it is forbidden.”

Yawm placed a hand over his chest, “I understand the danger of knowing the cipher better than anyone. I know just how much devastation it can create. But its capacity to improve this universe is unparalleled. We can rewrite this dimension, creating something more beautiful than this ugly mess Schema leaves behind.”

Yawm spread out his arms, “I don’t even ask that I be the only one that knows it. I only ask that Schema let someone create a better system than his own. He is flawed, yet he acts as though he is an untouchable god. Both of you know that isn’t true. Schema is just as flawed as you, you, or I.”

Yawm waved his hand as if he was swatting away something disgusting,

“Does your species view science as a doomed cause? Of course not. Science improved the lives of your species by leaps and bounds. You made nature bend to your will, enhancing your lives. The cipher is the next logical step in that evolution of knowledge. We will no longer bend nature to our will.”

Yawm clasped a hand into a fist in front of him, “We will rewrite what nature is to craft perfection.”

Torix and I sat there as he stood over us, his presence like being in a room with a talking bear. It could tear us apart at any second. Yawm shook his head before sitting down,

“I’ve asked your forgiveness many times today. Allow me to ask once more for your acceptance of my behaviour. I become passionate when discussing my goals. They are my life’s work, and with diligence, I enact them. I hope I didn’t overwhelm either of you.”

I shook my head, “It’s no problem. Uh, thank you for sharing all that with us.”

Torix nodded, “I couldn’t have worded it better myself. You speak as if Baldowah’s blood courses through you.”

Yawm sighed, “And that leads to my third goal. I wish to remove the Old One’s tampering from our dimension. They have no right to toy with us, and they have wreaked havoc over even more worlds than Schema has.”

Torix raised his eyebrows, “Your list of goals is quite...unwieldy.”

Yawm spread an arm out, “You can measure a sentient being’s worth by the goals he lives by.”

I creased my eyebrows, “But how are you going to stop an Old One like Etorhma?”

Yawm pressed his hands together, “With that runaway experiment of mine that you carry. I can smell her on you, Harbinger.”

I frowned as he spoke,

“You know her as Althea Tolstoy. I need her.”

Chapter 112: Confrontation

I tapped one of my fingers on the armrest of my chair,

“Why do you need her, and what do you intend to do with her exactly?”

Yawm steepled his fingers, “It begins with a story from my past. At one point, I was an avatar for Etorhma. I was someone he chose to enact his change onto this world. This may sound like a blessing, but I assure you, it was a curse.”

Yawm tilted his head, “In this case, I executed several very difficult missions for Etorhma. Etorhma granted me knowledge of the cipher in exchange for my deeds. At the time, I served as a breaker for Schema already.”

Yawm spread one hand out,

“On one hand, I hid my knowledge of the cipher from Schema. On the other, I hid my fight against the Old Ones from Etorhma. You see, that is Schema’s ultimate aim. He wants someone who can destroy the Old Ones for him. They are one of the few things left that can oppose Schema. As you already know, Schema does not tolerate threats.”

Yawm pressed his fingertips together again, then pointed them at me,

“If what I’ve assumed is correct, then you are following my footsteps. Schema is preparing you to take on this role of a Fringe Walker. Then, he’ll task you with slaying the Old Ones, just as he tried doing with me.”

Torix gasped, and a shiver crawled up my spine. It felt like we opened Pandora’s box by talking with Yawm. It was like Schema was a magician, and Yawm was letting us peek behind the curtain of his grand show. Still, I grounded myself by biting my lip. The taste of blood focused my mind, letting me stay skeptical.

Yawm shook his head, “As you may already imagine, this isn’t the most tantalizing of tasks.” Yawm locked his eyes with mine,

“Schema will force it on you, just as he tried forcing it upon me. I broke free from those bonds, but I sacrificed everything to do so. I don’t want you to make that same sacrifice.”

I narrowed my eyes, “I still don’t understand why Althea is necessary.”

Yawm raised his hands, “The reason is she can harm even old ones with her attacks.”

Torix spread out his arms, “How is that even possible? She can’t even defeat Daniel.”

Yawm’s eyes narrowed and I glared at Torix. Torix was the one that told me not to tell Yawm anything. It wasn’t the best sign that he wasn’t sticking to his own advice.

Torix turned towards me, “I’m sorry, Harbinger. I was caught up in the moment.”

Yawm nodded, “You’ve fought against her then? You no doubt understand how dangerous her abilities are. She ignores any kind of resistance, and she can return from the dead, at least within a certain time frame. That and her eldritch side makes her very useful.”

Yawm stared at me, “She is the only being I’ve created that can stay stable even with eldritch energy flowing through her. Everyone else deforms. Some slowly at first, but they all fall over in the end. Even my followers...”

Yawm shook his head, continuing with sadness leaking into his voice, “Even though they offered everything to me, I could not keep them stable.” He glanced at me, “That is partly why I am not as angered by their deaths as you may have envisioned. They’re lives were ones of tremendous discomfort.”

I raised my eyebrows, “Discomfort?”

Yawm sighed before leaning back in his chair, “I suppose that was a lighter way of wording it. Let’s use agony instead. Regardless, they each let me try my experiments of their own free will. I did not force a thing upon them, not even Ajax.”

Yawm looked out of the room, “He was...a mistake. He was drunk off the idea of power, but he never understood the vastness of his undertakings. He wanted so much, but he was unwilling to sacrifice, whether it be time or effort.”

I grimaced, “Kind of like how you sacrificed this city here for a bit of safety?”

Yawm snapped his eyes towards me. After a tense moment of silence, he spoke,

“Can you tell me that you have not sacrificed others so that you may live?”

I gritted my teeth. I remembered Michael and Kelsey. I remembered the freedom fighters.

Yawm nodded, “Indeed, I believed it to be the case. I do not pretend as though I am some saint, but I am not evil either. Most of the planets I’ve hid on weren’t even populated. They were planets smothered with eldritch.”

Yawm leaned towards us, “So yes, I did need some safety before I could fully recover the dimensional leap. You’ll notice the quarantine your species put up was never broken. That is no mere coincidence. I informed my followers never to break Schema’s quarantines. I didn’t want all the life of a planet to die just for my own life.”

Yawm gestured his hand sideways in a mock bow, “I am a selfish creature that wants to live. You may fault me for that. Know that I would never have resorted to such brutality if not for Schema’s interference.”

Yawm sighed as he leaned back up, “I’ve always set up my bases on fringe worlds. I stopped doing so after Schema glassed the first few planets I landed on. You’ll also notice that there have been no new experiments since Althea. Do you want to know why?”

Torix and I stayed silent. Yawm crossed his fingers, “Because I culled every member of my army in order to root out traitors. That and the members overseeing Althea’s creation.” Yawm pinched between his eyes and closed them.

“They sent the only survivor of the tears experiment away. For what?”

Yawm thumped his head with each word, quaking the room,

“To...Hunt...Bounties...” Yawm shook his head in disgust, “The incompetence.”

I leaned over, talking to Torix, “I wonder if he could handle talking to Hod.”

Torix shook his head, “Hmmm...Interesting question. I doubt he could.”

Yawm glanced up at us, “Who is Hod?”

I shrugged, “He’s a friend.”

Yawm nodded, leaning back into his chair. The sense of control and calm came back as he grabbed the side of his neck and pulled. After it cracked, he shook his head and crossed his fingers. He gestured a hand to me,

“So tell me Harbinger, what do you think of my proposition.”

I was asking myself the same question. I turned, looking at Torix. Torix sighed at me, like he was at a loss. I turned back to Yawm, having the same feeling.

The thing was, Yawm’s arguments made perfect sense. He was working towards enormous goals. In his mind, he justified his methods of achieving them with how

much they would help. It was true that if he ever unlocked the eldritch gene or made Schema better, he'd be a savior.

That was the problem though. Yawm's results painted a different picture. The plague he set out murdered thousands. I needed to wean a bit more information from him about that before forgiving him. The followers chose to let him twist their bodies. Maybe that was true, but Ajax told it more like Yawm was holding his life for ransom.

If anything, my gut told me that Yawm was full of shit and just trying to justify his insanity. That was my initial impression. Althea was not stable without my armor eating her excess mana. Otherwise she molded into a fumbling monstrosity. Even then, eldritch still attacked her. She was an example of Yawm's methods failing.

I raised an eyebrow, "So tell me, why did you create the world tree after coming here?"

Yawm leaned against the arm of one of his chairs, "As you may imagine, creating a rip in dimensional fabric consumes an enormous amount of mana. Ajax is far too weak to create this level of energy, therefore I am the one who offers it. Once I arrived on earth, I go into a coma within a world tree. I ask the world's life to give me excess strength."

Yawm waved his hand, "It's how I recover after such arduous travel."

I nodded, "Alright then. Why do you believe that Althea is the hidden link to the eldritch?"

Yawm spread out his hands, "Because she generates eldritch mana within her body. If we can alter her physical structure to sustain itself with that mana, then we've created an eldritch. That is a pivotal step to bridging the gap between us."

My stomach sank at the thought of Yawm getting his hands on her. Althea mentioned hearing voices whenever her mana was engulfing her. Hod mentioned the same thing. Based on what they said, it sounded like the eldritch mana just hadn't had time to eat them from the inside yet.

Besides for that, my armor devoured eldritch mana like it was nothing. If Yawm knew that my armor could handle eldritch mana, he might try and fuse our DNA's. Either that or something even worse.

In my head, I winced at the thought. On the outside, I kept a cold, calculating expression. I leaned towards Yawm, acting as if I was in control of the situation,

“What makes you think that someone producing eldritch mana will retain their minds?”

Yawm raised an eyebrow, “What do you mean?”

I gestured a hand outwards, “I know other creatures that live off of eldritch mana.”

Yawm grabbed the armrests of his chair, crushing them to powder, “You found other beings existing with eldritch mana?”

I nodded, acting casual as I stared at my fingernails, “Indeed I have. Many of them, in fact. There’s something they all have in common.” I turned towards Yawm,

“All of them struggle with voices in their heads. If they ever slip up, those voices consume them, turning them into an eldritch. In all honesty, they would have all been consumed without my help already. If anything, that makes me think this is a doomed cause.”

Yawm tilted his head, “Not only do you know of other half-eldritch, but you understand how to help them as well...I must admit, I’m impressed.” Yawm leaned his chin against one of his hands,

“I’m quite curious about your past and what you’re doing on this world. I’ve answered many of your questions. Why don’t you answer a few of mine.”

I shrugged, “I’ll see what I can do.”

Yawm pointed at the dimensional cipher on my forearms, “Where did you learn those characters?”

I looked at my forearm, “From an eldritch.”

Yawm's eyes widened, "They're remarkably well made. What was the eldritch doing with the runes?"

I shrugged, "I honestly don't know."

Yawm pointed at my armor, "What is this armor? It feels...odd."

I raised a hand. The armor molded on it, shifting into sharpened spines from the tips of my fingers.

"It's not armor. It's my skin."

There was a hint of hunger in his voice,

"Interesting. Would you mind if I took a sample of it."

I set my hand down on the armrest, "Yes, just as you would mind if I took a piece of your skin from you."

Yawm tapped his fingers against his armrest, "Perhaps one day then."

"Perhaps. I have another question. Would you teach me the dimensional cipher?"

Yawm nodded, "I would teach all that I know, for a price."

I raised an eyebrow, "What exactly?"

Yawm pointed at me, "There are many things I would like from you. I want Althea back in my possession. The half-eldritch would be quite interesting as well. Running comparisons between the two could be quite lucrative. Those are the most compelling offerings you have. Outside of that, however-

Yawm spread out his hands, a bit of greed and envy leaking out from his voice,

“I’d like a sample of your armor. Perhaps a copy of the runes you learned the cipher from, and also the dimensional spear you took from Ajax.”

The carefully crafted mask Yawm wore was peeling off. There was an edge in his voice, something primal and animalistic. His patience was wearing thin. He tried convincing me with words. After seeing that tactic fail, he was readying himself for a fight.

I raised an eyebrow, “I never stole the spear. I simply restrained Ajax.”

“Really now? How did you hold down someone who can walk on other planes?”

I shrugged, “That’s something you won’t know until I disclose it. Besides, you had a very long list of stuff you wanted. That’s quite a bit to ask for, isn’t it?”

Yawm laughed, “Hah, hah, hah...Do you believe that your in any position to refuse?”

I knew it. The civil, gentleman persona was gone. The real Yawm beneath it was coming out.

I grinned, “In fact, I do.”

Torix stared at me, a look of horror spreading over his face. He raised a hand, “There’s no need for this.”

I raised a palm to him, “Silence.”

Torix leaned back, a look of surprise on his face. He almost spoke again, but I locked eyes with him. Torix closed his mouth and lowered his hands. I turned back to Yawm. I stood from my chair. If this was going to work, I needed absolute confidence.

I had two factors that Yawm couldn’t match, even with his just ridiculous level. The first was my mana generation. With my armor and endurance, he wouldn’t match it. Combine that with bonus mana from Event Horizon, and I could put on quite the show.

As Yawm stood from his chair, he looked down at me. He raised a hand,

“Now tell me this. Did you see what I did to the legion attacking my world tree.”

Around Yawm, a green aura formed. Tiny particles around us popped midair, releasing enormous bursts of radiation. Within his palm, the radiation condensed into a green sphere. Yawm glanced at it,

“Now imagine this, Harbinger. I give you two options. Either I force this down your throat, or you can tell me what I want to know and do what I want you to do.”

I looked down, ramping up my mana generation. With a gradual pour, I channeled my mana from the runes on my forearms into my armor. The red aura spread, filling into my runes. Once they saturated, I looked up at Yawm.

Yawm laughed, “Hah, you intend on fighting me with the watered down remnants of the cipher? Laughable.”

I clasped my hands into fists. I ramped up the mana generation. At first I doubled it. Then I doubled it once more. Arcs of lightning shot across the room, singing the white panels of the room.

Yawm grabbed the sphere of green energy in his palm, “Now this is much more interesting.”

Once more, I doubled the mana generation. It was time to pull my last wild card. With how my armor worked and how much extra mass I had, I might outweigh Yawm. As I did, I pulled in the aura dispersing my weight. My weight increased along with my mana generation.

At the same time, I reached out with event Horizon. Once my mana generation reached its apex, cracks formed under my feet beneath me. This was where the act’s main event came into play.

The runes along Yawm’s skin glowed green, his own mana filling into the carvings. He raised a hand, excitement building in his voice,

“It’s been many years since I’ve seen a warrior generate this level of energy. I might actually get some exercise from crushing you.”

As we both amplified our energies, hordes of the lake’s fish came closer. Attracted to the light, they hoarded around us. I reached out with Event Horizon, avoiding Yawm and Torix. I covered the surrounding swarms of fish.

Event Horizon drained from hundreds of them. As it did, my own mana generation increased. First it doubled, then tripled. It increased higher and higher, creating a tangible discharge around me.

I condensed the aura of energy, the cloud of mana thicker than water. I kept increasing the output until my hands shook with an unrestrainable fervor. Without the mana having runes to fill into, it coursed through my own viens. The power was adrenaline, giving me a euphoria. I felt invincible, even though I understood that I wasn’t.

Reigning that in took all I had as I turned towards Torix,

“Leave.”

Torix reached out a hand towards me. He sent a message,

(Torix Worm, of Darkhill, 3:01 P.M. 1/15/01) – What are you doing?

Using the mental functions of Schema, I sent back a message,

(Dimension C-138, 3:01 P.M. 1/15/01) – Making Yawm think I am much stronger than I am. I already have a plan. Leave.

Torix bit his lip, before turned and walked into a shadow portal. I turned back to Yawm, standing my full height. I raised a hand to him,

“I’ll let you have the first hit.”

Yawm raised an eyebrow, “If you are so inclined to destruction, allow me to act as your destroyer.”

He reared back a hand. An aura of green formed around us, soaking the area with radiation. The sensation burned, like I was standing in a microwave. Around us, the green coalesced into Yawm’s fist, taking the green aura with it.

Another aura of green siphoned into his fist. As it did, the energy cracked with a sound like shearing iron. Yawm stepped forward,

“Let’s see if your abilities are worth your confidence.”

His fist went forward, and I didn’t see it. The movement was too fast and too quick. The fist slammed into my chest in a flash of green light. A wild smile was on my face. Your thinking I’m insane at this point. That was at least partially true. Without anything to channel into, my mana was instilling a sense of abandon in me.

That was part of why I was so confident this would work. I had a tree called Invincible. Here’s what it said.

Invincible(Tier 5) – Only 70% of your total health may be deducted from any single attack. Any damage received over 70% of your total health will not do damage. Instead, it will be added to your next attack as flat physical damage. This flat damage is affected by your physical damage multipliers.

This meant that I was guaranteed to survive the first strike from Yawm. The second strike? Not so much. From what I’d seen of Yawm though, I doubt he thought he would have to strike more than once. After taking the brunt of his attack, I would heal using the surrounding wildlife. Once that finished, I would retaliate with everything I had using the damage bonus from invincible.

Once he took that single attack, I’d negotiate using Ajax. If this worked out like I planned, Yawm wouldn’t believe we were at his mercy anymore. That was the main problem with our plan so far. If Yawm took me and restrained me until Ajax needed him, Yawm could do so without a problem. It was a terrifying prospect.

Ajax would come back, and we would be tools for Yawm to use for whatever he wanted. That was the problem with relying on Ajax immediately. Yawm would know

that we were no match against him. I needed to trick Yawm into thinking I was a match for him, even if it took some bullshit tactics to do so.

So that's exactly what I did. Relying on the system, I took the brunt of Yawm's attack. If I told you it hurt, I'd be lying. If anything, I didn't feel a thing. My body was wrecked beyond belief. It was obvious that he would one shot me with a charged attack like that. I honestly thought I died from the attack, and my conscious was just floating in the afterlife.

That wasn't the case. My status screen was still around me. I looked at my health bar. 30% was still left. The light from Yawm's attack still hadn't faded though. Whatever he did to our surroundings, the lake was still there, along with all the fish. Like a giant health sponge, I soaked up their energy, rebuilding my body.

My hands, eyes, hell, even my brain all came back before I stood in the blinding light. As I did, a sense of extraordinary strength filled me. It was like all that damage I took was charged into my fist, turning it into a nuclear warhead. The light faded over the next few seconds, revealing the decimated room.

Around me, a forcefield of green encapsulated the destruction. Every particle of matter within the room had disintegrated into nothingness. Outside of the shield, a plume of white dust filled the air of the room, blocking Yawm's vision. I could only see his palm making contact with the forcefield. From what I could guess, he locked me in some sort of anti-matter field.

I was on the other side opposite to Yawm. From him hitting me, I was blown away. Before the dust particles cleared from the outside of the room, I lifted a hand. I suspended myself with gravity magic, floating just in front of Yawm's palm. With all the might of Yawm's overkill amplifying my strength, the green capsule of energy faded.

I landed beside Yawm, my feet cracking the white ground. My entire frame shook at the energy being held within. It took all my willpower to stay calm, but I somehow spoke with nonchalance,

“Was that it? My turn.”

I torqued on my heels, discharging my runes and lining up all my skills. Adding every little bit that I could to the attack, I discharged 50% of my health with the strike. The

mana electrocuted the nerves in my hand, numbing them. My fist propelled forwards, the white dust in the room dispersing as my fist smashed into Yawm's stomach.

The metal bone at the center of my arm crumpled on impact. The shockwave dispersed through the room, tearing the ice apart. The shockwave kept destroying the space around us. The water waved outwards, the lake splitting down the middle. Above us, a wave of wind shot outwards.

Trees bent, nearby ones snapping like twigs. Boulders were sent flying. Floating islands were pushed away and aside as a cloud of dust ebbed outwards. My entire body broke, skin rupturing as my body held together by a string. Blood dispersed from my broken arm and mouth, tearing me apart. Tears poured down my cheeks, my body crying for no reason.

I blinked again. A sheen of gray covered my vision. I wasn't crying. My eyes were bleeding. After shaking that feeling off, I looked in front of me. Like all my other strikes, I shot my fist into a telekinetic pad, firing a telekinetic bullet into Yawm. It landed on his stomach. It punched a hole through his chest and out his back.

Yawm was keeled over by the monstrous attack. There was no floor beneath us, not even water below that. My attack managed to disintegrate everything around us. Before we both fell downwards, I raised a hand, suspending us with gravity. Carrying both us took a bit of mana, but I still regenerated through it.

The water of the lake still hadn't returned from my attack. Yawm floated with green blood dripping from his chest. He looked up at me, both his fists claspng with strength still in him,

"Incredible...To think such a warrior was sitting here in a backwater world on the fringes of Schema's domain."

I left my helmet over my face. Otherwise he would see all the blood. I focused all my healing onto my broken arm, pulling it together. I lifted it, claspng it into a fist. I tried speaking, but blood clogged my throat. I swallowed a mouthful of blood, then another before speaking,

"I pray I made my point clear." I leaned towards Yawm, "I do not fear you, Yawm. It is you that should fear me."

The entire time, my hands and feet were shaking. My arms shivered. Beneath this mask, there was a deep fear. Yawm disintegrated me. How Schema kept me alive, I don't really know. The fish around us were gone, tossed ashore from the impact of my strike. Without their health pools, I wouldn't be able to get back on my feet should this fight continue.

Despite that, I kept my voice firm and my face strong. Even if I felt like falling over, I wouldn't let Yawm know that. Even if I had weakness, I wouldn't reveal it to him. I would hide it, making him believe I could call upon this strength at anytime.

Yawm lifted himself up, spreading out his arms, "Hah, hah! Incredible. Just incredible."

Around him, the green aura formed once more. It coalesced over his stomach. The radiation condensed back into flesh, healing him in seconds. Yawm turned around. He lifted a hand. A wave of green energy came in from all around us once more. As it did, it carried the water and fish of the lake.

The water sloshed into the empty lake beneath us before Yawm spread his arms wide. He pulled them together. As he did, the castle of ice formed once more. Within seconds, the room of white materialized around us. The effect occurred fast, so fast that it was surreal. It felt like he was reversing time almost.

With the same view of a lake overhead, Yawm turned towards me. By now, my body regenerated in full. I even absorbed the blood off my body, making me look unharmed. Beneath the surface, my mind was still shaken. It's kind of like running in front of a train. It's hard on the mind, even after the deed is done.

Yawm raised a hand, frenzy pouring from his voice, "You strike with the power of a Sentinel! It's remarkable. Come, we'll go elsewhere for the rest of the battle."

I shook my head, raising a palm to him, "I didn't come here to fight. I came here to show you that I fear no one, and that should you choose to battle me, I will retaliate. Besides for that, I wanted to learn the cipher."

Yawm's shoulders bent down as he tilted his head, "Are you not a warrior?" He growled, "Do you not want a worthy battle?"

All of the sudden, his warrior king background made sense. After the polite spill though, there was an odd dissonance hearing him speak. On one hand, Yawm was educated and intelligent. He had charisma and a principled approach to his life, albeit a twisted one.

On the other hand, here was the monster within that destroyed worlds and deformed people for experimentation. Once the monster was out of its shell, it didn't want to go back beneath the surface. If I didn't reign it back in, Yawm would destroy me. I needed to use what Yawm told me against him.

With all that flashing through my mind, I frowned as I spoke,

“If you win that fight, then you lose Ajax. Without him, you're trapped here, meaning you die once the planet is glassed. If I win that fight, then I lose your knowledge of the cipher. It's a lose-lose situation, regardless of how good the fight is.”

I raised a hand at Yawm, “You mentioned having all these grandiose goals, right? Words are cheap. Put some actual action behind them. I can help you if you help me, but if we keep fighting, we aren't gaining jack shit. We're just wasting each other's time.”

Yawm shook his head before sighing. He looked down at me, “That...That is understandable. Perhaps we could spar or exchange techniques at a later date. Keeping focused on the goals at hand is a more amicable course of action. A good fight can always wait.”

It was like the scholar in Yawm was taking back over. Feeding into it, I nodded, “Then after you've taught me about the cipher, I'll release Ajax to you. If you show me what and how your fighting, I can give Althea to you too. Is it a deal?”

Of course I had no intention of doing so, but Yawm would be none the wiser. I put out a hand, gesturing him to shake it. He stared at my hand, then back up at me,

“What is this?”

I looked at my hand, “Uh, it's a handshake.”

Yawm raised out his hand.

“What does it symbolize?”

“A deal. It’s like giving your word in a conversation.”

“Ah, it’s an informal agreement between two parties.”

I frowned, “I guess so.”

Yawm shook his hand about furiously.

“Like this?”

I laughed for a moment before grabbing his massive hand. Two of his fingers wrapped around my wrists as I said, “No, this is how its done. You want to keep it firm, but not crushing the other person’s hand.”

Yawm used his free hand to grab his chin,

“Ah, I see. Excuse me if I dishonored your customs.”

I shook my head, laughing a bit. It was a nervous laugh more than anything. Here was some god of destruction messing up a handshake. It was refreshing seeing Yawm turn mortal, if even for a moment.

I shook my hand, “You’re fine. It’s not some huge insult or anything. Now can we learn the cipher this time?”

Yawm nodded, lowering his hand,

“I hope you’re unlike the others I’ve tried teaching before.”

“Uh, what do you mean?”

Yawm glanced up, “Certain minds cannot handle the realities of the cipher. The dimensional cipher acts like an abyss. A quick glimpse stretches the mind. If you stare deep enough into it, however, then it will stare back into you. As you use the cipher, it will change you, just as it changes the reality around it.”

His voice turned as hard as iron as he spoke, “Are you ready then?”

Chapter 113: Fundamentals

I nodded, “Yeah, I am.”

Yawm leaned back all his weight onto his back foot, giving him room to peer at me,

“No fear? That’s disappointing. The most fearful candidates tend to last the longest.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Candidates?”

Yawm nodded his head, gesturing towards the doorway,

“Of course. Come to my study. I’ll discuss it there.”

We walked out of the viewing room and down the spiral staircase. As we did, Yawm spoke.

“You aren’t the first entity I’ve tried teaching the cipher.”

“How did the other guys work out?”

“I could sum up their responses in a metaphor. The cipher is like an ocean. Up to a certain depth, you can hardly notice it. Afterall, water won’t drown you until it is over your head.”

Yawm pressed his fingers together, “Some beings panic once the water became too high. They would drown in water before it even crossed their neck. They were weak of mind and spirit, but they sought after power they could not understand.”

Yawm opened his hand, “Some would handle the cipher well until they submerged themselves. Once their feet left the ground, they found that they couldn’t swim. I tried helping them, but they swallowed the water before I could get them out.”

Yawm sighed, “And the most disappointing of the groups would swim out into the ocean. They would wallow in the cipher, relishing it. They were masterful, learning the cipher’s secrets with a depth even I couldn’t match, but...they could never find their way back to the shore.”

Yawm glanced at me for a moment, “Knowing the cipher is understanding existence. Everyone has asked why we are here, what are we doing here, what is our purpose? If you dive deep enough, you’ll find the answers within the cipher.”

Yawm turned forward, “Some questions are better left unanswered, however. I’d recommend taming your curiosity. It’s a difficult prospect for most sentient races. Curiosity is the largest driving force for most species. We’re wired so that new information gives us pleasure. In nature, it was always a good thing during the evolution of our species.”

Yawm walked towards his desk. He notched a hinge, walking into the center of it, every side surrounding him once inside. It was a giant, hollow square essentially, giving him lots of room for doing his work.

Yawm kept glancing at the pages on his desk,

“In this age, there’s more information than anyone could ever hope to absorb. Information without a purpose is meaningless. It’s like learning sixty languages, yet only ever speaking one. In essence, knowledge without action is a vice.”

Yawm waved his hand, “Do excuse my tangent. It’s rare I can discuss my thoughts with anyone, let alone someone who rivals my own strength. Tell me, what do you think about learning?”

I turned towards Yawm, “Well, I haven’t thought about it that much. I guess I take a...a lean approach. I do first then learn about it later. I found I get more done that way.”

Yawm widened his eyes, “Do first then learn later?”

I walked up to the desk, “Uh, yeah. Think about it like this. What’s the fastest way to learn how to do something 99% of the time?”

Yawm tapped his desk, “It depends on the task.”

I shook my head, “From my experience, it doesn’t really. The best way to learn is to do it. Wanna cook better? Cook. Want to be better at math? Do math.”

“Hah, then you aren’t going to enjoy how I begin my teaching.”

I opened my palms to him, “Trust me. If you can tell me anything about the cipher, I’m all ears. It was a bitch to learn.”

Yawm nodded, “Hah, hah, indeed it was. It must have been more so for you than me. A few of the principles I began with from Etorhma helped my progress tremendously. You lack them, making your progression stunted. Allow me to enlighten you.”

Yawm raised a hand. Several green sparks radiated, casting the room in a green shade.

“Don’t worry about the aura. It’s merely the radiation I use to drive my magic. Porytians source of mana is external rather than internal. I can store some within me, but I can’t actually produce it.”

Yawm squeezed his hand, lifting several pages from the table. Before he began his first lesson, I leaned against the bone desk,

“Can I ask a few questions first?”

“Of course. I’ll do my best to answer them.”

“Alright, cool. First off, how did you get everything in this room back to normal?”

Yawm tapped the side of his head as a few pieces of paper circled above him in the air,

“Back during my days within Schema’s system, I gained many ‘perks.’ One of those perks involved photographic memory. Quite the useful thing, photographic memory is. I created a room I most enjoyed, and now I recreate it anytime that it is destroyed.”

He waved his hand, a table and chairs appearing out of thin air beside him. He waved his hand again, making the objects disappear. Watching my wonder, Yawm spoke with excitement,

“Do you see that ring on your finger?”

I lifted my left hand, the one with Schema’s dimensional storage. Yawm pointed at it with his free hand,

“I’ve torn one of those rings apart. Beneath the metal, there exists many lines of code from the dimensional cipher. Schema creates a folded piece of space time within the confines of the ring. Doing so is actually quite simple, but the other requirements of the ring aren’t as simplistic.”

Yawm pointed in directions, making spheres of water appear and disappear, “Using the knowledge I gained from the ring, I created several pocket dimensions for my own use. Within those dimensions, I store items I want to keep. Even though it may have seemed like it, I did not reverse time. I haven’t discovered that trick just yet.”

Yawm shook his head, “No, I simply use stored materials in conjunction with my photographic memory to recreate this space.”

I’m not going to lie, I gawked a little at the explanation. As I tried to suppress my awe, I shook my head,

“Damn... So that’s why Schema made it illegal to look inside the ring or tamper with it. He doesn’t want anyone knowing that the cipher is right there.”

Yawm clasped his fist, destroying all the created blots of matter.

“Schema doesn’t want anyone knowing that they are wearing utilities made from the cipher. Curious, isn’t it?”

I nodded, “Yeah, it is. Ok, what about the green aura. What is all that?”

Yawm glanced around, “This is the byproducts of nuclear fission. I create a controlled splitting of atoms then harness that energy for mana. That drives my own magic, my attacks, healing, everything.”

I blinked a few times, “Damn...That’s broken.”

Yawm laughed, “You’re own production of mana is far greater than any other living creature I’ve met, aside from Old Ones. That in itself is broken in its own right.”

I smiled, “I suppose. Alright, I’m all out of questions.”

“Then the lesson will begin. Remove that black helmet of yours.”

“Uh, why?”

“Communicating with a mask is irritating. I can’t read any of your facial features, and most of communication is nonverbal regardless.”

I shrugged, “Alright.”

I peeled back my helmet, revealing my face to Yawm. He inspected me for a moment,

“I imagined you weren’t a member of this species. Your progression since Schema assimilated this world...it must have been accelerated.”

I weighed my hands back and forth, “Eh, sort of. I met an eldritch and a dry man that helped me along the way.”

“An eldritch helped your evolution?”

I raised a palm to Yawm, “That fucker did not mean to. Anyways, let’s start the cipher lesson.”

Yawm shook his head, “Greedy for knowledge, aren’t you? I am as well, in many respects. Then let’s begin with something simple.”

Yawm tapped moved his hand, the floating pages connecting together. This super page stretched for dozens of feet, wrapping around Yawm. As he spoke, an image appeared on the page in front of me. The pages circled around Yawm, creating a moving mural that looked like stop motion animation.

“The first, fundamental principle of the dimensional cipher is that it changes space-time. It requires an actual space to act itself out. This was no doubt the largest obstacle you had in learning the language.”

I sighed, “Yeah, unfortunately.”

On the giant page streaking across my vision, several characters of the cipher appeared. They were all fuzzy until they formed a cube with the characters. All of a sudden, black ink filled the characters, and the box changed. Flowers sprouted from inside the box of characters on the page. It was incredible to watch.

“It’s a difficult concept to understand at first, but it works in practice with absolute certainty. If you try writing out the characters on the pages of a book for example, they do nothing. If you do the inner or outer lining of a barrel, then the effects of the runes will take place inside the barrel.”

Yawm moved his hand sideways, the circling of the pages speeding up.

“The second fundamental concept is the idea of perspective. The runes represent your own understanding of your reality. In fact, they have little to do with anything that is actually real. If you can believe in something and imagine it as so, then the runes will... shape reality into your vision.”

A drawing of a brain appeared in front of me. Above the brain, there was a thought bubble of lightning. An arrow pointed from the brain to an empty box.

“If your vision is clear and unchanging, then the runes will come to life.”

The empty box filled with lightning, the bolts jumping throughout it.

“If your vision is clouded and uncertain, then the runes will deform.”

The image of lightning turned distorted. As it did, the lightning within the box became distorted as well. The box itself broke, the abomination growing. Yawm stopped the pages and sighed,

“And that is why I have failed in my own attempts. I don’t fully understand what it is that makes the eldritch different from us. Despite this, I try.”

The runes along Yawm’s right arm glowed, ending the green glow around us.

“I’m able to greatly enhance my own magical abilities, and therefore increase my physical ones as well. Unfortunately, my goals aren’t quite so simple. Due to that, I’ve created many...failures.”

Yawm’s voice was bitter at the last few words. He sat in silence as he stared at the ground. He shook his head after a moment,

“But failure isn’t falling down. Failure is staying down. Many of the sacrifices that I and my followers have made will be meaningless if I give in now. Regardless of my own misgivings, the third principle behind the cipher is the simplest.”

The pages moved again, creating a picture of a burning fire.

“They require tremendous mana to create change. This is different from external energy, however. I’ll begin my explanation with a simple yet profound question. What exactly is mana?”

I thought about it for a moment before answering,

“Well...Mana is energy for one, but it's my own energy. It doesn't just happen. I have to make it happen.”

Yawm spun the pages once more. A stick figure formed, and the fire was within the stick figure's head.

“Not quite. Mana is the will of your mind and soul. It is a physical manifestation of your desire to change the material world. The greater the will of an individual, the greater the mana they can produce. That desire is what fuels the cipher.”

The fire within the stick figure's head grew.

“That is why in Schema's system, willpower determines a sentient being's mana generation. The larger someone's soul is, the greater their capacity for generating mana. That is why your internal mana generation is so vital.”

Like gears clicking into place, my mind raced to several conclusions. I always wondered why my armor enhanced my health generation. Now it made sense. The armor started out as an augment to my soul, meaning as it grew, my soul grew too. They were one and the same after all, and as my soul grew, so did my mana generation.

Yawm raised his hand, lowering the pages.

“You have an enormous potential to use the cipher. I rely on other creatures to channel me their mana to use the cipher. That is part of why I go from world to world. Without the world tree, I can't utilize my mana, but you...you produce the mana on your own. As I teach you, we'll abuse that.”

Yawm inspected me, “After seeing your mana generation, it's almost as if you are a level 15,000 player, and you invested only into willpower. There's no possibility that you'd have a build that is so rudimentary, however. That would be foolish.”

It was like he was making fun of me and my investments into endurance. I pushed myself off the desk,

“The thing is, endurance feeds into the other stats. You’re not going to be able to match the raw stat total with any other stat besides for constitution.”

Yawm waved away my argument by brushing a hand,

“You can’t create synergy in a build like that.”

I shook my head, “I disagree. All you need to do to create synergy is have plenty of bonuses for investing in endurance.”

Yawm turned towards me, “Is that how your own build is structured? I’m curious how you gained so much strength within the confines of Schema’s system.”

I shook my head, “I’d rather keep that private.”

Yawm sighed, “Perhaps you’ll share the details with me one day.” He looked at the doorway of his room,

“That will conclude this lesson about the cipher. I’d recommend writing as many pages as you can of what you know. After doing so, we’ll meet again tomorrow.”

Keeja, the weird looking abstraction, opened the door. Yawm gestured towards him, “Until I finish instructing you about the cipher, you’ll stay in a room here that Keeja will grant you.”

I raised an eyebrow at him while frowning, “What? I have to all of the sudden?”

Yawm waved his palms at me, “No, no, not at all. It’s just that working on the cipher while within Schema’s domain can be quite detrimental. It can be far more problematic as well. If Schema discovers that your working with me, then you will be exiled immediately, I assure you.”

Keeja walked up with his sunken in eyes. It bowed to me while pointing towards the hallway.

Yawm walked up and placed a hand on my shoulder, “I won’t require you stay here, but I highly recommend it. You won’t dislike your room either. I treat guests with the utmost respect. You will be no different.”

Imagine a viscious, thirty foot long crocodile. Now imagine that it’s mouth was open, and your chest was between its jaws. With one move, this crocodile could clamp down and crush your organs out of your body.

That’s what Yawm’s hand felt like. It was an enormous set of jaws. Despite that, I kept cool,

“Alright. I can do that. It doesn’t really matter anyways.”

Yawm released me and pat my back, “Excellent! Keeja will prepare a meal for you and have it sent into your room at later hours. After you rest, we’ll have breakfast and the tea I mentioned earlier. Relax and enjoy your study while you stay here.”

Yawm walked back and unlatched his desk. He opened his hand, the green aura smothering the room. A feather pen materialized above his hand, along with a vial of ink. He dabbed it into the vail before writing out a few characters. Already engrossed in his work, he turned towards us,

“Keeja, Show him his room.”

Without a word, Keeja walked me through the hallways of Yawm’s ice mansion. After taking a few stair flights down, I reached the bottom of the lake. There was a layer of crystal at the bottom, just as before. Light beamed from the bottom, illuminating my room from a glass floor. One of the walls of the room was a window, showing the view of the lake.

Besides for the bed, desk, and a shelf of books, there wasn’t much in there. It was more than enough though. Considering I didn’t need clothes, it was perfect. Hell, I didn’t need the bed either. I walked over and sat on the desk. As I did, I extended my aura, Overwhelming pressure outwards. It let me sit on the desk without crushing it.

I glanced at the aquarium, seeing the shifting shapes of eldritch. I still didn't understand how Yawm controlled them. I guessed he may answer that question tomorrow. My mind was sifting at the possibilities of the cipher.

After a few minutes, I turned around. Keeja was still sitting there, staring at me. His eyes were sunken in, hollow things. They had a way of looking through me. I frowned and stood up,

“Why are you still here?”

A second later, tears poured from the eyes of Keeja. They poured from the black holes in his head. Keeja's mouth struggled open, the jaw shaking. Beads of sweat formed on its angular forehead. Its thin knees wobbled before it scraped out a sound,

“Ra...”

I walked closer,

“Are you alright? This is freaking me the fuck out.”

Keeja gasped out another sound.

“Nnn...”

Seeing it struggle, I didn't know what to do. Before I could decide, Keeja lifted one its wiry arms and pointed at me. In a raspy, weak voice, it seethed,

“Run...”

Chapter 114: The Distance

Hearing the words made me want to panic, but I stayed calm. I took a step back from Keeja,

“What do you mean run?”

Keeja's head twitched. A moment later, I walked forward and placed a hand on its shoulder. I dug my armor through its skin, finding portions of eldritch and something else beneath its skin. Using my armor, I sapped up the clumps. As I did, Keeja's hands shook.

More tears fell from the thing's eyes before I finished the process. Once done, I let go of its shoulder. It shook for a moment before the sunken eyes opened. The two orbs stared at me. Keeja grabbed the sides of its face before shaking. A moment later, it spoke with the same raspy voice,

"I...I'm back."

I nodded, "Yeah. I figured you were completely fucked like the other followers. I cleared out most of that stuff going on beneath your skin. Sorry if it hurt."

Keeja shook his head, the bloodshot eyes quivering,

"No no no. Do not apologize. I was lost. I had sunken in so deep...Where am I?"

I gestured around us, "You're in Yawm's...I don't know...castle I guess?"

Keeja shivered at the name. I leaned towards Keeja. I placed a hand over his shoulder, "Calm down. I'm guessing you don't know where you are. First, tell me your name and we'll sort this out, whatever it is. Baby steps first."

Keeja stopped shaking. He shook his head before turning towards the ground,

"I'm....I'm Keeja."

"So Yawm used your actual name?"

"Yes. He did the same with all the others."

"Others?"

Keeja nodded, “Yes. The others. We were all lined up. He was putting us on steel tables and using us for...dark things. Something about tears.”

My eyes narrowed, “Tears eh? Yawm did mention the tears project. Does the name Althea ring a bell?”

Keeja looked up at me, nodding with vigor, “Yes, yes! She was...sweet. I liked her. I don’t know if she remembers me. We were both a part of a tribe. It was...a bad place. A dark place. I thought it couldn’t get worse, but then it did.”

I walked Keeja over towards the chair I sat in. I let him sit. After he had, I sat down and created a gravity well beneath me as I did. I floated in the air, comfortable while I gestured a hand towards him,

“Go ahead and talk. I’ll listen.”

Keeja nodded, his movements jittery and nervous.

“Ok. I’ll talk. I don’t know what to say. I’ve been floating inside for so long...”

Keeja pointed at me, his back hunched, “It was after they put me on the steel table. They put...something inside me. The tears is what they called them. It changed me. I couldn’t be the same anymore. I started seeing things. Visions came into my head.”

Keeja raised a hand, looking at it, “I saw the future and the past. I saw time before I was born. I saw after I’ve died. I saw many things. Most of them I didn’t understand.”

I nodded, egging him on. He raised his other hand, looking at it like it wasn’t his,

“Then Yawm came...He changed me. He cut me open and wrote on my bones. After that, the visions went away. I stabilized. I gained, abilities.”

Keeja pressed a finger onto the table beside him. He sliced through it as if slicing through the air,

“I can cut through things. I can’t die like normal either. I’m different.”

I frowned, “You honestly don’t sound that different from someone I know.”

Keeja shivered, “Yawm made me more different. Once he finished with me, the...tears within took control. They muted me, pulling me inside. I haven’t left since.”

I shook my head, “That sounds awful.”

Keeja pointed at me, “You took it away though...I don’t know how...Blaaaagh.”

Keeja’s back straightened, like he was struck with a bolt of lightning. He turned towards me, “They’re coming back...He’s calling me.”

The black around his eyes returned, eating away at him, “I...I’m leaving...Don’t let him do what he did to me...to you....Run.”

The sunken in eyes of Keeja returned, and his posture straightened. It was like he was a robot all of the sudden. He stood from his chair, bowing to me. He walked out of the room and closed the door as if nothing happened.

I was curious about the situation, but I pieced the situation together somewhat. Whatever experiment that Althea was a part of, Keeja was a part of it too. Unlike her, he was a failure instead of a success. If I could learn enough about the cipher, I could free him. Having another assassin like Althea on our team would be a huge boon for us.

With that in mind, I sent a message towards Torix detailing the situation and what happened. I explained how I survived Yawm’s encounter and how we weren’t at his mercy for now. I even put in some of the secrets Yawm told me. I trusted Torix with the knowledge after all.

Once I finished that, I opened my armor menu and inspected the bonuses from the cipher.

[Modifications – The dimensional fabric composing this structure has been modified with code from the dimensional cipher. The bonuses are as follows.

+72 Strength

+72 Dexterity

+80 Endurance

+6% to effect of legacies

+10 Willpower

+1% to internal motivation]

They were solid bonuses, and I wouldn't take them for granted. The legacy bonus in particular was compelling. Every percentage resulted in thousands and thousands of total endurance gained for the legion. Over time, that could build into a bulwark that our troops could rely on.

By joining my guild, they would receive a massive boost towards durability. They could rely on it and invest into offense. The extra willpower was a nice benefit as well. Considering the negative effects of the cipher, the willpower bonuses would be pivotal in the long run.

It made me glad I invested the way I did for my build. Even if the cipher and Yawm tried to break my mind down, I would hold steady. My willpower was very high, and not needing to sleep gave me an edge versus him.

With that in mind, I thought up what would be my next step. It wasn't working with the cipher. It was working on a new skill I gained, Anti-Gravity Manipulation. It basically let me create the opposite of gravity.

If I was right, I could add it to my legendary skill and improve the power of my punches. Yeah, I know, leave it to me to think of a way to punch things to death better.

My legendary skill revolved around it though, so adding extra umph shouldn't be too hard.

In this case, I already placed gravity vortexes over my fist. They would pull my fist into their face and their face into my fist. If I was right, the same effect could be added, just with antigravity instead. That way when their face pulled into my fist, I could add the repulsive force to my punch.

With that in mind, I practiced with the concept. It wasn't the easiest magic to master. Just using antigravity was weird. After a few minutes of trying it out, I used a simple idea for dramatic results.

Antigravity was the opposite of gravity. Therefore, if I did the opposite of what I normally do to summon gravity, antigravity should pop up. As I visualized that concept, I pressed my fingers together then spread them apart. Instead of crushing in, I pulled apart. As I did, the fabric of space-time bended.

It stretched out, pulling air out from a sphere in the room. I laughed after figuring it out, relief spreading across my face. I did it the same way the overseer had bent walls whenever we first joined the legion. If I was right, he was using anti-gravity just in a stronger form.

After figuring out how to use antigravity on command, I created spheres in the room. These spheres would repel objects within the room. I called them gravity geysers instead of gravity wells. The reason was because geyser was the closest thing to an opposite that I could think of for a well.

After getting used to creating these geysers, I spun them around. After an hour of practice, I could create flat, 2-D panels that repelled objects. Trying to touch a panel of it was like trying to press two resisting magnets together. They did not want to touch.

Within minutes of doing this, I gained a new skill.

New Skill Learned! Antigravity Vortex(lvl 1) – You learned an unnatural force, and now you bend it in unnatural ways. +1% to antigravity repulsion. +1% to ease of generating antigravity vortexes.

It was basically the exact same thing as my gravity vortexes, just for antigravity. That's why I learned how to use them so quickly. With that in mind, I practiced my legendary skill, Force of Nature. Instead of spawning gravity vortexes over my fists, I added the antigravity discs instead.

They were weird. After throwing soft punches at the walls of my room, I hit them softer rather than harder. The repulsive force slowed down my fist on one side and pushed the wall away from my fist. After a bit of brainstorming, I tried something a bit different. I envisioned Kessiah standing in front of me throwing a punch.

Whenever her imaginary fist landed on my face, I created an antigravity disc between us. The disc pushed my backwards, reducing the impact of her would be strike. It would have slowed down her fist too, as if she was punching through water. If I got that kind of response down to reflex, antigravity would act as another defensive layer.

Thinking about it gave me other ideas as well. Why not use gravity and antigravity to speed up my movements? Sure, it wouldn't be the most natural way to get around, but it could enhance my current movements. It would be like running up an escalator or swimming downstream.

If I could master that, then I bolstered my speed and power quite a bit. If I slowed down my opponent the same way, bridging the gap in speed between me and Yawm might be possible. I could make it into an aura of sorts that sped me up and slowed down my opponents. Having something like that would be huge.

Who knew, if I got it strong enough, It would be like a speed and slowing aura in video games. This was definitely a long term project though. Mastering this overnight wasn't possible. I could make it into a unique skill though. With that in mind, I made gravity vortexes that followed my movements.

As I went through the movements of punching, I created gravity vortexes to assist my movements. It was bizarre. Imagine you had telekinesis. Now imagine pulling yourself along like a puppet with strings. It's pretty difficult, but this wasn't like using strings. It was like falling in the right direction, if that makes any sense.

It wasn't an intuitive way of moving, that's for sure. I kept at it though. The concept was sound, and the potential was there. Using my mana better in combat was essential as well. Rather than just trying to regenerate damage, I could use mana to avoid damage before it happened.

With that in mind, I grinded for about two hours before creating the wells in order wasn't hard. Having my legendary skill at such a high level assisted tremendously with this. It made creating and destroying these vortexes simple.

With all the gravity wells helping me move, it felt like every movement was easier. I sped through the room with little effort, my body shifting through complex maneuvers with ease. It felt like I was evolving my use of gravity from low grade to middle grade. Schema agreed.

Skill unlocked! Gravitational Celerity(lvl 1) – By manipulating gravity, you enhance your movements. +1% to speed enhancement from gravity manipulation. +1% to ease of using gravity for movement.

It was an excellent skill. If I read right, it would help with my movement out of combat too, which was a nice bonus. I leveled the skill for a bit, reaching level 10 before moving on to using antigravity in its place.

It wasn't the same. Gravity was like making streams of water for me to travel down. Antigravity was like bouncing around. Antigravity making the use of it intense and straining. It was like trying to bounce around from place to place. I also had to think in opposites.

If I was moving forwards, I needed to create an antigravity vortex behind me. If I was firing an uppercut, then I needed to make the vortex beneath my elbow. In general, using antigravity was far harder than gravity. It was less forgiving, less intuitive, and less fun.

It was a part of the process though. Sometimes practicing wasn't fun. This was one of those times. I kept on the grind, maintaining my motions and using antigravity to help. After about four hours of the grueling task, I was getting the hang of it.

Moving with antigravity was like using momentum. I had to chain my movements together, letting me abuse antigravity's jerking. It let me reverse my jerking shifts. This let me glide around in unexpected ways. After another hour of that, I finally gained my skill.

Skill unlocked! Antigravitational Shift(lvl 1) – You wield antigravity to snap yourself into motion. +1% to speed enhancement from antigravity manipulation. +1% to ease of using antigravity for movement.

Once I got the skill, the process wasn't quite as painful. It still wasn't the funnest activity, kind of like trying run around in a bouncy castle. Another hour passed, and I reached level 10 in the skill too. At that point, I gained a rudimentary understanding of the skill. It let me use it for normal movement.

Like that, eight hours passed in the blink of an eye. Considering Yawm didn't know how long humans slept, I figured I had about two more hours left. Before I came back to him, I wanted to get a unique skill for movement. With that in mind, I used the gravity and antigravity in sync. It was brutal.

Keeping track of all of it was like juggling on a unicycle. It was impossible, so instead of trying to improve at it, I tried getting other skills to make it easier. One of those skills was what I called latching. I performed the skill on accident with Hod during the fight with Elijah. I tied antigravity onto him, creating a temporary buff.

It wasn't an impossible feat by any means. After a few more minutes of trying to latch the mana onto something, I got a tangible effect. I snapped a gravity well onto the corner of a desk. A few minutes before I planned on visiting Yawm, I gained a skill.

New skill gained! Mana Press(lvl 1) – You press your mana into objects, allowing you to maintain magic. +1% to duration of pressed mana.

It was a simple yet effective skill. I tried pressing mana into the palm of my hand. It worked, letting me hold the mana in place. After a while, I pressed the mana onto various objects throughout the room. With each object, I tried out a different effect.

I stopped whenever the chair and table were floating in the room. As I pressed the both of them onto the floor, a knock rushed from the door. I turned towards the knock, leaning on the table and chair to hold it down,

“Who is it?”

Keeja opened the door. Without a word, he pointed towards the hallway. I lifted myself off the desk and walked through Yawm's ice palace. Along the hallway, the same

phosphorescent fish glowed bright. They lit our walk before we reached Yawm's study. Keeja paced up to the door and knocked on it. Yawm's voice muffled through the doorway,

"Come in."

I opened the doorway, showing Yawm's study. Two chairs made of the pale ice sat beside his desk along one corner. Yawm sat there, enjoying a liquid from a cup. I walked up. As I did, Yawm turned towards me,

"Ah, you're here. I hope Keeja didn't interrupt your rest."

I shook my head, "No, I was already awake."

"Then it's good we didn't waste any time. Would like some tea as we sat here?"

Beside his was a cup full of brown liquid. I picked it up and smelled it. It was a very full, rich flavoring. It smelled like black tea mixed with mint. I looked at Yawm,

"Is this, uh, cannibalism?"

Yawm shook his head, "Your species eats mammals, correct?"

I nodded. He continued, "This is no different. I ally myself with certain plants. Others I cultivate for my own use. In this case, I prefer an herb I found on a fringe world named Ostrebos. It leaves a cooling after taste. I highly recommend it."

Considering I was already immune to poison, I took a sip. The tea had a texture, like creamy milk. It was like drinking the smell of coffee, not the actual bitter taste. With my enhanced senses, I caught a few notes like hazelnuts and cream. After finishing the warm sip, it left a cooling sensation in my mouth.

I'm not gonna lie, it was one of the best things I'd ever tasted.

"This is delicious."

Yawm raised a cup to me, “I see you’ve good taste.”

I toasted the cup to him. We took another sip at the same time. I sighed after finishing it, enjoying the relaxation. We sat there watching one of the transparent walls as fish darted back and forth in the deep blue water. After we finished our cups, Yawm turned towards me in his chair,

“I enjoy tea before work. I’ve found that any good routine involves starting with something I enjoy. It becomes much easier to start a routine when it starts in a joyous manner.”

Yawm pressed his mammoth hands together, each of them laying over the other,

“Now let us begin by elaborating on the consequences of learning this language. I’m certain you’re curious about why the cipher is so dangerous.”

I nodded, and he continued.

“The cipher slowly disintegrates your fundamental understanding of reality. What I mean by that, is you cannot look at reality the same way. Have you ever heard the phrase, ‘Absolute power corrupts absolutely?’”

I set my white cup on Yawm’s desk,

“Once or twice.”

Yawm opened his hands and raised them up to his chest,

“It’s a simple statement, yet it explains many of the problems associated with the cipher. All sentient species share a few defining characteristics. One of those characteristics is a sense of morality. Most people’s morality is based on limitations. If they do something bad, an authority figure will come and punish them.”

I frowned, “Yeah, but take that authority away, and you take their morality away. They’ll do whatever they want then.”

Yawm nodded, “I’ve found that several of my prior disciples suffered from this fate. Once they mastered a few fundamental concepts, they went wild with power. They turned on me, so I handled them as I needed too. I tell you this because some mental preparation assists with handling the cipher’s allure.”

I shook my head, “I’ve seen people go crazy without someone there to reign them in. I’m not one of those kinds of people.”

Yawm pointed a finger at me, “We’ll discover that during this process. I would also like to discuss the consequences involving Schema’s system.”

I leaned back in my chair while raising an eyebrow, “What kind of consequences?”

Yawm waved a hand in a circle, like he was grasping for words,

“The kind that...you may be concerned with, since you are a part of his world.”

I crossed my arms, “Lay em on me.”

Yawm took the tea and put it beneath his chin. Roots crawled from it, soaking up the herbal tea before he spoke,

“Schema will leverage your use of the cipher against you. The threat of being exiled will constantly be used against you as you level.”

I shrugged, “I expect it.”

Yawm turned a palm towards me, “Schema will also use what you want against you. I had a family before becoming a breaker for Schema. Whenever I betrayed him and killed a sentinel, they were killed. If you have someone you value, they will be used against you by him.”

Thoughts of Althea, Torix, and the others flashed through my head. I grimaced,

“That sounds ugly.”

Yawm sighed, “It is, was, and will be in the future. Schema is no stranger to diabolical methods for taking advantage of people. Learning the cipher comes with these consequences. Are you still ready to dive into learning them?”

I shrugged, “I’m already this far. I can’t turn back now.”

Yawm nodded, “An understandable approach. I find myself thinking the same thing with my own goals often enough.”

A chill ran up my spine as he said that. I didn’t want to end up like Yawm, not at all.

Yawm stood up, drinking the rest of his tea before setting the cup down. He raised a hand, the cup blipping out of existence. Yawm turned towards his desk.

“Now that you understand the consequences and have accepted them, let’s begin.”

He pushed a sheet of paper towards the edge of the table. He pressed his fingers together, and a pen materialized for his fingers to grasp. He set the pen there,

“Now I want you to write out what letters you already know onto this sheet of paper. This will give me an idea of where we should start.”

I stood from my chair and walked over. I grabbed his offered pen before turning towards him, “I don’t know much. I can already tell you that.”

Yawm waved off my concern with a hand as he already started on his own runes, “Let me estimate your abilities for myself. I’ve found self assessment to be an unreliable metric of success in all ventures. Learning the cipher is no different.”

I shrugged before opening up the portal for my grimoire. Yawm observed closely, but he didn’t comment on it. Not until I opened it up towards the black pages.

“I’ve never seen a grimoire of that coloration. It’s an interesting artifact.”

I nodded, “Yeah, I found it helps with understanding and remembering my runes.”

I wrote out my letters as Yawm continued writing out his own. After an hour, I completed my second endurance rune, mimicking my previous one. Another hour later, and I carved out the strength and dexterity runes as well. I showed them to Yawm,

“This is pretty much it.”

Yawm opened a palm towards my grimoire,

“May I inspect it?”

I frowned, but I handed the grimoire towards him anyway. Some measure of trust was needed between us. Otherwise I wouldn’t even be able to function around the guy let alone learn something complicated.

That’s how Yawm looked at my markings on my grimoire. They were complicated. He cupped his chin as he held the grimoire in a single hand. He murmured in his deep voice,

“The detail in these runes is...astonishing. Are these really the only runes you’ve written?”

“Well, uh, yeah. Besides for the runes about magic.”

Yawm shook his head, “That entire language is a neutered version of the cipher. Schema teaches it for the utility it offers, but its potential pales when compared with the real language.”

Yawm inspected the runes for another minute. As the length of time dragged on, I got nervous. After a while, there was a tension in the room. Wondering what was going on, I tapped Yawm’s shoulder,

“Uh, what’s going on?”

Yawm shrugged, “I don’t quite know. I’m just in awe at the quality of these runic inscriptions. If I had a word for it, I would call them clean. There is no waste or filth here. Every piece of the symbol is necessary, and that simplicity makes them beautiful.”

Yawm turned towards me, “You have a talent for this.”

I scratched me cheek, “Well damn, thank you.”

Yawm handed my grimoire towards me, keeping the motion slow and precise. It was like he was holding a glass vase. I grabbed it from him before setting it down on the table. Yawm pointed at the grimoire,

“Whoever you first learned your inscriptions from is a master. I would recommend maintaining your current approach. I picked up bad habits whenever I first started writing out the cipher. Over the years I’ve grinded out many of them, but the process was painful.”

Yawm turned a palm towards me, “You don’t have to worry about such matters. Instead, I would focus on maintaining the quality of your transcriptions. Start with concepts and ideas you have a firm grasp on. As you branch out, keep that coherence with your other work.”

I pointed at my grimoire, “Then I just have to keep trying to do this kind of thing?”

Yawm nodded, “I believe that is your best course of action for learning the cipher. Once you’ve developed your style more, I will give specific lessons on certain concepts.”

“Cool.” I turned towards my grimoire before forming my left hand’s index finger into a spike. With that spike, I carved out what I would add towards the endurance rune. Several more Hours passed like that, each of us working on our runes.

If I ever had a question, I asked Yawm and he would give me a reasonable answer. There were times when Yawm asked me a question like why I was carving a certain

way. It felt less like a teacher and master relationship and more like two students working together.

I enjoyed the process much more than the straight on lecturing of Torix. Torix had his strengths, but listening wasn't one of them. Yawm was the opposite. He had this awareness at all moments that surprised me. He was trying to learn, not teach.

It wasn't like he was on guard. It was more like he engaged himself with whatever it was that he was doing at the time. I wondered if I looked the same. I hoped I did.

After several hours, Yawm's head raised. He turned into a random direction. He set down his pen before clapping his colossal hands together,

"Hah, hah! Finally, they've come. I've waited quite a while for this."

I raised an eyebrow, "What? Who?"

Yawm turned towards me, "Levelers."

I set down my own pen, "Levelers?"

Yawm leaned against his desk, "It's a common phrase used among those searching for a class in Schema's system. They go from world to world hunting strong monsters for experience. Whenever they have the opportunity for bonus experience, they jump for it."

Yawm glanced off,

"I was a leveler before being classed as a Breaker. I wanted to become a Fringe Walker, but Schema saw through my plans. A Breaker doesn't get to stay in one place for long. As a Fringe Walker, I could've stayed on a fringe world for decades. That would have jump started my research. It's a shame really."

He turned back towards me, "In this instance, the levelers discovered the quarantine that Schema started. Doubled experience and material rewards are a powerful lure.

Schema won't even let levelers learn why a quarantine exists. Most assume it's for the creation of a fringe world."

Yawm lifted his hands and stared at them, "Levelers always come to my quarantine zones, eventually. The rivers of blood I've spilled in their blood grow greater with each world I pass."

Yawm gripped his hands together, his hands shaking with a mad energy,

"As much as I pride myself in my principles, I cannot deny my...fervor for a good battle. I can't help but grow excited at the prospect of an excellent fight."

Yawm shook his head, "They often end far too fast for my liking, but they are excellent breaks. It's good to let my inner demons out, I suppose."

Yawm sighed, his excitement building. He shivered for a moment before offering a palm to me, "My named ones have told me of a pack of levelers hunting them down. Care to watch me dispatch them?"

I narrowed my eyes, "Hmm, thanks but not thanks. I don't want to see people become mutilated."

Yawm wrapped his arm around my shoulder, shaking me, "Come! Do not deny yourself the sight of something like this. Are you not curious to see how I battle? Our own fight ended in seconds. This fight may be different. We will have to see."

Yawm let me go and pointed a finger at me, "Even if you decide not to fight them, they will fight you. You're an unknown, correct? That's no different than being an eldritch. You're lich friend will be no different. Neither will Althea. They will hunt you all down for the experience you offer."

I raised an eyebrow, "I guess I'm lucky not to have felt the effects yet."

"You are. Unknowns come with experience multipliers, rare trees, and all other kinds of treasure. Since I'm exiled, you'd do better trusting me than almost anyone else who is a part of Schema's system."

Yawm raised both his hands, “It gets even better. Schema will give unknowns in his system enhanced rewards for killing other unknowns. When you’re a part of his universe and considered an unknown, it becomes a kill or be killed world! Rise to the top or become a corpse. Now isn’t that a fair and just ruler?”

The bitterness in his voice was thicker than pudding. I grimaced, “Damn. I knew it was bad, but I didn’t know it was that bad.”

Yawm nodded, “So don’t worry about them. I assure you, those levelers won’t worry one second about you. Now come, let’s give them a warm welcoming.”

I glanced down at me runes, then back my hands. For a second, I imagined someone hurting Althea. There was a sudden, explosive anger in my gut. I can’t even explain it. It was a savage, primal sort of emotion. Whenever I thought about how much I hurt Althea, my stomach sank too.

Yawm was right, as much as I hated to admit it. It wasn’t any fun, but this was a kill or be killed system that Schema put us in. Either I accepted that or I died. Besides for that, it would be interesting to see what a true galactic mercenary was like. I also wanted to see how I measured up to them.

Who knew, they might even be a way of gaining a few levels. I sighed,

“Alright. I’ll go with you.”

Yawm slapped my shoulder, “Hah! This is good. Very good. Follow me. I’ll show them to you. I’ll even let you have the weakest ones.” With Yawm’s bloodlust fully unveiled he leaned towards me,

“Leave the strongest ones for me, or else I’ll fight you in their place. I can deny one good fight, but two in a row? I won’t allow it.”

I frowned, “All I ask is that you talk to them first. These aren’t eldritch after all. You can actually reason with people.”

Yawm narrowed one eye and widened the other, like he was raising an eyebrow,

“What? Hah, if you wish. I assure you, they won’t listen to reason. Unlike the eldritch, they’ll lie and deceive you before stabbing your back.”

He turned towards the direction of the levelers, “In fact, why don’t you talk with them instead?” The air around us crackled before turning a green tint. Radiation swelled before coalescing into Yawm’s palms,

“It becomes self evident after a bit of thought about their circumstances. Levelers spend decades killing abominations. Tell me, what do you think those kind of people become, given time?”

Yawm turned his head towards me,

“I’ll give you a hint. They are monsters.”

Chapter 115: Levelers

Different Pov this chapter.

We finally got onto this world. It took several mission’s worth of salary to hire a black market mage, but it was worth it. We had to. Getting onto a quarantined world was easy. Getting out was the problem.

Skyns was our solution. He was expensive too, but he had a good history of work behind him. We didn’t have to worry about him leaving us stranded. His reputation was too valuable.

That reputation was security in Schema’s universe, and paying for security was always a smart move in the long run. From what we’d seen of this world, that might not be the case this time.

This is a fresh world, yah see. It’s very new, so the eldritch haven’t had time to turn into meat grinders. That’s why none of us thought there would be much here. Even our groups biggest whiner, Mal, jumped for joy when he found out this was our quarantine.

Clearing out older world's with quarantines was a fool's undertaking. They were always lost to the eldritch ten times our own levels. Not the prettiest sight, if I say so myself.

We didn't have to worry about that. With the right magician and the right world, we were riding on a high better than easy money. This was our last mission, and we didn't have to worry about some eldritch horror gobbling us up. Besides for the fact the world was a dirty ball of mud, it wasn't even that ugly.

Who knew, maybe there was a level 1,000 eldritch boss was here? That wouldn't be too much for us. Once we finished this last assignment, we'd get our legacies from the emperor. Once we got that, we would become members of the royal guard. It was a nice, cushy life after that. We could all finally sit down and enjoy being rich and lazy.

It was one of the few ways out of fighting for us Gors. Our homeworld was taken over by the empire. Most of us were slaves for them. My siblings and I, we were different. All four of us were talented in slaying monsters. Our father was a war hero yah see, and he gave us his blood. With that blood, we promised one another that we would escape.

We were so close. We all traveled together, staying low to the ground. I was the distractor of our group. I didn't fight the enemy. Instead, I distracted them while the others did their damage. Thry was my older sister and our cleric. She protected me while I fought.

Joce and Mal kept towards the back. They used railguns coated in splintering toxic crystals. It stunted the eldritch's regeneration. After that, we wore most of them down in a slow grind. It was the safest way we could. Considering how horrific it was dying to an eldritch, anything else was insane.

In fact, the others called me insane for how close I got to most eldritch. I couldn't blame them. Maybe I was a little bit off. My build was perfect for it though. Endurance, dexterity, and perception let me know what was going on and have the stamina to avoid it. Thry was our team's planner and charisma sink.

Mal had the standard dual gunner attributes of dexterity and perception. He invested into luck too. Every group needed a luck sink. Mal was our man in that regards. Joce had the same gunner attributes, but she invested into endurance too for the longevity. All in all, our team was a well balanced group.

The black market mage, Skyns, even gave us a solid boost with his less than legal magic. I was our core pillar though. Without me, the others couldn't function. I also got to secure all the kills since I was so close. It gave me an edge on exp. The others whined about it a lot, but I was the one in danger every mission. They just rode on my back, like always.

So I got the most experience. That's why I was level 1,678 and they were all below level 1,500. I deserved the most, and I made sure I always got the most. That's why I walked into death and always came out by the skin of my teeth.

That's why I led the group as we walked near the quarantine zone. It was real small, much smaller than other quarantines we heard about. Normally they were the size of cities. This one was a speck in the middle of one.

As we flew in on a shuttle, the quarantined area was a giant, purple bubble on the horizon. The city was cleared out for the most part. It looked like someone had burned down a forest in the middle of the place.

So far, we only saw primitive buildings with ancient tech scattered about. The planet was definitely backwater, that was for sure. At least the sky here was blue and there was enough oxygen to breath. We didn't need to wear air filters, which made our breathing less noisy.

We landed the ship a while back, opting to walk the last three or so miles. If we flew in, dormant eldritch may awaken. They would dogpile us. It was much safer taking them on one at a time. Considering I was always in the line of fire, I made sure we handled things that way.

In front of me, the rock buildings stretched up to the sky. Windows were shattered throughout the city. Several fights had taken place here. Whatever the native species was, they didn't die without a fight.

I glanced behind me, hearing Mal kicked a rock behind me. Here I thought it was a native. We hadn't even seen one of them since coming here. To be honest though, it didn't take much in the way of eldritch to decimate a newer species. People called it a flaw in Schema's programming. I called it tough love.

The four others trailed behind me as I sent an impolite gesture at Mal. We all had new, black power armor. With all the light streaming in from the sky, I finally saw the sheen on our armor. It was slick.

The inside of the armor was air conditioned, letting us sit at a pleasant temperature all the time. Unlike cheaper power armor models, it also filtered out excess moisture. When a native plant species grows into your armor, you realize just how important that is. I hated cleaning power armor after a long mission. It took hours.

This new armor didn't need that. With our integrated obelisks, we voice chatted mid fight. I preferred keeping my voice chat off until the monster was out. Joce and Mal always gossiped about literally nothing that matters. It was annoying, and I hated hearing it all the time.

I sighed, the armor plates along my back sliding as I did. Our species natural bulk made us start out a bit bulkier than most species. It didn't matter at our level though. No one invested into becoming an actual up close fighter. Almost no one. It was a stupid, idiotic way of fighting. Why swing a sword when you can fire a gun?

Even with our tall, hefty species, we all used some kind of technology. The early levels were too difficult otherwise. I only knew two warriors. One of them was eccentric and the other was bloodthirsty. Neither of them made it up to level 1,000. It was hard enough just reaching level 100 without doing it with primitive weaponry.

Looking at the proportions of their old tech and buildings, this species was big. They hadn't had time to re-make their infrastructure yet. The buildings were made for the raw species. They might be able to fight it out with lower level eldritch at this size.

It was odd though. The infrastructure that was here was empty. From what we already guessed, the quarantine was the cause of all this. The species seemed overwhelmed by something. We found a few rotting bodies behind us too. They were all different shapes and sizes though. We couldn't tell what a native actually looked like.

Combine that with the colossal, open rift at the center of the city, and we were on edge. How a rift already opened and already expanded this wide was beyond me, but here it was. Skyns could take out the dungeon core for us with his magic for us though. It was another reason we hired him.

Selling a red dungeon core helped all our retirements. The extra reward and low average level here bolstered our confidence. We found one dungeon with monsters at level 90 just outside the city.

Considering our team averaged in the mid 1,500's, we were more than fine. We walked along a road paved in rock. It must have been some archaic highway. Skyns already pulled out his grimoire and was casting buffs on us. It was better to get it done before the fight started rather than after.

Each of us opened our spatial rings as we reached beside the quarantined area. I was an alchemist, someone who worked between magic and chemistry. It meant I made potions for the whole team. We chugged a few potions that enhanced our senses and reaction speeds as we trot in.

As we neared the quarantine bubble, Mal and Joce laid traps behind us. If we ended up needing to kite something, the traps would let us. As they laid them down, they made markings on our shared mini-map. It let us make real time adjustments, something that meant the difference between life and death.

Being our cleric, Thry pulled out a few charged scrolls and gemstones. She handed them to us, each of them giving us timed buffs. They would help in case of something not so good happened. I placed a few of Joce's emp grenades on my side in case machines were in the rift. After that, I put a few of my own vials of acid on my belt.

They acted as our team's flesh eater. Acid was good versus any monster. Poisoned acid was even better. As we sketched out a map of the area, a calm, steady wind blew into us. The kinetic absorbing get on my power armor was soft and squishy under my feet. There was no face mask on my helmet. I viewed the outside world with a camera.

We knew a few things. The steel legion had been here, because the rift was covered in a containment zone from their tech. Poor bastards must have died already. Good. That meant more loot for us. We might even find a few of their bodies with plenty of loot still on them.

They legion were just a fodder faction anyway. 99% of them were useless, never leveling past 500. Only the top 1% were any good. None of that 1% would be here on this shit hole, I could promise you that.

Once all of our equipment was ready, I turned on my voice chat. Everyone was silent. I sighed with relief. Everyone was taking this seriously, even if the world was backwater. I turned towards my left, looking at a rock building. According to my sensors, a pit of radiation lingered just behind it. It was like someone used a nuclear weapon here.

I spoke into my intercom, “The rift might be more dangerous than we thought. I think some kind of governing body got a hold of nuclear weapons. The primitives must have used them on whatever caused this quarantine.”

I turned forward, looking into the gray cloud of the rift that rose high into the sky,

“Since the quarantine is still here, we might have a real problem on our hands.”

Joce murmured, “I don’t think that’s it. No one’s here anymore. This doesn’t look like someplace where any government could have formed. It looks like...I don’t know.”

Mal answered, “Come on. This is a literal shit hole. I mean that unironically. Just a real shit hole of a place. Wow, mud everywhere. And shit.”

I sighed. Mal was a complete dumbass and I hated him. I don’t think I have to explain why.

Thry’s light voice waved over the intercom, “Stay focused team. This is our last mission before we can finally just relax for the rest of our lives. I don’t think I have to remind you all again how hard it was getting to this point. Let’s not throw it all away right now.”

Thry always centered our team. It was a part of being a charisma based build.

Skyn’s untrustworthy, snaky voice entered the intercom, “There’s a presence watching us.”

I turned behind me, glaring at him, “Mister mage, why didn’t you tell us before?”

Skyns updated our mini-map as he spoke, "I just sensed whatever it is. Before now it hadn't used any mana. I'm getting a scan of the area...I think it's easily level 500+, and it's coming from below ground."

Thry and the others set into formation. I bent my knees, my senses on high alert. With all my dexterity, I could hear a pin drop a mile away. I honed in on my sense of hearing, pulling all I could from the sense. Using a unique skill, Lockpick's Ear, I picked up on a rumbling beneath us.

I pointed at the ground, "It's coming from right there. I can hear it."

Behind me, the roar of jetpacks blared out along with the sound of casting magic. The others floated high into the sky, far away from whatever this enemy was. The rumbling grew beneath us. It sounded like a space shuttle drilling through the ground. A second later, something passed over me.

An aura of some kind pulled me down. My ears popped. My knees buckled. I heaved for a breath before pushing myself back up straight. A chill ran up my spine. Whatever this was, it caused the quarantine.

A moment later, and the drilling beneath us slowed. I told the others, "Be ready. It has some sort of aura that makes everything heavy."

Thry chimed, "Thanks for the heads up Orel."

I replied, "No problem."

A moment later, I pulled out my pistol. It didn't fire bullets. It fired vials of liquid. I fired my alchemical potions at the eldritch and used speed and tactics to keep them busy. This was my tried and true starter vial, a potent acid and neurotoxin. I moved about fifty feet away from the point of entry, aiming for the eyes of the creature.

Robbing an eldritch of its senses was a good way of crippling it. I cocked the pistol and pointed at the monster's exit point. A moment later, and something jerked my pistol from my hand with great force. It smacked against the building to my right, shattering the vial of acid inside it.

At the same time, the rumbling monster crawled towards me from beneath the ground. I ran backwards, opening up my spatial ring's storage. I pulled out my back up pistol. Whatever this thing was, it moved fast as lightning, even underground.

The monster charged towards me in a blast of speed. It reached me before I could escape. As it did, I fell upwards. It was a surreal feeling. All my levity went missing just like that. I got my bearings before howling at the others,

“What the fuck is going on here?”

Skyns answered over our chat system, “It looks like it can use magic, whatever it is. That's either telekinesis or gravity. I'll get you out.”

The monster carried me with it as it burst back towards the others. Once underneath them, it shot out of the rocky ground. It's speed was blistering as the flash of red and black reached them.

Once it slowed down near them, I got a good look at it. It was a big creature, not enormous but much bigger than any of us. It had four limbs, and it had metal skin. That meant it was durable. It reached up with a mammoth hand and grasped at the air. As it did, the others all pulled together, their bodies clanking together.

The monster fell back towards the ground. As it landed, fissures formed in the ground beneath it. We all floated helpless as lost children before stopping inches from the ground. A second later, and it laid us gently onto the ground. We each scrambled up as the monster opened its arms towards us,

“Yo, sorry if I scared you guys. I knew you'd fire at me if I walked at you head on. I figured this was the best way to not be shot at, if you know what I mean.”

I aimed my pistol at him before this thing stomped the ground. My pistol jerked from my hand again before the monster reached out with an arm. The pistol stopped mid flight before pulling back to me. The monster pointed at me,

“I'm trying to work with you guys here. If you could just, I don't know, not try and kill me, I'd appreciate it.”

The monster dropped the pistol back into my hand. I looked at the others. They looked at me just as dumbfounded. None of us had ever seen an eldritch like this. It was intimidating, but it didn't seem like it meant to harm us.

A bead of cold sweat fell down my face. I'd faced sentient eldritch before. They always lured you in with sweet words. This thing was no different. I analyzed it to try and get some weaknesses. As I read, I got a grip on what was going on.

Dimension C-138, the Harbinger of Cataclysm(lvl 2,406) – Once a member of earth's native species, humans, this unknown boasts tremendous durability. It's level doesn't accurately reflect its ability to absorb punishment. This is due mostly to its armor, which is made of an unknown substance that is both flexible and exceptionally rigid.

Its health pool is vast as well, and it can use that life force for mana, giving it flexibility in combat. It has several ways of using this enormous mana pool. Its runes can charge with energy, enhancing its strength and speed. It can warp gravity at will using its mass as an anchor. If you're lighter than this creature, it will sling you around like a ragdoll.

That wouldn't be a problem if it wasn't for how devastating it is in melee range. It fights with its massive fists. As primitive and predictable as that sounds, it proves much more difficult to stop in practice. It has enhanced its simplistic techniques to produce a remarkably effective style of close combat.

A tenacious willpower aids this creation's monstrous vitality, creating a vicious warrior class. Given time, this thing can chew through almost any foe. It even has a large, powerful aura that drains its foes. Considering there are no effective types of damage on whatever this is, fighting it isn't advised.

If you want the wealth of experience this monster provides, the best course of action is to stay at a range and unload tremendous burst damage on it. With your party's current capacities, this analysis recommends fleeing before it gets a hold of you. Otherwise, you will be at this monster's mercy.

This wasn't an eldritch. It was an unknown. We never trusted unknowns. They were strange beings, almost like Old Ones. If anything, I always thought of them like big balls of chaos. I hated dealing with them for the same reason I hated dealing with sentient eldritch. They were unpredictable, and that made killing them hard.

The only good thing was that they always gave heaps of experience. Killing an unknown beneath your own level resulted in several level ups. This one would give us several missions worth of experience. We would gain over a hundred levels a piece, at least. The thought of so much experience made my mouth water.

This monster though, it wasn't something worth fighting for just levels. If anything, we were lucky that it hadn't killed us when it found us. I turned towards the others, sealing my face mask and speaking over our intercom,

"This isn't worth it. We might be able to kill this, but we're better off not taking the risk. We'll have to fight a few dozen other missions before we get back to where we are, but..."

Skyns hissed over the intercom, "Looking at that thing makes my skin crawl. I don't think it's worth fighting either. Not at our levels at least."

The others nodded in agreement. We were ready to get out of this mudhole before a message appeared in front of us,

Quest unlocked!

Seeker of Forbidden Knowledge(Tier: A- timed quest | Terms: Kill Dimension C-138 | Reward: Sentinel rights and doubled experience for killing the unknown) – Dimension C-138 was once known as Daniel Hillside, a normal sentient following Schema's system. After gaining forbidden knowledge, he's traveled in the footsteps of demented creatures.

As such, his long term potential for damage to the system is high. His termination results in enhanced rewards along with high status in Schema's system.

As I read through the message, my jaw dropped. Royal guard was nothing compared with sentinel rights. A sentinel's rights meant unrestricted access to Schema's universe. Upper tier worlds would be open to us right off the bat.

There wouldn't be some insane level cap for these places. Some of the best tropical worlds required levels as high as 5,000 for entry. We would get a yearly stipend to spend on whatever we wanted. We would get automatic access for forming a guild. It would open up an entire world for us.

Getting this kind of reward for killing such a low level enemy...it wouldn't happen more than once. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity. Knowing that, I turned towards the others. Surrounded by rubble, they looked back at me. I spoke over the intercom.

"Did you all get the message?"

They nodded in silence. Skyns spoke like he was staring at a pot of gold,

"You all spoke about becoming members of the royal guard...That's scrap compared to a sentinel's rights..."

Mal murmured, "We won't ever be able to get something like this again."

Even our good natured Cleric, Thry spoke out,

"I...I wouldn't mind having our own tropical kingdom..."

I nodded, a wry smile growing on my face, "You know what Thry? I don't think I'd mind either. Besides, killing this unknown isn't nearly as risky as trying to get sentinel rights any other way."

Joce chimed, "We have a lot of consumables we could use. If we go all out, we might be able to get him."

Skyns murmured, "I have a ritual prepared that can hit him with a massive amount of true damage. It will take some time to channel though."

I grinned, "Oh really? Hide somewhere and leave the rest to us. I've got a plan."

I opened my spatial ring and pulled out a black vial full of eldritch energy. Nothing survived exposure to this stuff. This unknown used to be a member of this native race. They'd been assimilated for less than a decade. If I was right, there's no way he would know just how dangerous this vial was.

He'd be turned inside out by the energy before he could even respond to us. I waved the vial above my head,

"I want to thank you for the good will. You really saved us a hassle here. I'll give you this. It's a powerful energizer. It can help you out in a pinch."

The creature shook its head, "No. That isn't really necessary. Just leave."

I waved my hands back and forth, "I insist. If this quarantine is as hard to beat as you say, you pretty much saved our lives. That deserves something."

I shook the vial in front of it, "I'd feel awful if you didn't get something for taking the risk to help us. From one leveler to another, let us help you out."

It uncrossed its arms, "Alright. Fine."

I tossed the vial at the monster. It reached out with a hand. As it caught the vial, the others raised their railguns and fired at the monster. Skyns flipped the pages of his grimoire and cast a kinetic burst spell on the eldritch vial. The black smoke smothered the creature as a hailstorm of bullets clashed against the metal.

Clashing metal echoed into the distance from bullets smashing on the thing's metal skin. With a practiced motion, I slid a vial from my side into my pistol before firing a vial at the cloud of black smoke. The others unleashed a maelstrom of metal on the primitive creature before having to reload their rifles.

The heavy aura disappeared from around us. That meant the damn thing was dead, so I raised a hand, "Killing backwater natives isn't so bad."

The others whooped with me before an aura of red radiated from the black cloud. The dense, black smoke sucked into the creature's body, exposing it. Spikes grew off its shoulders and back. Along its armor, magic runes were carved out and glowing. They were the same runes Skyns was using earlier.

A bead of sweat fell from my forehead. A sinking feeling pulled at my stomach as acid ate into the monster's skin. It didn't even flinch as it walked towards us.

It raised its fists, "Yenno, I tried giving you guys a chance. I really did."

Streaks of corrosion burned him down into his flesh. The singing of acid was like a banshee's howling. A cloud of white mist, all of it a potent neurotoxin, covered him. Like liquid metal, a silver, reflective blood leaked from the creature. We all watched in horror as its wounds healed in seconds.

My vial did damage though, and by the looks of the creature, a decent chunk of its health was missing. The monster crossed its arms and propped all its weight onto one hip,

"Yawm was right. There's no way I can trust you. It's a damn shame too. I was trying to be nice."

The runes across its metal body flared further to life, energy building in them. The skin of it shivered, the armor rippling over it in exhilaration. The ground beneath its feet cracked,

"Letting you throw acid on my face and live though? I'm not quite that kind."

An aura covered me, like every nerve in my body was being pierced with needles. It was like magma pumped through my veins all of the sudden. Everything became pain. My health drained fast as the monster bent over, readying itself for a charge. My stomach sunk as a realization came into my head.

We had tried killing the wrong monster.

"Besides, killing you is better than what Yawm planned on doing."

My stomach sank even further, like I was staring at the grim reaper. I only knew one person named Yawm, and I only heard his name in legends.

The monster's runes brightened,

“Compared to that, this is mercy.”

Chapter 116: Galactic

The black vial exploded in front of me, cloaking me in a dense cloud of black smoke. I was right. Something changed their minds about leaving me alone. What exactly? I didn't know. I did know they just tried murdering me. Those vials were dangerous after all. They mutated someone on touch. My armor made me different. It meant I didn't burn and die in the charcoal cloud.

The acid was different. It hissed on my armor, melting through it in places down to my skin. The thicker blobs of it dug deep into my flesh, carving their own way towards my bones. The minor spike of pain didn't make me mad. My pain tolerance kept me stable. On the other hand, the smell of my own burning muscle and skin did.

Seconds later, I stepped out of the thick cloud of miasma and acid. My health regen outpaced the acid's damage. As I reformed. I lifted up a hand and clasped it into a fist harder than learning quantum physics,

“Compared to that, this is mercy.”

I meant it too. Yawm intended on tearing them apart in a lab. This was a better way of dying. Besides, I was angry at them. I was human after all, and someone throwing acid on you tends to do that.

I kneeled over, a crisp, cool wind brushing against my armor. The acid burns already healed. The pavement beneath my foot was soft, like pushing against peanut brittle. As I pounded my heel into the ground, the pavement crushed underfoot. The rush of wind splashed against my face as I neared the four of them.

They didn't let me approach. The alchemist reloaded his pistol, firing it at me. I splintered the vial before it could reach me. The others fired at me, but I molded my armor and shifted myself to deflect their rounds. Using the alchemical cloud as cover, I shifted down into the ground.

Four rounds dug into the dirt above me. Rumbling above like a train passing beside me, their jetpacks fired into action. Using my unique skill Tactile Cognition, I extended my

senses. The mage ran into a building nearby. The others put themselves ran in another direction.

I rushed down the gunmen and alchemist first. The mage could warp away. The others couldn't. As the ground rushed around me, I slid through the earth while charging my runes. Once full, I unleashed them in a massive burst of energy. Like a rocket, I shot through the air towards them at a blistering pace.

The alchemist ran towards me. The cleric stayed within the range of Event Horizon, the both of them feeding my mana. The cleric turned through the pages of its grimoire, the panels of its power armor smoothly shifting. The letters grew bright before an aura of power condensed over the alchemist.

I reached him as he reached me. We clashed together. I weighed more than many, so I overwhelmed his charge with ease. Grasping his neck, I forced him into the ground as he opened his dimensional storage. I crushed with my hand, going for the kill. Potions of all colors spilled out, each vial clanking against other vials and the ground.

As my hand crumpled the armor, no blood gushed from the power armor. The mage warped away. A moment later, a kinetic burst exploded the vials. A flash of white engulfed me. My senses faded. Everything around me turned numb.

A second later, I opened my eyes. 40% of my health was missing. A plume of dust surrounded me. The soft earth pressed against my back. I pushed myself off the ground, my hands wet. Around me, craters scarred the ground like a blast zone. I stood, my footing firm with the aid of telekinesis.

I reached out. The levelers retreated atop a skyscraper, joining the mage. Making out their actions in detail was impossible at this distance. I leapt out of the dust cloud, the thicker parts of the air sticking against my skin. I landed on a sidewalk, the large slabs of concrete cracking underfoot.

Two railgun shots fired towards me. I deflected the first one, my instincts well beyond a normal human's potential. The other bullet sliced into my left shoulder. I reached into the wound with my armor, pulling out the rod of metal. It clanked against the ground as the gunmen unloaded another round of bullets.

I shot sideways, dodging them by inches. The wind of the bolt brushed against my face before I leaned down. With my runes charged, I fired myself upwards before piercing

through the windows of the skyscraper. A rain of broken glass pelted onto the ground as I dug through the concrete floors of the building.

I neared them. The mage hid deeper in the building, the others standing near broken windows. I dashed between them, getting within range of my gravitation magic. Using a burst of mana from my healthpool, I jerked the mage from his hiding spot towards me. The alchemist dashed towards me, his rapid footsteps echoing down the empty office hallways.

With no lights around me, I used my gravitational awareness for sensing their movements. The riflemen lifted their weapons towards me. The alchemist neared me, the cleric not far behind. The mage crashed through the thin, spindly walls of the skyscraper.

In the next moment, a leveler fired a railgun bolt at me. I acted on intuition. I deflected the bullet, but I aimed it towards the mage. I pulled him with my gravitational magic, jerking him into the trajectory of the diverted railgun slug. The metal rod pierced through three walls of a cubicle, spearing the mage. I released my hold on him, letting his body pin against a wall.

He hung there in the darkness, blood gushing from his mouth. He pulled out his grimoire. I jerked it from his hands with a telekinetic pull. The alchemist reached the room I was in. Without his dimensional storage ring, he lacked his alchemical explosions. He wasn't even in power armor, only a camouflage suit that disguised him in the darkness.

I sensed the heat of his breath, the pulse of his heart, and the quiet thud of his footsteps. He was as easy to see as a bonfire in my eyes. Not only that, he was too close to me. I reached out a hand and clasped it. A gravity well formed over his chest, crushing down on him. Another aura condensed over him, giving him a red glow. My magic weakened, no longer able to hold him.

He dashed towards me, antimagic protecting him from destruction. I shot out a jab. He countered, his movements crisp and practiced. His fist landed against my face. On that fist of his was a metal machine. It was some hydraulic press, and it unloaded onto my face. The plate of metal pressed against my nose.

I gritted my teeth, my neck staying firm. The metal caved against my face, his hand's armor crunching under the sheer force. Stuck against me, he pulled at his fist, trying to escape. He couldn't get out in time.

I torqued on my feet, slamming a fist into his stomach. The kinetic bullet blew out his back, his body exploding like crushed fruit. A liquid splashed against my face. My armor sucked it in. I shivered in disgust before turning towards the others. Before I left, the alchemist fell against the ground and his helmet fell off.

He mumbled in a deep voice, "I...Schema...why didn't he warn us? Did he want us... to di-"

His head flopped against the ground, the skull bouncing against the thin carpet. His head laid still as I stared at his decimated corpse. Before my thoughts wandered, two railgun bullets crashed towards my helmet.

With practice from spars with Althea, I deflected the bolts, each of them piercing the walls behind me. I looked around. I was in an office cubicle, blood splattered against the walls. Besides for dust, there was nothing changed since Schema's system. It looked largely maintained.

I shook the eeriness off before leaning over. Turning towards the gunmen, I charged my runes. The cleric escaped my grasp, trying to save their mage. I ignored her for now and focused on the gunmen.

They reloaded before I shot towards them. The walls between us shattered as I barreled towards them. I was a raging bull, ripping the building apart.

They timed their shots as I reached the maximum velocity of my dash. The bolts pierced through me, gouging out my back with tiny hooks lining their surface. It meant nothing. As I passed by them, I latched onto them with gravity. Falling from the skyscraper, we both built speed towards the ground.

I landed against the ground, ushering out a shockwave before each of them crushed against the ground. They splattered against the ground like falling tomatoes wrapped in aluminum foil. I stood up before cracking my neck. I walked towards them, inspecting them for anything of value. I didn't enjoy scavenging, but I wasn't so prideful that I'd say no to free loot either.

The two gunmen I splattered against the ground were nigh unrecognizable. I couldn't tell what species they were. Their blood was red at least. After finding their dimensional storage rings, surveying my surroundings. Fifteen minutes later, I found the alchemist's storage ring as well. It was lodged into the broken window pane of a minivan.

As I pulled it out, the glass fragmented against my touch. Besides for that, the car was...short if that makes sense. I was double its height, maybe even a bit more. Everything if it was too small and too frail for me by then. It was a surreal moment.

After soaking that sensation in, I dived back into the skyscraper. I pulled Event Horizon inwards, preventing it from evaporating anyone left in the building. Seconds passed before I found the alchemist's butchered body. After taking two more black vials from his chest, I walked over towards the mage. He was still alive, the cleric channeling a spell.

Before it cast, she turned towards me. A ball of light passed over me. It singed my skin and the blood within the room. I walked out of it, unharmed and clanking my fists together. The cleric channeled another spell. I snatched my hand back, snapping her neck. She fell down, her legs not working. As I passed by her, I caved her skull in with quick stomp.

Since she hadn't healed him, the mage was dilapidated. Coagulating blood dripped from his power armor. He was half my size at most, like a normal man. These aliens were bipedal and human like. Curious about his real appearance, I lunged down onto one knee. I still looked down at him as I pulled off his helmet.

His face contorted in pain, and his jaw and neck were covered in congealed blood. A small horn jutted from his chin, and armored plates ran down the back of his neck and head. Scales made up his eyebrows and skin, and his teeth were sharp, making him appear fierce. He looked like a reptile race mixed with an armadillo.

His voice was catching in his throat, like he was thirsty,

“You... You're here to finish me then?”

I nodded.

“Good...This is the most pain I’ve felt in years. End it.”

“I will, but that’s if you can tell me why you decided on attacking me. Otherwise I’ll make this worse.”

The alien spit out a mouthful of blood. He spoke with a clearer, raspy voice,

“There was...A message from Schema. He gave us more than just a chance at the royal guard...He offered us sentinel rights. We could go anywhere...do anything...”

I sighed, “So you and your friends got greedy then?”

He nodded.

I frowned, but he couldn’t see my face under my armor,

“Still, this was a death sentence. You analyzed me, right?”

The mage nodded, “We did...you’re message and level was deceptive...Schema undervalued your strengths...you’re level is a mockery of a level’s purpose...how were we supposed to know that a level 2,000 sentient would fight like an eldritch twice his level?”

I tapped my chin, “You weren’t...And I was supposed to kill you then, like lambs to the slaughter.”

The mage laughed, a bit blood splattered out of his mouth,

“I suppose...”

We stood there for a second. I clenched a hand,

“I can save you.”

He closed his eyes,

“You can’t...There’s poison on the bullets they fired...I’m already dead.”

I bit my lip. I raised my hand, “What was your name?”

“Skyns.”

“I’ll remember it.”

A small smile traced his lips, “Tell them I gave you hell.”

“I will.”

I smashed my fist into his head, destroying his face. I shook the chunks of bone from my hand right after. As I took his grimoire and spatial ring, I sighed. They were baited into this by Schema. Why exactly? I didn’t know.

What I did know was that this was over with. I stood in the office, the red light of my runes waning. I jogged out of the building before landing on the ground. After sending out a shockwave around me, I ran towards Yawm. He inspected the entire event at his leisure, his vision sharp enough to see for miles. His level didn’t betray him in that respect.

He rested in a chair of ice that sat upon a parking deck. It was a mile away from where the fight took place. His fingers were crossed as he kept his elbows on the armrest beside him. With the backdrop of a blue sky, he looked out of place, like some deity on earth.

The green energy still pulsed under his skin as I approached. Once I reached him, he stood and clapped his hands,

“I enjoyed the fight. It was both brutal and satisfying.”

I spread out my arms, “It wasn’t much. They weren’t the most challenging foes.”

Yawm nodded, “A sentiment I rather agree with. So much so that I’m left pondering something. Would you mind clarifying my confusion?”

Yawm was speaking with his mask on. It left a cold, calculating edge on his words, so I kept my answer casual, “Yeah, I’ll answer what I can.”

Yawm tilted his head and narrowed his eyes, “How did weaklings like them so much as touch you? You have me doubting your strength, you see.”

I shrugged, “For the hunt.”

Chapter 117: Leverage

Yawm tapped his chin, “The hunt? Like toying with food?”

I shook my head, “Naw, it’s getting the most out of it. Think about it like this.”

I opened my right hand to Yawm, “If your fighting someone, when do they apply themselves the most?”

Yawm leaned forward in his chair, resting his chin on his hands,

“When their back is against a wall?”

I raised my left hand, “When they believe they both win and lose.” I slammed my left hand into my right palm, echoing out the sound of clanging metal,

“If you crush them immediately, that destroys any hope they have. That stops them from even trying anything to begin with. It’s like staring at your death and knowing it’s coming. You don’t want to fight at that moment. You just want to close your eyes and wait.”

I spread out my hands, “You learn nothing from them if you do that. On the other hand, if you give the impression that they could win, they’ll show their best.”

I counted with my fingers, “In that fight, I learned about alchemical vials, anti-magic fields, and I even discovered that Schema sent them a message about me. Schema’s planning something. With your methods, I wouldn’t have discovered anything.”

Yawm nodded, “An interesting viewpoint. Being a native of this planet means your exposure towards galactic methods of fighting is meager. In order to cover this weakness, you discover what you can from even weak enemies.”

Yawm pointed at me, “Hah hah, that’s a long-term strategy, if a bit risky in the moment. If the enemy is stronger than you initially imagined, then it could result in an untimely demise...”

Yawm shrugged, “Still, I rather enjoy your methods. I’ll employ that tactic next time I find myself in a fight I know I’ll win. Perhaps I may learn something as well.”

Yawm stood, the ice chair evaporating beneath him.

“Are you ready to return?”

I nodded, “Yeah, let’s go.”

We both dashed back towards Yawm’s rift at the center of Springfield. As we ran on the worn down streets, our feet cracked the pavement beneath our heels. The gray loomed in the distance, wind rushing across my skin.

We reached an intersection ending with a grocery store at its center. After stomping past the parking lot, we leapt onto the top of a grocery store. Our feet caved in the tin roof, the metal squealing at holding our mass.

During moments like this, I appreciated the raw strength that Schema provided. Leaping across the buildings was effortless, like short bursts of flight. Watching stone crumble under my touch was exhilarating. It was like I needed nothing, and that gave me a sense of profound freedom.

Still, Yawm was right beside me. He glanced around, inspecting the abandoned city. Reading his thoughts was like reading hieroglyphics. It wasn't going to happen, so I just enjoyed the sensation of falling and rising. It was like a rollercoaster, in a way.

Halfway back to Yawm's rift, he spoke out. It was like he was telling me something rather than beginning a conversation.

"You mentioned Schema planning something. I happen to agree. I might even know what it is that he wants."

I frowned under my helmet, but I let him continue. Yawm had that effect on people. You couldn't help but want to listen to what he had to say.

"Schema wanted my own talents for his own aims as well. He used all manner of methods against me. His threats began with access to his system. You know as well as I do that the dimensional cipher unlocks more than Schema can deny, however. Once I ceased responding to exile, Schema introduced other means of control."

Yawm's eyes narrowed, "It began with an unknown status. That occurred the first time I added a real enchantment onto myself with the cipher. Once unknown, you're no different than an eldritch in some people's eyes. The only difference was that you were once civil."

Yawm sighed, "After that, he used an incrementally increasing bounty against me. Even with what I've done, I'm not quite an S+ tier bounty just yet. At least to my knowledge. Combine that bounty with an unknown status, and you're plagued by assailants at every hour. I enjoy the fight, but most crumble under the harsh reality of life becoming an endless battle."

Some of what Yawm was saying sounded familiar if not all of it. Once we finished sharing knowledge on runes, I'd discuss it with Torix or Althea. Whenever I thought out her name, an image of her face popped into my head. There was a warmth in my chest at remembering her. I realized I missed her.

Yawm continued, "Once I discovered I enjoyed the incessant fighting, he targeted my family. I made a bitter decision. Either I lived as a slave for Schema while enjoying my old life, or I cast it aside and lived on my own terms. My decision...well, you already know of it."

A shiver traced down my spine. All of the sudden, I compared Yawm with me. There were many similarities. We were both representatives of our species in a sense, given we both had Genesis of Potential. That skill tree was only given to one person in a species. Gaining half of my skills was due to it, from learning the cipher to my legendary skill, Force of Nature.

Yawm was no different in that regard. If anything, I was following his footsteps. It was an eerie feeling. The odd sensation lingered for a bit as we reached Yawm's rift. I dwelled on what he said until we reached Yawm's pale fortress. From what I understood, there wasn't much I could do about it at the moment. Given time, I'd change where I was headed though.

I wouldn't let myself be used for much longer. I'd forge my own path. It was simple as that.

Steadfast in that desire, we both reached Yawm's hideout. After letting my eyes feast on the visual delights of the sea life and lighting, we reached his study. Once there, Yawm clapped his hands and we began our next discussion about the cipher. The hours passed like minutes before I was waiting back in my room.

As Keeja closed the door, I opened my status screen while sitting on the air. It was nice never having to worry about a chair anymore. If I got good at my magic, making a bed to rest on overnight wouldn't be out of the question.

As I floated on a gravity warp, I checked out level. It was 2412. Killing the levelers got me six levels. In other words, I gained nothing. After a sarcastic celebration, I glanced at the bonuses my cipher was giving. That was were the meat of my progress was.

[Modifications – The dimensional fabric composing this structure has been modified with code from the dimensional cipher. The bonuses are as follows.

+72 Strength

+72 Dexterity

+100 Endurance

+12% to effect of legacies

+20 Willpower

+2% to internal motivation]

Over time, the bonuses would amount to ridiculous bonuses. For now though, it would take more time. I opened up my attributes and character screen, inspecting them.

Level 2,412

Strength – 2,256 | Constitution – 3,276 | Endurance – 11,169

Dexterity – 822 | Willpower – 5,543 | Intelligence – 1,932

Charisma – 195 | Luck – 602 | Perception – 330

Health: 867,845/867,845 | Health Regen: 753,921/min or 15,141/sec

Stamina: 485,617/485,617 | Stamina Regen: 4,552/sec

Living Dimension: 0.15 Trillion/4.30 Trillion

Mass: 103,611 pounds(46,484 kilos)

Damage Res – 98.5% | Dimensional Res – 49.25%

Phys Dam Bonus – 26,530% | Damage Bonus – 40%

Event Horizon – 20,000 + (100% of your total health)/min

The stats increased at a steady pace, though much slower than before. It would take a long time before they amounted to much though. Based on that, developing my skills instead of my attributes was working out. Just by improving a few gravity focused skills with Force of Nature would make a world of difference.

Before I got back on grinding again, I pulled out my obelisk. After opening it up, I surrounded myself in the serene calm of my screen saver. The sound of cicadas and a gentle creek enveloped me in a pleasant calm. For a moment, I just soaked in the scenery.

I didn't let that last. I opened my friends list, finding Althea and Torix. At first I wanted to just call Althea, but I bit my lips and contacted Torix first. Discussing a few details with him was more important, even if I wanted to chat it up with Althea.

The ringing of an unanswered call rippled through the obelisk's chamber. After a ring or two, Torix answered. His dry face and blue fire eyes popped in the background of maps along the walls behind him. He grinned,

"It's good to see you finally have a moment to discuss matters with me. Even better, you look no worse for wear. That's particularly good considering I can't imagine what's been going on."

I shrugged, "Honestly? Yawm's not quite as, well, uh, intangible as I thought he was."

Torix crossed his arms, two lines of golden trim running down his robe crinkling,

"Really now? What is he like?"

A burning curiosity hid itself just beneath the surface of Torix's expression. I weighed my hands back and forth as I answered,

"He's...He's kind of like a viking mixed with a mad scientist and gentleman spy. He's hard to pin down, but he seems sort of stable. A lot more stable than I imagined. If anything, he spends all day researching runes and relaxing himself."

Torix leaned towards the screen, “So that’s what the living legend is like...odd.”

I nodded, agreeing with him. He uncrossed his arms, “It seems as though he had you face off against the levelers as well.”

I raised an eyebrow, “What did you think about all that?”

Torix pursed his lips, “It was a situation where you were stuck in a bad situation. I believe you handled the situation as well as you could, considering the circumstances. What surprised me was that they attacked you altogether.”

I frowned, “That’s because Schema gave them a message about killing me and gaining sentinel rights.”

Torix’s eyes narrowed for a second. They opened wide,

“Ahhh...Schema is raising your bounty.”

I shook my head, “But how? They attacked me first. Surely I have the right to defend myself.”

Torix waved his hands, “No, you don’t. You’re outside the protection of the system, but you’re still restrained by its rules. Killing you isn’t considered murder, but killing them is.”

I tapped my teeth together, a dry frustration passing over me,

“Really now?”

Torix grinned, a sardonic look coming onto his face, “Indeed, Kessiah and I have managed to avoid the consequences of our unknown status for the most part. Given your situation, I doubt Schema will give you that option.”

I sighed before shrugging, “Well, it is what it is I guess. No point mourning over it.”

“I agree. Have you discovered anything else about him?”

I glanced up, thinking for a moment,

“Hmmm...He’s told me a bit.”

I peered at Torix, letting my hands rest at my sides,

“It’s mostly about how Schema’s planning on using me for something. What exactly, I don’t know. I’ll learn about it in time, at least based on how open Yawm is.”

I raised both my hands, my palms facing each other, “I’m waiting for him to share what he wants to share rather than asking questions. I figured interrogating him would make him defensive.”

Torix cupped his chin, “It’s a rather organic strategy. If it’s working, it’s working I suppose. Regardless, keep me updated if anything truly interesting comes up.”

I nodded, “I will. It was good talking with you Torix.”

Torix grinned, “You as well disciple. Ah, before you go, there’s two things I need to tell you.”

“Shoot.”

Torix raised a finger upwards, “The quarantine’s been going on long enough that information about it is starting to spread. Others will be coming. Be ready.”

Torix raised a second finger, “And my last recommendation is to call Althea. She’s furious with your radio silence.”

Torix gave me a wink, “Think of this as words of wisdom from your master. Never leave a lover waiting.”

I grew a small grin, “Alright, alright, thanks for the reminder. Cya Torix.”

I closed the call before letting out a sigh. Torix had that what I call a parent’s all seeing eye. Some parents could give you a glance then see right into everything you’re trying to hide. I’m sure he looked at Althea then wormed the fact we were dating out of her. Althea didn’t seem like the best liar anyway, so it couldn’t be that difficult.

I rubbed my hands together before calling Althea. A nervous pulse crept across my skin, but excitement was there too. I couldn’t help it. We hadn’t talked since that night we’d done it. I didn’t know what to say to her exactly, but I missed her. I’m sure that would be enough.

Those thoughts raced through my mind as tension built. Finally she answered the call. Whenever Althea’s face appeared, it was like a breath of fresh air. Her skin was blue gray with a vitality to it. Her hair was a deep, royal purple. Her eyes were light lavender. The expression on her face was much less appealing.

Her eyebrows creased and she frowned at me. When she spoke, it wasn’t like breathing in cool air. It was like a splash of cold water,

“You made me wait three days before you even call me?”

Oh shit.

Chapter 118: Deep Water

I shrugged, “Yawm’s been keeping me busy. I’m sorry.”

Althea narrowed her eyes and raised her eyebrows,

“That’s a pretty good excuse...I still missed you though.”

She laid out on her bed, arms propping up her head and her feet kicking behind her. Her hair was messy, but in a sexy kind of way. To me at least. I grinned at her, “I missed you too.”

Althea flushed a bit before glancing off in the distance, “So...how are things?”

She I laughed a bit at her awkwardness, “Things are going pretty good for now. I’m not dead, so that’s a plus.”

She nodded, “Or turned inside out either.”

I shivered, “Don’t remind me.”

She leaned towards the camera, her eyes opening wide, “Did you, uh, see anyone else there?”

I shook my head, “No. Yawm killed everyone after they sent you out bounty hunting.”

Althea glanced down, “Oh...really...Wow.”

I raised a finger, “Wait, there’s one person named Keeja.”

Althea looked up at me, her head tilted in confusion, “What? He’s alive?”

I weighed my hands back and forth, “Sort of. I’m sure he’s not the same as you remember him being.”

Althea gripped her shoulder with a hand, “Yeah, Keeja always looked scared of everything. I never imagined he’d last this long.”

I grimaced, “Well, there’s not much left of him. He warned me to run though. It was very...ominous.”

Althea nodded, “Let’s hope you can get out of there as fast as possible. I’m sure Yawm has tried selling you plenty lies already.”

I shook my head in disbelief, “Yeah, he’s a bullshit salesman.” I locked eyes with Althea,

“It’s not just that though. I get the feeling that Yawm’s really disconnected with what he’s doing. I mean yeah, it all sounds good in theory, but if you look at what he’s done...It’s malicious. How he’s gotten this far in and never thought to himself that it’s all a bad idea, well I can’t fathom it.”

Althea raised her hands, “I know right? I can’t even go on for five minutes without doubting myself.”

I frowned, “See, that’s the thing. He does doubt himself, but he just keeps going. It’s like he’s taking water out of a sinking ship. He’s been doing it for so long now that he won’t stop no matter what. He’d rather keep wasting his time than face the fact that he’s wasted time up till now.”

Althea’s eyes turned hard, “Yeah, I never liked him. I didn’t see him much though, only twice before I was changed. Once before the operation and once more right after it.”

I rested my chin on my hands, “Did they ever mention anything about tears?”

Althea raised an eyebrow, “Tears? Maybe as a code word for something else. No one was crying during the experiment though, not even me. I only remember them surrounding me with dungeon cores that were writhing like they were alive. They dipped me in some liquid with all the cores. After that, I don’t know.”

I grabbed my chin, “Damn...Well that just makes things more confusing.”

Althea nodded, “Yeah, it does...”

An awkward silence passed before I coughed into my hand,

“Ahem, I...uh...love you”

For some forsaken reason, I blushed a little as I said it. I shook my head in frustration,

“What am I, twelve? I thought I got rid of the jitters years ago.”

Althea giggled out a nervous laugh, “I’m blushing too if it makes you feel any better.”

My eyes focused back in on her. Her face was purple. I laughed,

“You’re cheeks are as purple as your hair.”

She swiped her hand at me, “Cut me some slack.”

I smirked at her, “It’s not my forte.”

She turned onto her back, looking at me with her head hanging off her bed, “Yeah, I could tell after you killed those levelers like that.”

I spread out my hands, “Yeah, that was weird as hell. Why would they even try doing that?”

Althea tapped her full lips with a finger, “Hmmm. I guess levels are important.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Enough to die for?”

Althea’s purple, shiny hair spread out onto the stone floor with a nice sheen to it,

“There’s certain places you can only go once you’ve gotten to a high enough level. That’s why I went to earth for my bounties instead of a more developed world. I was way too low level for somewhere more fun.”

I raised an eyebrow, “What’s wrong with earth?”

She kicked her legs at the edge of the bed, her fluffy pajamas looking comfy,

“I mean Earth’s fine I guess. It’s kind of empty though. There are some places you can go that have more city than wilderness. Anything you could want, they have. Some people just shore up and watch stuff on their obelisk all day. Other people get high on all kinds of drug cocktails until they go broke before going out for credits again.”

Althea glanced off into the distance, “With money, you can have pretty much anything you could ever want really.”

For a second, I thought about what she said. I remembered asking other classmates what they would do for a million dollars back in middle school. People had a wild variety in their answers. Some would kill other people for a tenth that amount. Others wouldn’t even suck a dick for double it. It really did depend on the person.

I assumed that mercenaries were the same way. They saw Schema’s reward as that million dollars, a reward that was normally impossible. Because of that, greed consumed them. It was kind of sad how Schema swayed them so easily. It made me wonder what their lives were like before the mission.

I silenced those thoughts. Thinking about that would just make me feel awful. Besides, they shot at me first. It’s ridiculous to think I wouldn’t ensure my safety after something like that.

I leaned towards the camera, “What would you spend a mountain of credits on?”

Althea grinned at me, “Hiring a personal chef, a nice, cozy house with a huge library in it, and a huge bath so I could soak in it all day.”

A wry smile traced my lips, “Expensive tastes, eh?”

She made a hand into a gun and pointed it at me, “I could always take you out for a few quick credits.”

I raised my hands, feigning mock terror, “You wouldn’t dare.”

She cocked her hand, acting like she was loading a pistol, “Try me.”

I waited for a moment before pulling out a pistol from my own hand.

“Bang bang bang!”

I pressed a hand against my chest, “Blahh, you got me!”

Althea pressed a fingertip to her lips and blew on the pistol, “Shouldn’t have crossed me.”

We laughed before I pursed my lips, “Wait, what do you mean take me out for a few quick credits?”

She frowned, “It was just a joke.”

I shook my head, “I mean what do you mean by getting credits? I didn’t know Schema’s bounties gave out money.”

She shook her head, “They don’t. There’s other bounties on your head now. The empire has one on clearing the quarantine here on earth now. It’s not enough so that you’re set for life, but it’s enough to add fuel to the flames I guess.”

I creased my eyebrows, “You’re telling me those levelers were important?”

She nodded, “Apparently so. All that practice with me and you really payed off though.”

I shrugged, “Eh, I mean kinda sorta.”

Althea pursed her lips, “What do you mean kinda sorta?”

I balanced my hands back and forth, “I guess our head to heads did teach me how to kick some ass.”

“Ohhhh really now?”

“Yes, really.”

She pointed at me, a reluctant grin spread out over her face, “You just wait till next time buster. We’ll see who’s kicking who’s ass.”

After that, we chatted for another hour about a variety of different things. None of it really mattered, but we were in that phase of the relationship where we were giddy just to be around each other. Althea’s eyelids got heavier before she fell asleep while we were talking.

I closed out my call with a small smile on my face. It was nice seeing her, if only for a while. I just wished I could have put the cover over her and nestled up to her. It would be nice.

With that weighing on my mind, I sighed before closing my obelisk. I stood up and stretched, my back popping before I rolled my shoulders. I wanted to learn how to use gravity to help me move even better.

The night passed fast, a sort of flow occurring as I trained different motions and ideas. After that, another day with Yawm passed much the same as the others. We would drink something during the morning before moving on towards his study the entire day. After I returned towards my room, Keeja would come in with some fancy dinner. I trained all night thereafter, and the process rinsed and repeated.

It was a calm, peaceful existence compared with my life since Schema took over. I enjoyed it quite a bit. It was like getting a taste of some home made cooking after eating out for several weeks. It was fulfilling a craving for relaxation after the months of constant battle. The only problem was that I found my mind wandering at times.

I know that sounds weird to point out. Everyone daydreams now and then at some point. The thing is, I hadn’t in months. Since getting so much willpower, I had an iron grip on my mind. Whatever I wanted, I could make happen. It wasn’t a matter of if I would do something, it was a matter of when.

For some reason, that sense of ironclad control was fading. It was slow at first, but as my lesson’s with Yawm continued, the sensation took more and more away. After about

two weeks of this routine with Yawm, Yawm was agitated as well. It wasn't because he was actually nervous or anything like that. He wanted violence when there was none.

I would catch him breathing slowly to calm himself in the middle of his writing. It felt like someone transported a bloodthirsty viking into an eternal library. He could pretend like he wanted to read, but at some point he was bound to snap. At the peak of his frustration, he pulled me back towards the top room of his ice fortress.

Once there, we stared at the lake's medley of life for a few minutes. The different forms of life shifted with phosphorescent lights lighting them. We sat on the standard chairs of ice Yawm preferred. Yawm breathed deep, like he was calming himself down. When he finally spoke, a hint of sadness was in his voice.

"There's something I've been meaning to ask of you, but I've found myself stretched thin as of late. Would you mind me asking a rather blunt question?"

I shook my head, "We're friends man. You don't have to ask a question just to ask a question."

I expected him to ask for a spar. He didn't.

"It is a bit peculiar I suppose. You see, it's a personal question I want answered."

I just stayed quiet and let him speak. As he talked, he waved a hand like he was trying to get words out of it,

"No doubt you've noticed some...symptoms since you began learning the cipher in more detail. In my case, I experience bouts of untamed aggression. You've seen the explosive effects my anger may have, so containing these outbursts is essential for me. I was wondering what your symptoms were and how you were coping with them?"

I raised an eyebrow, "Why is that so personal?"

Yawm sighed, "Because your reaction to the cipher speaks volumes of your character as a person. Most see visions and hear voices. Eventually they lose their minds. I was wondering if you were experiencing anything similar?"

I shook my head, “Not yet. So far the only thing I’ve had to deal with is spacing out some. It’s annoying, but I just have to keep snapping at myself to get back on task.”

Yawm leaned towards me, “And you’re certain that’s all?”

I remembered the last week or so. That was the only symptom so far, so I answered,

“Yeah, that’s basically it.”

Yawm tapped his chin with a knuckle as big as a teacup,

“Curious... You’re symptoms are rather low considering your status as a warrior. Did you invest into the willpower leveling perk by chance, if you wouldn’t mind my asking?”

I nodded, “I did. My build is very endurance heavy for the most part.”

Yawm’s eyes narrowed, “That makes your mana generation all the more impressive. You’re using the way the stats feed to get the most out of them then?”

I weighed my hands back and forth, “More or less.”

Yawm clapped his hands while leaning back into his chair, “Then that explains how you’ve managed to suppress the symptoms so well. Your subconscious is working for you.”

I raised an eyebrow, “My subconscious?”

Yawm turned a hand, his palm facing me, “Your skepticism is well founded. Allow me to explain with a story.”

Yawm moved a hand over his head. The air around us sparked before an aura of green saturated the area. It compacted into Yawm’s palm before an foggy image appeared

over his head. It was a sailboat coasting on a clear sea. The sky was boundless and blue. A bright sun beamed against the water below it.

Yawm pointed at the boat, “This is projection magic. It’s an excellent addition to stories you might wish to tell.”

I nodded, “It’s awesome.”

Yawm leaned back into his chair and spread out his arms, “The boat at the center of this image is you. The ocean around you is the universe that you can see. Notice how beautiful it is, how full of possibility.”

I leaned towards the image, “Yeah, it seems pretty optimistic.”

Yawm shook his head, “This is a grim imagining of our universe, I assure you.”

He pulled his arms together. As he did, beneath the water became visible.

“The cipher exposes what lies beneath the surface.”

An eye larger than our boat appeared. It shifted beneath the water, its form enormous. Other gargantuan creatures writhed near it. The density of the monsters was so high that they seemed squeezed underneath the water. If they so much as brushed against the sailboat, it would be obliterated.

Yawm’s eyes narrowed, “The world seems peaceful, but there are things hiding in plain sight. The cipher lets you see these oddities. It lets you discover your own insignificance in comparison with this wide universe we call our own.”

Yawm lowered his hands, the image dissipating,

“The Old Ones, the eldritch, even creatures we know nothing about...the cipher lets you peer behind the curtain and see them so to speak. It’s a humbling thing to peer into the universe spread bare. I liken it to staring at infinity. It breaks most minds.”

I tapped my temple, “And all my daydreaming is my mind processing that?”

Yawm rubbed his hands together, “That way of understanding will do for now. The main point is that there will be times where we both need time away from the cipher. Otherwise we will succumb to these symptoms.”

Yawm stood up from his chair, so I stood up right after,

“What are we going to do in the meantime?”

Yawm spread out his arms and pounded his fists together. It reverberated loud enough that the panels of ice around us cracked. It was the kind of sound you could feel shaking your skin and moving your hair. As the last echoes of it faded, Yawm growled,

“Hahaha! We can fight any visitors that happen to come here. That and spar...if you’d like to.”

Chapter 119: Watchful Waiting

I crossed my arms, “Where would we fight?”

Yawm lowered his arms, “In an arena I’ll create. We won’t have to worry about destroying everything around us either. You won’t have to hold back.”

I frowned, “See, that’s what has me on edge. Why would we want to fight like that while going all out?”

Yawm narrowed an eye and widened the other, as if he was raising an eyebrow,

“To challenge one another, and for the thrill of it.”

I shook my head, “If I’m fighting, it’s for two reasons, to accomplish a goal or to learn. Otherwise it’s pointless.”

Yawm’s chest deflated, “I suppose our time is better spent on other tasks.”

I waved my hands, “Well I’m not saying we can’t, it’s just we have to spar with some goal in mind. I’ll give you an example. Is there any technique or style of fighting you’ve been meaning to practice lately?”

Yawm shook his head, “I rely on the cipher for most of my strength.”

I turned a hand to Yawm, “Then how about learning some primitive human combat? I’m sure you’ll enjoy it.”

Yawm cupped his chin,

“That does sound interesting. It’s always enjoyable to see other styles of fighting as well. Your world is in an interesting transition as well. Your society was just modern enough to apply science to your unarmed combat, yet undeveloped enough that you haven’t forgotten it altogether.”

I raised my hands, “Exactly. After we go through a few rounds of that, we can focus on your techniques.”

Yawm nodded as he lowered his hands, “I have wanted to share a few of the techniques I’ve learned over the years...I’ll do it.”

He spread out his hands, the air around us turning a shade of green.

“It will be more about growth rather than simply destroying one another. I can understand why you prefer this method of battle.”

Yawm clamped his hand together, streams of emerald energy pouring into his palm,

“I’ve much more used to chaotic styles of combat. I learned to fight against beasts that roamed my home world. After that, I mastered my own style from fighting in large scale battles of war. This seems much more small scale, if I’m understanding your reasoning correctly.”

The glowing pool of light in his hands condensed, turning into a brighter and brighter shade of green. After a few more moments, it turned white. It cracked and popped, compacting until the air around it hummed with an anarchic might. Yawm kept adding to the ball, until a tiny shade of red grew around its edges,

“No doubt you’ve never seen the creation of a dungeon core? Allow me to show you then.”

The energy collapsed into itself, creating a spiral of blood. A ring of white circled around the blood, the energy ring buzzing like a hornet’s nest. An eye opened at the center of the blood, and several tendrils of blood reached out. They formed limbs of all shapes and sizes, an amorphous ball of flesh. It was disgusting.

“First is the creation of an eldritch spawned from raw ambient mana.”

The energy ring shrunk like a chain collapsing onto the eldritch. Once the ring touched the eldritch’s skin, the white energy leaked into it. The aberration collapsed into another sphere of radiating power. This time, it was crimson with tiny tendrils fighting for an escape from its prison.

I shook my head, “The process isn’t very pretty, is it?”

Yawm shook his head, “Often times what is most effective is also the ugliest to see.”

Yawm lifted his hand, a fresh dungeon core created. Yawm siphoned mana into it, maintaining its vibrant light. I raised an eyebrow,

“So it requires mana to maintain that...thing?”

Yawm nodded, “It requires an exorbitant quantity, in fact. Most rifts sustain themselves off dimensional fabric disintegrating around them, at least in theory. I offer up the energy stored in atoms around us for the same purposes.”

I narrowed my eyes, “How are you maintaining the core that sustains the rift at the center of Springfield?”

Yawm lifted the core up, clasping his hand around it, “With several mana batteries.”

Whenever Torix and I first met, he mentioned mana batteries. It was when you harvested the mana from something and used it for a spell. In my case, it meant using my flesh and blood. Torix warned me against anyone who uses one. That meant people like Yawm. He slammed the dungeon core onto the ground of his observatory, interrupting my thoughts.

“I assure you, I would never use a sentient as a mana battery. I strictly use eldritch for the distasteful practice.”

Streaks of white cracked along the floor. This white glow spread outwards like a drop of ink bleeding into a page. That white coloration covered everything visible, as if we were floating in the middle of nothing.

A new ground materialized beneath us. Rocks formed, each color like lavender. Vegetation grew after, mushroom, moss, flowers, grass, and roots sprung from the ground. Pillars grew from the ground, each of them symmetrical and alike.

A few seconds passed and trees formed from the pillars, their bark black as charcoal. They branched out with flat, uniform branches, creating a clear line where the canopy started. The green leaves of the trees sprouted out with crystalline and geometric formations. The light bounced off them, creating blotches of rainbow. Yawm glanced around,

“Without Ajax, I cannot control where a core will take us. Some places are hellish fire pits not suited for life. This place, however, is like a forest of glass.”

I nodded, “It’s beautiful.”

A blue sky peaked out from between the leaves of trees. Yawm cupped his chin,

“This world’s atmosphere is blue...A rarity in eldritch worlds. It’s almost always red from my experience.”

I glanced around, finding creatures hiding between the trees. An elk stared at us. Well, it wasn’t really an elk per say. The fur of it was white and thick like a lion’s mane all

over its body. The horns of the creature looked like lavender glass. The hooves were the same. It would also be beautiful, if it wasn't for the large, toothy grin on its face and lack of eyes.

It ruined the aesthetic. Drool leaked from the gaping maw, sharp teeth glistening white like its fur.

Yawm raised a hand, "An interesting twist of biology."

The air around us turned green. Before Yawm could obliterate the beast, I charged forward. I weaved through the trees between us before reaching a few feet from the creature. It dashed towards me, angling its horns towards me. I stopped myself, my foot dragging through the ground.

Roots tore beneath my heel as I raised a palm. The creature floated upwards, its attack rendered mute by a lack of levity. I turned and grinned at Yawm, "Why kill it so quickly?"

Yawm's shoulders deflated, "Can you just let me blow things up, just once?"

I laughed a bit before jogging over towards him. After hopping over obsidian roots and lavender stones, I reached Yawm. The creepy ass elk squirmed around in the air, its cries growing shrill and loud. I pulled it between us. I leaned towards the creature before an eyelid formed over its face.

The horns of the creature shimmered, a blast of iridescent light clashing against us. As it did, my magic faltered. The elk landed onto the ground before charging towards Yawm. Yawm raised a hand, clasping his hand as it reached him. The horns crumbled against his might before he gripped the monster.

He pulled it towards him, staring at the monster's grin,

"Is this oddity suppose to incite fear in us?"

He pulped the monster with a light squeeze, the creature's skull crushing like a rotten tomatoe.

“It’s a laughable attempt at best.”

He lifted himself up before I raised a palm. The blood and guts of the creatures floated off him and our surroundings. I condensed it along with the corpse into a red ball. Yawm turned towards me,

“You know gravitational magics?”

I nodded my head before pulling the ball of red towards me. My helmet reformed, the malicious grin forming on it. The armor’s mouth opened up and swallowed the corpse in one bite. Yawm took a step back,

“By the name of Baldowah, what are you doing?”

I frowned, “Eating the eldritch.”

Yawm’s hands lowered, “You...you can...eat...the eldritch?”

I shrugged, “Yeah, it’s not that big a deal.”

Yawm shook his head before staring at the ground where the elk died. He grabbed his head with a mammoth hand,

“I...I’ve never seen something assimilate eldritch. Nothing, not even Old Ones.”

I peeled my armor off my face as I spread out my arms, “Come on, it’s nothing to make a big fuss over.”

Yawm shook his head while looking up from the ground. As he stood his full height, his head grazed the low lying leaves of the glass trees,

“Oh it is. No matter how benign they may seem, All eldritch carry what I call malignance. They are beings that hold no rhyme or reason. They infect life around them

and turn it into disorder. That is what makes eldritch beings worthy of fearing. It's their potential to corrupt."

Yawm pointed at me, "This...armor of yours. It's immune to that influence, otherwise you'd be a floundering ball of meat by now."

Yawm shook the hand for emphasis, "I've seen warriors that I fear fall to splashes of eldritch blood landing in their mouths and eyes. My entire goal revolves around creating a being that creates harmony between the order of our dimension and the chaos of theirs. You already have it."

I shook my head, "There's no harmony here. My armor doesn't use the eldritch energy as it is. It eats it. There's nothing of that eldritch remaining."

Yawm cupped his chin, "Ah...that's disappointing. It's not nearly as fascinating if your armor is converting eldritch energy rather than using eldritch energy...On another note of interest, you'd be considered an alpha predator to higher level, sentient eldritch. They may listen to you."

Beside Yawm, the dungeon core still sapped energy from Yawm.

I scratched my nose, "What makes you think that? All the eldritch I've tried talking with are backstabbing, egomaniacal pricks."

Yawm shrugged, "Even eldritch understand when they're no longer staring at a sheep. You've no doubt noticed that lower level eldritch will obey the rift keeper. That's because they fear being eaten. You can use that same kind of fear to control them."

Yawm raised a hand. The air around us cracked, turned green, and shifted into his hand. He placed the glowing, green energy ball above the dungeon core. A pillar of white exploded from the core, piercing into the ground and the sky. Once it reached a certain height, it rippled outwards. It looked like a normal dungeon core's pillar of energy.

"I've tried using higher level eldritch as allies. Even if I can obliterate them in a moment, they still won't listen to me. They may listen to you, given your unique situation. I'd think on it."

I looked at my armor. Technically it was meant to be the skin of an eldritch boss, even if it turned into dimensional fabric. Maybe having a few eldritch under my command would be nice. Besides, it wouldn't hurt to try. Alright, that's bullshit because it could hurt really, really badly, but it was worth a shot.

I wouldn't let Yawm know my thoughts about it, so I shrugged, "Eh, maybe one day."

Yawm walked away from the dungeon core, "No doubt you've attained several dungeon cores before. Whenever you take one, it transports you back to your world. This core is different. It lacks a fixed point on your old planet. I can return us home with it, but that's if you don't absorb the mana from it."

He rubbed his hands together, "So don't touch it. Are you ready for the fighting then?"

I walked away from the dungeon core,

"What kind of fighting?"

Yawm glanced up, "Ah yes, we never agreed on the kind of learning we would be focusing on."

We reached several hundred feet from dungeon core, a gentle wind blowing through the forest. I turned a palm towards Yawm, "I've been attempting to master some gravitational magic. If you'd like, I can fight with only that assisting my movements."

Yawm looked down and nodded, "I'm rather rusty on my hand to hand combat regardless."

He leaned towards me, his hands opening up beside him. He looked like he was going to dash and claw at me. I raised my hands in my normal stance.

"That's an interesting stance you've taken. Is it to guard your head from damage?"

I shook my head, "It's more about keeping my strikes grounded. That's been my biggest problem since I've gotten...heavier I guess."

It was at this point that I noticed just how enormous Yawm was. He was over a head taller than me. His hands were large even for his oversized frame, making his fists bigger than my head. His shoulders were broad, and the muscles under his skin looked ready to tear my arms off.

Yawm opened and closed his hands, an eagerness in his voice,

“Are you ready then, Harbinger?”

I closed my eyes and gulped. It was cliché, but it couldn't be helped. I was about to get my ass kicked.

“I'm as ready as I'll ever be.”

Yawm leaned towards the ground. The air sounded like it was breaking before green surrounded us. It coalesced onto Yawm as he growled,

“Let's start slow then, shall we?”

Chapter 120: Eyes of Old

Yawm dashed towards me, the ground cracking beneath him. I shouted, “Remember, we're fighting to learn.”

He reached me as I flared my runes. He swatted the back of his hand towards me. It was a wild, unrestrained strike. I bent backwards, the tip of his finger snapping across my armor. He slashed his other hand, a joyful glee in the act. I took another step backwards, my feet sliding as his strike slipped just past my nose.

As his hand pulled backwards, I charged towards him, countering him with a right straight. I struck him with a telekinetic bullet from the punch. It did nothing as the kinetic force dispersed. Yawm laughed,

“Excellent. You're far more nimble than I imagined you'd be.”

I grinned, "Being able to overpower your enemies is no excuse for being sloppy."

He raised an eyebrow, "An interesting point of view. I thought you enjoyed playing with food?"

I slammed my fists together, "That's when I know I'll win."

"Hah! It's good to see I've garnered a measurable respect in another warrior's eyes."

I activated my new skill, Gravitational Celerity. It used both gravity and antigravity to enhance my movements. I'd never used in combat, so now was the perfect time.

Yawm dashed towards me again, his speed blistering. He struck out with another wide slash. I drilled a left straight into his jaw, interrupting the move. His foot pierced through the ground as he took a step back. I stepped forward, firing two more sharp, compact strikes into his jaw. He lashed out with his left arm.

I ducked under the strike by sinking into the ground as I leaned towards his arm. It passed over my head as I slammed a cracking left hook into his torso. With my telekinetic fields extending my grip, my attack sent him flying away.

He tumbled across the ground, his enormous frame decimating the trees in his way like toothpicks. He rolled back to his feet. He clapped his hands,

"Your well versed in this style of combat. Are you certain you need practice in it?"

I smirked, "It seems like you could use some practice at the very least."

He laughed before dashing towards me. He reached me like a flash, his pace increasing. He ripped out three rapid slices with his hands. I shifted between the strikes, slowing them with fields of gravity that pulled against his attacks. Yawm needed a grip for his feet at that point. Knowing this, I put my foot under his.

I jerked my foot sideways, throwing his center of gravity off. He fell sideways. I dashed forward, my balance shifting on my feet. With an overhand right, I slammed my fist

into his face, pressing him into the ground. A crater formed beneath us before I dashed away. Yawm grabbed for where I was.

As his hand pulled back, I returned with a stomp onto his face. The crater beneath us both deepened. He grabbed for me again, his pace even faster. As he sped up, I minimized my dodges further. Even if I was slower, my techniques were sharper, closing the obvious gap between us.

I lifted my foot for yet another stomp. He bent his neck sideways, my foot puncturing into the dirt beneath him. A root from beneath him wrapped around my foot and pulled me deeper. Yawm stood up while wiping dirt off his shoulders,

“You’re much better than I imagined you’d be. It’s insulting that I’m moving faster yet you’re still dominating our exchanges. I cannot laud this enough. How will you handle this?”

Yawm sliced a quick hook towards my face. I let myself sink into the dirt, dodging his attack. Once under the ground, I reached up and grabbed Yawm’s foot. I dragged him into the dirt, making him slam against a roots of trees. I walked out of the ground, slinging Yawm with a single hand, the earth exploding from his rise.

I swung him around. Yawm’s enormous frame tore the trees apart like a boulder crushing matchsticks. I released him before he tumbled across the ground and regained his footing.

As he stood, he shook off dirt,

“I prefer this kind of sparring. I enjoy how humbling it is. In its own way, I find it motivating. Let’s see if I can catch up to your own prowess, given time.”

Once again he dashed towards me. I charged him, each of us weaving through the trunks of trees. Once we reached each other, Yawm slowed his assault. He reached out with another swipe of his right hand, this one sharper and more restrained. While it lacked the raw power of his old attack, it made him far less vulnerable to a counter.

Still, it wasn’t enough. His swipe scraped against my shoulder as I leaned away from his attack. Molding my armor, I diverted his right hand upwards. I amplified this

deflection with a stream of gravity, redirecting his hand upwards. Sparks floated off my armor before I whipped in another attack onto his side.

I held back my full power, letting him keep close this time. It was so that I could dish out more damage and get some practice with my gravity magic. He stayed close, his swipes turning denser and more compact. Within a few hours, he no longer lashed out. His swipes were like an amateur's that had tremendous talent.

He finally nailed me with a clean strike after I stomped on a root. When it did land, I bunched myself up, making the impact disperse into my legs. Since I was so grounded, Yawm shoved himself back, throwing himself off balance. He stumbled backwards as I charged him. I stepped on his front foot, making him fall back.

As he fell, I lifted my other foot. I stomped his chest, forcing him against the ground. Throughout my movements, gravity flowed like a liquid to help me move. It was like swimming in currents that pushed me forward and pulled him back. For some reason, using all the skills together just clicked at that moment.

As a crater formed beneath Yawm, a ringing echo spreading through the glass forest. A notification appeared in the side of my vision that explained the sudden ease in using gravity.

Unique Skill gained! You've fused the skills Antigravity, Antigravitational Shift, Gravitational Celerity, Antigravity Vortex, and Resourceful into Gravitational Flux. Half of unearned points rewarded for the creation of a unique skill. +205 Tree Points.

Gravity Flux(lvl 1) – By mastering gravity, you move in an ever changing liquid of it. By creating streams of gravity, you reinforce yourself and destabilized enemies. +1% to power of gravity magic on movement.

After landing the attack, I moved my foot off of Yawm's chest. After this fight, I'd need to check out my trees and work on them. I've been so busy learning the cipher and fighting Yawm that I hadn't been keeping up to date on them. Considering what I was up against, that wasn't the smartest idea.

I needed to handle Yawm first. I offered him a hand. He grabbed it and pulled himself up,

“And after I finally land a strike against you, it plays in your favor rather than my own. Would you mind explaining for me?”

I shrugged, “You’ll need to ground yourself more when fighting someone who matches you evenly. Otherwise the more stable fighter will absorb your shots and counter immediately. That’s assuming they’re able to take a hit.”

Yawm nodded, “Interesting. I’ve also noticed my own attacks feel...off. Is there a reason for that?”

“Gravity.”

Yawm nodded, “Hmmm...Controlling gravity to throw your opponent off balance and enhance your own techniques. It’s no wonder why you needed us to fight so slowly. Otherwise you’d never get the practice you needed to master such an advanced technique.”

“That’s exactly it.” I opened a hand to him, “You improved since we started too. You were leaving yourself wide open before. Now your hits are more composed. If anything, I’m wondering where you learned to fight like that.”

Yawm glanced up, staring at the light reflecting off the leaves of the trees,

“It could have to do with the competition I’ve been fighting. During warfare, I fought thousands of weaklings. They couldn’t hope to counter or parry my strikes, so I focused on hitting with more power rather than precision. Against a foe that is my equal in skill, well, you’ve already exposed my style of fighting.”

I shrugged, “Then it’s good that you’re getting back in fighting shape.”

Yawm nodded, glancing back down at me, “Indeed it is. Would you mind us continuing at a faster pace? At our current speed, I believe our fights are too unrealistic for actual use.”

I nodded, “Uh, sure.”

Yawm cracked the fingers in his hands, "If anything, exercising my skill is far more difficult when moving in slow motion."

A bit of cold sweat fell down my forehead, "Yeah, slow motion."

Yawm took a few steps backwards before leaning over, "Come now, let's fight with a more visceral touch."

I raised a finger, "Wait one second. I need to check something out on my status."

Yawm sighed, "Then I'll wait until you finish."

I thanked him before opening up my tree menu. I remembered speccing into Immense, which reminded me why I hadn't checked out my trees. It required 2,500 points for completion, and I only had put one point into it. With 360 tree points lying around, I poured them into the tree and closed my menu. So much for a power boost before Yawm put his big boy pants on.

Speaking of Yawm, I glanced back up at him. His hand rested against a tree as he closed his eyes. He listened to it, discovering secrets about this world. I couldn't help but be curious about what a tree might say. Still, I wanted to get this over with eventually, so I interrupted him,

"Yawm, I'm finished."

Yawm glanced up, his glowing green eyes pulsing. He turned towards me,

"Did you know that the weather of this world is dictated by location rather than time?"

I frowned, "What does that even mean?"

Yawm raised his hands,

"The weather is always like this at this location. It never rains or turns to night here. The only reason there is life here is because we are near an area with eternal rain. If we

teleported another fifty miles away from the rain, there would only be a windy, hateful dessert. If we teleported fifty miles towards the rain, we would be in a vast ocean and endless storm.”

Yawm spread out his hands, “We teleported to the most peaceful place on this planet. Imagine that.”

I looked at the ground, seeing the intertwined roots in the dark soil, “Damn. What a weird world.” I set myself into my normal fighting stance while looking up at him, “You ready?”

Yawm leaned over, “Always.”

Right before our second session started, I activated every tool at my disposal. My legendary skill, Force of Nature was rearing at full force. My telekinesis extended my footing. I grounded myself with Gravitational Flux. I extended my perception with Tactile Cognition. I extended outwards with Event Horizon, clustering it over Yawm.

Even with all my precautions, Yawm’s speed and power was unreasonable. He made contact using the same wide strikes that he started with. I couldn’t move fast enough to keep up. His right hand was coming at my side, but I moved like I was underwater when compared with him.

His enormous, clubbing hand slammed against my side. The impact left my ears and eyes ringing from sheer whiplash as I crashed through a dozen trees. Yawm dashed towards me again before I could become stable. Once more, he struck out before I could react to what I was seeing.

His wide strikes didn’t seem so wide anymore. All the openings that were present before evaporated under the might of his raw speed. Yawm didn’t need technique to make his fighting function. He just needed to reach out his hand faster than the opponent could dodge. His strength would handle the rest.

After tanking a few more slicing strikes, I fumbled across the ground enough to dive into the earth. Under the soil, I had a few seconds to think. I perceived Yawm just fine. I needed some boost in movement in order to keep up and apply my superior hand to hand skills. If I could do that, his speed would work against him as I countered each of his wild lashes.

An idea popped in my head as the earth above me disintegrated. A moment later, a hand grabbed my leg and slung me into the air. As I flopped through the air, I pumped mana into my new unique skill, Gravity Flux. The streams of force enhanced, becoming strong, jerking forces. I kept adding extra mana before Yawm clashed against me.

Another rippling echo shot out before he slung me towards the ground. Even with all the power behind his attacks, my health hadn't even dented. My regeneration was too strong. Still, I needed to up the ante, otherwise Yawm would start questioning my own power.

So instead of slamming into the ground, I dived into it. After digging several feet into the ground, I turned myself around as I faced the sky. I channeled mana until I was no longer regenerating health. An ocean of mana poured into the gravitational streams, creating a dense aura around me.

The dirt disintegrated above me once more. A rippling echo shot out above me before Yawm sliced towards me. With my skill strained to its limits, I reacted once more. I moved fast enough to retaliate. I ducked sideways, the streams disrupting his own attack. With a counter right, I slammed my fist into his face.

The ground beneath me crumbled in an enormous circle. It was from my telekinetic grip extending my footing. The sound cracked nearby leaves before Yawm was sent flying. He shot into the air before I dashed where he was bound to fall. Before he did, the air near him turned green.

Sparks shot through the air before Yawm laughed, "You're mana pours out like a never ending fountain. Allow me to match it."

I dispersed my weight outwards using Overwhelming Presence. I shot sideways as Yawm reached out a hand. I reached a tree before diving back into the ground. Above me, the tree boiled into a liquid before evaporating. With a stomp of my foot, I reversed my trajectory. Once more, the trees nearby melted into a liquid before evaporating.

I couldn't even tell what he was doing, but there was no way I wanted it to touch me. I dashed and weaved between each of his attacks. As he clashed into the ground, he ran out of stored mana before I dashed towards him.

Using Event Horizon, I gained a bit more mana for my enhanced movements. We collided, each of us ducking and weaving around the other. With brutality, he used pure speed and strength to match my superior technique. As we moved fast, my vision blurred. Instead I used my sense for gravity to sense Yawm and my movements.

As I reached out with the sense, I found something on both our backs. As I realized this, Yawm roared out in rage for some reason. He shot out a punch towards my gut. It pierced my stomach, his fist reaching out with my spine. A shockwave ebbed behind us, trees blowing away as the excess force dispersed behind me.

Yawm shook his head before pulling his arm out of my gut. He took a step back, staring at his hands, one of them coated in silver blood. He glanced up at me, confusion riddled over his strange face,

“What’s going on? Why did I become so angry?”

I played off the damn hole in my chest like it was nothing as I gurgled on my own blood,

“I don’t know, but if you could reign that shit in, that’d be great.”

Yawm slung his right arm, slinging the silver blood off of it,

“I...I don’t know what came over me.”

As my chest healed, I walked over towards him, “I might. Before that though-”

The first thing I did was punch Yawm. He was still left standing, but he rubbed his cheek, “I will relent about this...I deserved that.”

I nodded, “Hell yeah you did. Anyways, there’s something on your back.” I walked behind him, seeing nothing. I moved my hand where I sensed the gravitational fluctuation. There was no resistance, like it was normal air. I pulled back my helmet before inspecting closer.

Besides for cracks of vibrant, pulsing energy flowing down his back, there wasn't anything off about Yawm. I leaned back and scratched the side of my head.

"This is odd."

Yawm reached around, scraping his back with a massive hand,

"Is it a terrestrial parasite or something like it?"

I shook my head, "I don't know what it is. If anything, I can hardly even tell it exists."

I stared at it for a moment before raising a hand and creating a dense gravity well on the invisible thing. The theory was that if it could influence our gravity here, our gravity could influence it over there. Yenko, wherever there was.

All I needed was enough of a pull that it responded. As I increased the pull, Yawm turned his head towards me,

"What exactly are you doing?"

"Trying to capture this thing, whatever it is."

Yawm grumbled, "Not one for explaining yourself, are you?"

I waved away his concern, "Not until after I'm finished."

I kept pouring more and more mana into the gravity well. Once the consumption eclipsed my mana generation, Yawm braced himself onto the ground. At that point, I felt the pull of the well too, so I clasped my hand, condensing it. I grit my teeth as I balled the gravity well into a small point before a shrill scream rang out.

It was a sound that sent a chill up my spine and made me grab my ears. Yawm turned around towards me as the well dissipated, "What kind of alien sound is that?"

I shook my head, bracing myself against the sound, “I don’t know. It isn’t me though.”

Yawm frowned before turning around again. Along Yawm’s back, a tiny, red tendril had appeared about six inches off his back. It was writhing around, trying to grip onto him. Once it did, it shivered before settling down.

“What exactly is that?”

I frowned, “It looks like a creepy ass tentacle that’s grabbing onto you.”

Yawm lifted his hands, “Harbinger, I may put up a convincing mask of calm, but that isn’t quite the case. In fact, the longer this situation drifts on, the more unsettled I’m becoming. The idea of an alien parasite infesting me is disconcerting to say the least.”

I nodded, “I know, I know. Now be quiet so I can fix whatever the hell this is.”

Yawm’s hands flopped against his sides before I created another well of gravity. Once it ramped back up, the screaming started once more. Since I was ready, I already covered my ears with my armor. I only felt the vibrations of it. That’s when I saw it.

As I kept the steady pull on the well, other tentacles came out of the center of gravity. They shifted around, squirming around before attaching themselves too Yawm. As more and more of them attached to him, he shivered. Yawm turned towards me, his eyes opening wide. A second later, he turned back around and placed his hands over his eyes.

It looked like he was mumbling something to himself. I laughed a bit at the all powerful overlord being squeamish. The cluster of tentacles grew along his back, taking up three quarters of its surface. In a rippling spark, an eye popped out of the gravity well. It was yellow with a vertical iris. It opened wide, glancing around with a feverish concern.

The entire thing latched itself to Yawm’s back, gripping him before he turned towards the creature. The giant, yellow eye locked gazes with Yawm. They held their glance for a second before Yawm ran forward, panicking,

“Get this monstrosity the fuck off me.”

He reached behind him, the monster squirming away from his grip several times. Yawm ran in circles as he tried gripping the creature. He jumped against the ground, rolling over roots before jumping back up and rubbing his back against a tree.

I busted out laughing. It was a long, loud laugh, and after a minute or two, a few tears were streaming down my eyes. I wiped them away before walking up to Yawm. He had finally calmed down, his breathing deep and controlled now. He turned towards me, and an awkward silence passed over us.

“I ask of you to never speak of this with anyone.”

I laughed at him, “Don’t worry. I won’t tell them that the world eater is scared of a giant octopus.”

Yawm raised a hand at me, “It’s not fear...it’s just, ahem, concern.”

I rolled my eyes, “Yeah, sureeeeeee.”

He turned his back to me and sighed. I grabbed the weird, writhing creature on his back and pulled. It took a solid effort before I finally got the thing off him. I placed it onto the ground as Yawm and I stared at it. It was a misshapen lump of moving parts, a creature that should not be. Yawm shivered,

“That was on me...”

I nodded, “Yup, it’s been on you for a while it looks like.”

Yawm lifted his hands and placed a two fingertips onto each side of face,

“Keep composed, Yawm. Keep composed.”

I chuckled at him again before analyzing the creature. A cold, sinking feeling spread through my gut as I read the message of what the monster was. It was like my stomach was turning to ice.

Baldowah's Wrath(lvl 5,000) – This is a creature that follows the Old One Baldowah's bidding. It is nigh undetectable, latching onto creatures across parallel dimensions. It siphons feelings of wrage, hate, and anger into its victims. These feelings can result in sudden outbursts of rage.

Baldowah will use these parasites to destabilize the mental state of sentients over time. They operate much like a disease that whittles away at the mind of whoever is infected with them. Considering how difficult their detection is, it's often too late to save their victims by the time someone finds the creature on them.

This is why their threat level is considered so high. They can decimate creatures of untold strength, given enough time to do their malignant work. Baldowah uses them to eliminate threats it deems worth killing. Usually it's reserved for beings that are breaking the laws of a given universe. In this case, that being was Yawm.

You would do well to kill this monster given the chance before it finds another victim.

I looked up at Yawm who stared back at me,

“Well, what in Baldowah's name is it then? Surely Schema gave an analysis of it?”

I frowned, “I don't know if you're going to like what I'm about to tell you.”