

29 A Boundless Storm

Torix peered at Kessiah, his gaze dark and menacing, "Are you certain you're willing to garner enjoyment at my expense? I gave you knowledge of this place for your expertise, but if you are unwilling to help us-" Torix's eyes flared dark, "I am more than willing to dismiss you."

Muscles in Kessiah's neck rippled, "Hey now, you know that's a bad idea. Calm down, and let's talk."

Torix crossed his arms, "Of what, exactly?"

Kessiah spoke to Torix while pointing at me, "Does he know about his friends?"

I raised an eyebrow, "You mean Michael and Kelsey, right? What about them?"

Kessiah propped her weight onto one leg, jutting a hip out, "Oh ho, this is too good. Go ahead and tell him, Torix."

The lich turned to her, his eyes flaring while clasping his hands around his robe. Torix simmered, "You're detestable, you know that?"

Kessiah put her hands on her hips, "Only when I'm dealing with you. Now tell him."

Curiosity spread over my face, and I waited on Torix. The necromancer turned towards me, and he coughed into a hand, "Ahem...Well...I do have something to unveil to you...Of that, there is no doubt."

I tapped my side, "Alright. Cool. What is it?"

Torix took a breath, "I...There are factors I know of...And they may change this situation ever so slightly."

I crossed my arms, "Like what?"

Torix raised his palms, "Hm...How to put this."

Kessiah glared at Torix. The remnant snapped, "Say it."

Torix reached out a hand, "Ah...Your friends. I know where they are."

My eyes widened, "You do?"

Torix sighed, "I...Yes."

I spread out my hands, "Are they safe?"

Torix leaned back, "What? Of course they are. I needed them for collateral. At the time, that is."

Kessiah smiled at Torix, talking to him, "There's the lizard man in you coming out. Cold. Emotionless. How's that make you feel, Daniel? Used? Exploited? Maybe *humiliated?*"

Torix gave me a look of apprehension, and the necromancer fiddled with his hands. Kessiah leaned forward, expecting some kind of outburst. Instead, I clenched my hands into fists while yelling,

"Hell yes. They're alive." I swung my arm down, celebrating like I won a boxing match, "That's what I'm talking about. Alright." I smiled at Torix, "Thank you."

Kessiah's smile withered into a deep frown. No, more like a grimace. She blinked, "You're not mad? Not even a little?"

I grimaced back, "What? No. Of course not. Why would I be mad?"

Kessiah's arms flopped onto her side, "Oh come on. Torix, your supposed 'master' and teacher, has known where your friends are, but he hid them from you so that he could run his experiments. On you. For his gain. Maddening, right?"

I shrugged, "I mean, what was I supposed to expect? Hell, I'm grateful he kept them alive at all."

Torix pulled his shoulders back, standing taller, "Really? You've taken no offense?"

I shook my head, "Nope. Not at all."

Torix froze for a second before putting his hands on his hips, "Hah...Well then, you heard him. He's utterly fine with his current position. Of course he would be. I've treated him fairly. That being said, I don't know if we really must follow through with this test of ours. There's really no need for us to take on such a risk without due cause."

Kessiah turned to Torix, "Wait...You're telling me you got cold feet? You of all people? The lizard man?"

Torix raised his palms, "I'd never. I'm simply rethinking the pros and cons of the decision. I'd really rather not have to make another body."

Kessiah's nose wrinkled in disgust, "I paid good money to warp here, and I'll have to wait for you to warp me back too. You're telling me that after I came all this way, you're just going to bail at the last minute? After I arrive?"

Torix gestured to the runes, "There is still plenty to see here. Why wouldn't you spend time studying all of this?"

Kessiah spread out her hands, "I came all this way to see a tear in dimensions. By Schema, I'm going to find one, whether you want me to or not."

Torix rubbed his temples, "It's just so unnecessary, and besides that, we need to destroy this place soon. Yawm of Flesh has arrived, and he'll want these runes. I'd rather he not have them."

Kessiah fumed, "You're going to destroy this place? I'm not even going to get to study the runes, huh?"

I turned a palm to Torix while saying, "Woah now, this is your last chance to see what your son's final work was all about. Why are you throwing that away?"

Torix raised his hands, "It's simply not worth the risk."

Kessiah tilted her head at Torix, her posture changing. As if sniffing something out, Kessiah walked up and stated, "It looks to me like you found a replacement for Alfred."

Tension mounted as silence cloaked us. Torix's words oozed from him like a thick poison, "What did you just accuse me of?"

Kessiah stopped moving for a bit, but she pushed through and pointed a finger at Torix, "You heard me. You're trying to replace Alfred."

Torix's mana trembled over his frame, "No one, and I repeat, no one, will ever replace Alfred. Daniel is simply my disciple, and I don't wish to throw his life away over nothing. It is that simple."

The quiet thickened until its presence suffocated us. Forcing myself through that palpable veil, I walked up and put a hand on Torix's shoulder, "Hey man...I want to thank you, but I'm fine with us running the ritual once."

Torix's anger dampened somewhat, "You are? Would you mind explaining why, perhaps?"

I lowered my hand and shrugged, "That was our deal. Disciple or not, I'm sticking with what I said I'd do."

Kessiah clapped her hands, "You heard him. Let's get this show on the road."

Torix peered down at me, "I know we outlevel, but know that you shouldn't feel forced to do this."

I cracked my neck, "I know. It's my choice."

Torix gave me a slow nod. He murmured, "Hm...Respectable. We'll do as you wish."

Another silence lingered. Althea lifted a hand while saying, "So...Uhm, hey guys. I just wanted you to all know I'm here."

We all turned to her before Torix and I laughed a little. Kessiah turned towards the runes, and she pulled out dozens of multicolored mana crystals from her starry portal. Kessiah grumbled, "Guys, this isn't going to happen if we don't make it happen."

Torix pulled mana stones from his own storage, and the necromancer flicked them about, "Indeed. Daniel, go wait for us to finish. Althea, you may wish to leave BloodHollow in case the situation goes awry. I can't guarantee your safety any other way."

Althea pointed a finger gun at Torix, "You got it, chief. I'll head out before the ritual starts."

Once we finished talking, I sat down in the colosseum's center and checked out a rain of notifications. They didn't disappoint.

Unique skill unlocked! | Requirement: Defeat a monster with less than 5% health remaining | Blitz, Ferocity, Desperation, Death's Dance, and Scorn fuse into a single skill | Tireless Berserker | Half of points below one hundred in each skill are rewarded from skill fusion.

Unique skill unlocked! | Requirement: Defeat a boss monster alone | Fuses Deflection, Calm, Patience, Countering, and Dominion of the Mind into a single skill | Tranquil Duelist | Half of points below one hundred in each skill are rewarded from skill fusion.

Mythical skill unlocked! Fuses the three unique skills, Lumbering Brute, Savage Berserker, and Tranquil Duelist into a single skill | Boundless Storm | Half of points below one hundred in each skill are rewarded from skill fusion.

I lifted my hands, having another little celebration to myself. An absolute rain of free skill points came crashing down. The absolute explosion resulted from creating and fusing multiple skills. All this time, I developed all these skills for my fighting style, working them together. Whether by accident or not, challenging myself pulled them all together. The rewards proved palpable in turn.

Boundless Storm(lvl 1) - When you battle, you are a force to be reckoned with. You are a boundless storm. This skill improves hand to hand combat, reaction times, deflection, countering, and your overall ability when at low health. It also augments control of emotion and the stats they augment. Effects increase with skill level.

It even carried a different color compared with normal skills. Chills ran up my spine just thinking of using the skill. It culminated with the other unique skills I gained, giving me over four hundred treepoints from the fight. In fact, with all my skill points saved up over the past few weeks plus this fusion, I owned 521 skillpoints, enough for Obliterator. I funneled points into the tree and gawked at its glory.

In the waste of your wake, you may expunge entire planets like a plague. You may also become a plague for monsters, for beasts of other worlds. What they conquer, you may reap. When they strive, you shall end.

+3 attribute points per 5 levels. Effect is retroactive for all levels before 100.

| Note - Total increase is +3 attribute points per 5 levels | Example - In ten levels, you will gain sixteen points instead of ten.

In your path, many will stand beyond you. They will lurk in shadows, wishing for your demise, for the shadow you cast is long and wide. They live in it, inevitably drench themselves in it. That shade is a wake of nothing, a path of annihilation, a desolate land.

And you leave it by breath alone, for are an obliterator.

+100% experience gained from riftkeepers and unknowns.

+4 attribute points per 5 levels. Effect is retroactive for all levels before 100.

| Note - Total increase is +4 attribute points per 5 levels | Example - In ten levels, you will gain eighteen points instead of ten.

I smiled at my screen, the attribute points pouring in. Crossing my fingers, I hoped it was enough for charisma. I put six points into luck, reaching the level thirty I needed for the leveling perk. My armor's charisma reduction meant twenty eight points filed in before I hit thirty.

Anyway, I had six other points, so I put them into endurance. I waved my fingers while selecting the perks from there.

[Miraculous(Luck 25 or more) - Your luck is incredible. 1/10th of luck added to Charisma. Circumstances will more likely guide you towards your goals. Sometimes, you'll ask just the right questions, learn just what you need to know, and do just what you need to during a crisis.]

[Opportunity Untold(Luck 30 or more) - Your luck is unexplainable. Gives additional money found, odds in your favor, and chance of rare event for every level gained. Every point in luck gives an additional three points in mana, health, and stamina. Another 1/10th of your luck is added to charisma. You gain one revival after death. Use it wisely.]

[Well-Worded(Charisma 10 or more) - Your charisma is good. Doubles haggling ability.]

[Convincing(Charisma 15 or more) - Your charisma is admirable. Doubles persuasiveness.]

[Charming(Charisma 20 or more) - Your charisma is amazing. Doubles likability. Charisma let's you open up more in conversation, making you more genuine and authentic.]

[Compelling(Charisma 25 or more) - Your charisma is incredible. Your words have weight to them, making others think of what you've said after you've spoken them. Your voice and tone when speaking grows easier to listen to from additional points of charisma.]

[Undeniable(Charisma 30 or more) - Your presence is a power all to itself. Doubles the growth and effects of speech related skills. Gives additional likeability, persuasion, haggling, and charm per level. Doubles mana consumption.]

I selected the perks, using all my leftover dungeon cores before I basked in the shining sun that was a power spike. For a while, I stagnated, trying to grind out all these stats and perks. I preferred going out and exploring. With leveling back on the menu, I aimed to partake in its grandeur.

Peering at my hands, nothing really changed about me. I raised my brow, kind of disappointed by the lack of sensation from the change. Luck and charisma carried subtler effects than strength or willpower, but maybe they'd manifest in time. Even thinking to myself, I enjoyed my thoughts more. It was a pleasant hum in my head now.

Heh, that makes me sound crazy, doesn't it?

Maybe I was. Regardless, I justified those thoughts with my new charisma. I affected myself with my newfound, better voice. Taking a moment, I opened my screens and inspected the impacts.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Character Screen

Health - 3,095/3,095 | Health Regen - 600/min | Stamina - 1,269/1,269 | Stamina Regeneration - 32/sec | Damage Resistance - 97% | Mental Resistance - 97% | Physical Power - (+)353% | Damage Increase - 5% | Evolution: 1.56 Million/16.00 Million

Aura - Oppression | Current Damage: (8,000 + 25% of your health)/minute within a 150ft radius.

Level 105 | Attribute Menu

Strength [30] | Constitution [36.3] | Endurance [60] | Dexterity [30] | Willpower [33] | Intelligence [30.5] | Charisma [35.2] | Luck [30] | Perception [30]

All these bonuses culminated in a massive increase to my effective fighting power. Even better, leveling came back into the picture. Extra stats and abilities gushed in from each level up, and the extra attributes guaranteed smooth progression from here on out. Peering at my next few trees, I inspected their effects.

[II Vicious(Beat an enemy 40 levels higher than you in combat lasting over an hour, Death's Dance, Scorn, and Desperation over level 25)(0/50)]

[III Fighter(Kill an enemy 40 levels over you)(0/50)]

[Genesis of Potential(Be the first of your species to clear an extreme priority dungeon, to clear 15 total dungeons, and to create a mythical skill)(0/1000)]

I selected Genesis of Potential. The bonuses from Obliterator outdid every other tree outside of the Determinator line, which I wasn't supposed to have access to anyways. Besides that, the large trees gave me enormous, life changing bonuses. The incremental gains from small trees may add up, but they never gave me something similar to Obliterator.

Having eleven points left, and they piled into Genesis of Potential. Of course, I gained nothing from it yet. With that handled, I glanced back up from my status screen. It was like re-entering the world. Torix and Kessiah already left, both of them casting different spells for remodeling the fractured rock. All the spears, collisions, and fighting resulted in a litany of scars tracing stone around us.

Over the last few minutes of me reading over my status updates, the two of them already filled in almost every missing glyph. They stared at status screens for that purpose, screenshots from Torix and recreation spells assisting their efforts. Despite their conflicting natures, the two worked together like the gears of a machine. They spoke little and gestured less, glances being more than enough most of the time.

Each one of them filled in the gaps for each other. Torix's attention to detail let him smooth over the lightning quick yet reasonable quality from Kessiah's incantations. The succinct and smooth coordination told a story about how long they knew each other. They avoided each other for so long, yet after meeting back up, they picked right back where they left off. It was like nothing ever happened.

I hoped the same for my friends and I.

When I stood up, Kessiah turned to me and said with a sinister smile, "You look different. What changed?"

I shrugged as I said, "I finished a tree."

Torix turned to me, "Ah yes, trees. It has been quite some time since I've unlocked one, and my skill points have piled up because of it. What tree is it, if you don't mind my asking?"

I peered at my status, "It's Genesis of Potential now. I was working on Obliterator."

Torix moved his hand over the rock, "Never heard of it."

Kessiah tapped her side, "Obliterator, huh?"

I rolled my shoulders, "Yeah, I maxed out my leveling perks just now. I've finally gotten to where you guys are at. The slow grind."

Torix stuck out a hand, formed a dark sphere, and stepped on it, "It's less that we're losing in levels and more so we're focusing our efforts on skills rather than levels. It's a different focal point of progression within Schema's system, though no less important than levels themselves."

Kessiah gave me a strange look before running up and leaping towards me, "That's what mister low level over there says. Levels are power, especially for people who tri-spec." She turned to Torix, "You'd know if you had the balls for it."

Torix floated over, "Just as you know how to fight at full force for more than fifteen minutes. Despite that, I haven't seen that take place in decades. Besides, why should I fight when I can just summon armies to do it for me?"

Kessiah rolled her eyes, "Really now? Hey, Daniel. You wanna know why Torix over here didn't spec into perception?"

Torix waved his arms, "I hardly think telling him that is necessary-"

Kessiah pretended to hold a book, "When your perception gets so high, you don't have to read anymore. You can just look at a book and absorb the knowledge on the pages. Sorting that knowledge is all you have to do. This bag of bones here likes reading, so he didn't spec into perception. Psh, talk about efficiency."

Torix stammered, "I-I needed the charisma for leading armies."

Kessiah gestured at the walls, "Yeah, but these runes are well outside your grasp, aren't they? I never understood that reluctance for investing in perception."

I weighed my hands back and forth, "Eh, I think I understand why he did it."

Torix's eyes flared, "Do you really? Explain."

I raised a hand, "It's like putting cheat codes in games. They make playing the game so easy, it becomes pointless. Where's the enjoyment in that? To conquer, and the journey of doing so, is over half the fun."

Torix raised his hands, "Now, I wish for you to take note, Kessiah. A being under twenty years of age can understand why I acted as I have, yet a remnant I've known for decades can't?" Torix slapped his side, "Kessiah, your ignorance is truly something to marvel at. Tis a miracle. Have you been awarded for it yet?"

Kessiah reached beside me and brushed him off with her hand, "Uh huh, and who has the higher level again? That's right, me." She flexed an arm, blowing it a kiss, "And don't you forget it." Kessiah leaned onto my shoulder, crossing her arms, "Besides all that, I can't believe how damn well this ritual was made. Without those previous scans, I'd never be able to remake these runes."

Torix sneered, "It is quite unfortunate, but I am at a loss as well. These are simply beyond me."

I peered at the images, "They're bizarre, but it makes sense why. There's layers of talent here. Here, there's a precise and delicately carved incantation, created by two prodigies, each masters of different magics. The more I look at it, the more I know it's more than just a simple spell."

I gave Torix a knowing look, "This is Alfred's legacy, the son of an archlich."

Torix replied with his chest puffed and his hands on his hips, "But of course. My son was a master sorcerer trapped by a powerful Ruhl. Do you see the armor that Daniel wears? Disciple, show Kessiah what it does, and tell her Alfred's story as we finish."

And I told the tale, embroidering Alfred's heroic sacrifice. In all honesty, doing so took almost no effort. I mean, the guy tore his soul apart to stop an evil hivemind. That's the stuff of legends, or in my case, where mine started.

Heh, at least I hoped so.

Regardless, Althea listened as I talked. Torix formed several fluffy, dark energy chairs for us to move around in. The transport eased the talk, making it casual and easy. By the time I finished telling Kessiah the story about the armor, Kessiah leaned over the edge of her seat. The remnant mouthed,

"Torix, you've been holding out on me. Why didn't you mention all of this?"

Torix worked with diligence, "It wasn't necessary, and Daniel can recite the story better than I can."

Kessiah smirked at Torix. She sneered, "Hell, I might've showed up on time if I'd heard about all this."

Torix stopped for a second, "You didn't show up on time when I needed your help finding my son. Why would I mention his death when you didn't care while he lived?"

Althea and I winced as a painful, awkward tension passed over the group. Kessiah glanced over at a rock, "Ahh...Yeah...About that...Sorry."

Torix sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose, "It wouldn't have mattered. Finding Alfred inside a dungeon that's transported...It would have been impossible. Just...Just help me with this ritual, and I won't mention it again."

Kessiah smiled, more reserved than before, "Yeah...Sounds good. I won't let you down...Not again at least."

The remnant and lich shared an obvious history, but I kept my curiosity at bay. Asking right now would be pouring gas on fire, and I didn't want to get burned. Torix pulled out his massive book from under his robe. He turned to me,

"It's time to tear apart dimensions."

Kessiah clapped her hands, "Yes, yes, YES. Now we're talking. Let's get this show on the road."

A nervous spike panged in my chest. I raised my hands, "Ok, so what am I supposed to do exactly? Contain the energy here, right?"

Torix interlocked his hands behind himself, "Indeed. If the ritual works as you stated, a colossal tear will form, and interdimensional energy will spill from it. You will be tasked with handling it."

I gave a nod, "Alright then. I got this."

Kessiah leaned towards me, sensing my agitation. She raised a brow, "You've seen what's over there, right?"

My eyes stared into a memory, "Yeah...It's darkness. An abyss. A bottomless pit of something dark and sinister." I let out a shiver, "I don't know what to say except it's bad news."

She pointed at me with a smile, "Oh, so it's crazy and bizarre and completely corrupted. Are you sure about exposing yourself to it?"

Thinking back, the Determinator tree immunized me from external corruption, as the tree put it. If I had to guess, Baldag-Ruhl put that tree in place for me so that the hivemind could avoid degenerating. Baldag-Ruhl may have even intended on using this ritual more than once as well. Unable to tell, I shrugged,

"Yeah, I am. I'll be alright."

Kessiah threw her hands up, "Could you be any more boring if you tried?"

I cracked my neck, metal on metal ringing out, "That depends on what you mean by boring."

Kessiah walked off, channeling mana from her crystal storage into the various clawed goblets made for the mana pools. Torix mirrored her, their sorcery and abilities far exceeding Baldag-Ruhl's raw might. As they worked, Kessiah tried her luck with another jab at me,

"I figured I'd tell yah, but Torix and I, we've been trying to get the eldritch to work with us for a long, long time. If we coexisted with them, there'd be no need for all this dungeon fighting." Kessiah turned a hand to Althea,

"You see her? She's actually damn close to coexistence. You all know what happens when Althea doesn't get some help though. It's *ugly*."

Althea peered away from Kessiah while balling up a fist. Kessiah crossed her arms at Althea, "Yeah, yeah, feel bad all you want. That's called reality, honey. It's knocking on your door."

I raised my brow, "I was just thinking you weren't exactly fun to look at Kessiah. Maybe reality's knocking on your door too."

Althea laughed while Kessiah stared at her fingernails, "Oof, you've obviously not had a mirror lately."

A twinge of anger slid up my chest, but I ignored her. Kessiah let her hand down, "Point is, Torix and I already talked about it. Your help is why Althea's stable. That means you're the most stable fusion of eldritch and sentient that I've ever seen."

Torix's chimed in, "To add to Kessiah's point, I've never seen anything like it as well. Unlike with most attempts at melding with the eldritch, it isn't assimilating you. The opposite is true; you are assimilating it. In time, you may be the key to bridging the gap between sentients and the eldritch."

Althea peered at them both, "Aren't you guys over the eldritch by now? You're both so strong, so, I don't know. I thought you'd both not have to worry about them anymore."

Torix shook his head, "I wish it were so simple."

Kessiah's eyes narrowed, "You want to know why Schema hates remnants so much?"

Althea shrugged, "I really do...For what that's worth."

Kessiah opened her arms wide, "Schema says its because of the genetic modification. You'd have to be an idiotic to think that. There's lots of theories, like Schema hates his creators. It could be bad blood from our civil war. Maybe even faulty coding while we made Schema. I think the real reason is that we're immortal."

I leaned back, "Why would Schema hate immortals? Wouldn't he want super strong sentients flying all around the galaxy?"

Torix raised a finger towards the ceiling, "Indeed Schema would. What he does not like, however, is investing large amounts of resources into people who do not continuously deliver."

Torix made a circle with his hands, containing a mass of mana for the ritual. He struggled out, "You see, after a few decades of killing monsters, the task grows tiring...By now, neither Kessiah nor I want to keep visiting fringe worlds...To destroy giant monster after giant monster...It gets quite dull."

Torix threw his hands out, dark mana oozing into runes. I raised an eyebrow, "What? That sounds pretty fun."

Kessiah scoffed, "Oh, it is when you're on a planet like Earth, where every monster is weak. On fringe worlds, monsters exceed level one thousand. Even five thousand. They're so strong, present, and battle hardened that just surviving is difficult. Trust me, it's not a walk in the park."

Torix spread out his hands, staring at a wall, "And besides the difficulty involved, who wants to spend an eternity fighting monsters? You lose the spirit for it after a time. I agree with Kessiah's judgment. Schema outlawed genetic modification to stop immortality. That AI wishes to maximize the monster killing of his investments. Fresh, young, and naive levelers are the best for that. That and classers, but that's a different story altogether."

Kessiah crossed her arms and legs, leaning against a wall. Her black boots clanked together, and she grimaced, "Schema's all for helping you when you're killing the eldritch, but the moment you stop, it looks at you like you're just wasted resources. All the levels, attributes, power-ups, they all cost Schema something. What? If I knew that I wouldn't be here. I'd be in my own private world, sipping a fine drink. Maybe a good looking hunk or two at my side."

Her voice hardened, "That's a dream until we find a way to actually stop the eldritch. Until then, we'll just fight until we die. If we ever stop fighting, then we end up unknown, a ball of experience for any bounty hunter out there."

Kessiah raised her hands over her head, "Agh. How in the hell am I supposed to find a new home after Schema stole our homeworld. He even made his whole domain my enemy." She snapped her hand into a wall, crags of stone falling from it. Kessiah seethed,

"It's not fair. It's just not."

During her tirade, veins pulsed up the side of her neck. Her face grew brighter as blood pulsed in. Despite a palpable aura of anger, Althea laid a hand on Kessiah's shoulder. Althea murmured,

"It's alright. Things don't stay bad forever. You never know when something might change."

Kessiah glared at Althea, the remnant's eyes piercing and bitter. That anger melted before Kessiah sighed. The remnant rested her cheek on a hand, "Yeah, sorry. The subject hits close to home. Or, well...A lack of home, I suppose." Kessiah's eyes narrowed, "You're cute, you know that?"

Althea blushed before Torix rolled his fire eyes. The lich spoke at me, "Aimless, shallow flirtation aside, Althea and you may hold the key for stopping all this brutish nonsense. Who knows, we may even be able to live with the Old Ones with how readily Daniel's armor eats their energy."

Kessiah jeered, "Alright, yeah. Sure. How about we take this one step at a time."

Torix raised a palm, "Of course, of course...One can dream though."

I furrowed my brow, "Eh, I don't know about that. Those Old Ones can turn a sleeping dream into a living nightmare."

Kessiah punched a fist into her other hand, "Then let's make you into a nightmare for them...Or at least one for the eldritch...Can the eldritch or the Old Ones even dream?"

Althea closed her eyes, "The eldritch's dreams are like peaceful mornings. All the chaos is still during those moments. It's like returning home, to somewhere safer and heavenly."

Torix slammed his hands together, sending a shockwave through the room. Althea and Kessiah floated away from the center of the colosseum while Torix stated,

"We can talk about that later. Yawm will be here soon. He will be a problematic nuisance should he inspect these runes. We need to finish this ritual and destroy this place before he gets here."

Kessiah smirked, "Hah ha. Let's get this going."

Torix's mana channeled through him, "Now Daniel, I shall control the tear in dimensions, and your aim shall be to absorb any leftover energy that oozes out. It's to protect us, and perhaps your armor shall feed upon it. Should you feel that you're overloading in energy, then simply signal so. If that is the case, find your most powerful memory. Use that to anchor yourself."

He gave me a stare like steel, "Are you ready?"

I snapped my fists together, "Yup."

"Kessiah will offer up her mana. Althea, it's time for you to leave."

Althea gave Torix a tiny salute before hopping away without making a noise. A living shadow, she disappeared like one. I slapped the sides of my helmet, psyching myself up. I growled once or twice before shouting, "Come on, Daniel. Let's do this. Let's do this."

Torix tilted his head, "Primitive, but potent...And now, it begins."

The light in his book glowed a blinding blue, like an eruption as waves of coursing mana poured from Kessiah and him both. Their manas intertwined, one a dark, adumbral stream and the other a darkened orange plume. The flowing energy hissed like a lit fuse, and it carried more energy than dynamite.

The mana's trembling, humming form pulsated across the entire room while Torix weaved the power from numerous gems in his robes. The mana squealed like water drenching molten metal. The aura alone stole my breath, leaving me unable to breathe. It pressed down on all sides, my body and mind withstanding the pressure with struggle.

The runes around us glowed once more, the room awash with white and blue light. No sphere formed around me this time. Instead, all the mana poured into a blue sphere beside me. Oscillating with violence, the mana formed a perfect sphere condensing into a single point of light. All the sound and air in the room flowed towards that one point.

For a moment, there was unearthly silence as the world wanted to end. All was still and empty and hollow.

That peace shattered as a calamitous detonation of sound rumbled across the room. The shockwave coursed over us in an all consuming wave. Torix opened his tome, and spheres formed over the three of us, protecting us from the pulse. Right beside me, a tiny point appeared. The point expanded, revealing a black rip the size of a pen. Torix's arms shook as he roared,

"It's true. They found a space between dimensions. Wondrous. Incredible."

I blinked my eyes shut before hitting myself in the forehead. The little bit of pain let me get myself ramped up. The tear opened wider, becoming the size of a basketball. I reached out my hands around it, the endless void oozing out. That energy channeled into the armor without any problems. I turned, giving Torix a thumbs up. I shouted,

"Is this good enough?"

Torix nodded, "It is. My son was a genius beyond equal."

I stared at the portal leading to a foreign place. It growled out into my mind, an infection of anger and rage and hatred. It stammered out in agony, a hollowed space wishing for fullness. It

echoed as a throttling hunger, but the null's screams ripped through me as pain. Every instinct within me howled to run away, to avoid this calamity with all my might. I ignored them.

Torix closed his hands, and the tear shrunk in my vision. Torix's arms trembled, his fire eyes flickering in the wind. The lich growled before stammering, "W-what kind of energy—"

The tear engorged, breaking reality. Unlucky despite the earlier perks, that break in space-time reached me, plunging my arm out into the waiting abyss. My armor rippled all over my skin, feasting on the incoming energy like a ravenous hyena tearing at a carcass. My armor flowed deeper into the void, pulling me with it. I pressed my heels into the stone, pushing myself away.

Torix shouted over the heavy hum of the dark portal, "Stop smiling. This is serious."

No smile plastered on my face. It spawned on my armor. I shivered and poured a cold sweat, the insidious energy seeping through my bones and flesh. Being so near the portal made every cell in my body scream. I wanted to scream, to shout, to howl out in fear. I pressed my heels into the stone floor beneath me. A few seconds passed before the rock caved under me, my feet sinking into stone.

I thundered, "It's pulling me in."

Torix's eyes flared red, and he reached out a hand. Another forcefield snapped in place between the tear and myself. The armor slid into the portal, pulling at my bones. I smashed into Torix's barrier, my bones creaking under the strain. The sheer force of the pull exceeded my own strength. Even if I outdid its power, the ground beneath me didn't. Nothing to stand on, cracks popped over Torix's barrier. I roared,

"There's something...It's melting my arm."

I sunk another foot deeper, my arm and leg within the abyss. From within the portal, my limbs numbed from a sinking cold. It coursed in, flooding deep like a liquid malevolence, something that should not be. My body feared it. My mind trembled at it. It sent primordial terror through me like a child scared of the dark.

This was something insidious and sinister, something that couldn't be named, that shouldn't be named. My flesh and bones warped under its presence, unable to contain it. The arcane bonds turned to utter chaos. All semblance of order ripped as my arm within the portal turned bulbous. Skin split. Bones tore. My body turned inside out.

And yet, it didn't hurt.

I panicked. This was what I imagined what being Baldag-Ruhl's shell would feel like. I focused on what Torix said, to use my most powerful memory. I remembered how much I hated Baldag-Ruhl. I remembered the disgust of watching him drip fluids and talk of using my soul as

a shell. I remembered the violation, the repulsion, even my anger. Then I remembered my mother and how I couldn't recall her face, only the warmth she left behind.

With a force of will like a living tempest, I rose. But I was no mere tempest. I swallowed them whole and spit them out over mountains. I fired back at the malevolent presence. I gritted my teeth. I clenched my fists. Instead of forcing it out, I commanded it to obey. I demanded the presence to submit. The tide turned as the war of wills shifted to my side. This wasn't my first battle against an invasive force. It wouldn't be my last.

More of the cold sunk in, but my arm reverted to normal. My armor stopped pulling me into the portal. The cold turned to fire. A liquid lava coursing through my veins. It throttled through as a cleansing fire, like pulling a knife from my stomach. The acidic, fiery rush sank into every ounce of my body as I converted the entropy into order. I conquered this energy with my will.

After an eternity of sitting within the portal and the energy, my entire body turned new. Like a freshly healed wound, I sensitized. The entire world thrummed out with vibrant hues and intense sensations. It was like I entered a new body. Kessiah shouted,

"We need to close it. I can't keep doing this. It's going to kill me."

Torix roared, "I can't control the ritual." He peered down and murmured, "I'm sorry."

The armor atop my face peeled back, revealing my face. My skin grayed and the armor melted into my flesh, becoming a foundation of my body. The tendrils in my flesh melted straight into my bones. The metal molded into my mind. Its hunger became my hunger. Its brutality became my brutality.

The coursing tide of energy slowed, reaching a balancing point. The portal no longer pulled me in. I moved my arm in it, no longer trembling in fear. It warmed me, a new home. It drenched out, and filled into my lungs like a warm haze. I breathed it out, and a mist of this strange energy poured out.

I stared long into that abyss. It stared back into me.

As I destroyed the monsters eating me, I became a monster. I became more, an eater of monsters, an eater of eldritch. Something that may eat both the old and the new. Torix's eyes flared white, "How are you doing that?"

I gripped both my hands on the portal while saying, "I don't know, but I didn't tell you?"

I pulled the portal shut, the rupture in dimensions clashing closed. I stated like stone,

"I will be no monster, for I feast on them."

I fell backwards, leaning back into the ritual's center. Torix paced towards me, and Kessiah fell down, vomiting onto the floor. She wiped up the smeared food on her face before jeering, "That's the last time I help you, Torix. That's it."

Torix reached me, casting an analysis spell over me. After checking my vitals, he let his hands flop on his sides, "What is going on? You're...fine. If anything, you're unchanged. What just happened?"

I let out a deep breath, and I pulled my hand up. The armor no longer shifted like clay. It flowed like water. I grasped my hand into a fist, "Heh. I think my armor just got an upgrade."

30 The End of an Era

I stood up, my armor stabbing into the ground to help me up. I willed it into spines over my back and chest, and it did so without resistance. Holding them there, they no longer snapped back. I urged a grin from the helmet, and it listened to my command. Retracting my adjustments, I closed my eyes and searched for anything else.

I found something, a presence in the back of my mind. Within and around it, an eerie sensation snarled in the back of my mind, a hunger both liquid and palpable. It seized me, starvation, bloodthirst, all ending consumption roared out. I snapped back to my senses, that primordial being entrenched in my mind. It no longer rested on me. It rested within, an extension of who I was.

And who I would be.

I turned towards Torix, "Yeah, the armor's just, I don't know, stronger?"

Torix widened one eye and narrowed the other, "Is there any differences within your system updates, perhaps?"

I opened my status, and no changes showed themselves. I raised my hands, "Uhm, just step back for a bit."

Kessiah and Torix did, and I activated Oppression. It no longer snapped on like before. It crept out, the aura alive and thriving. I furrowed my brow, able to adjust it some. I looked down at myself, the armor more organic and less plated. This was me now. I thought fear would race up my spine at that or maybe disgust. I stepped away from humanity at that moment.

And I liked it. No, I *loved* it.

The joy sprung from deep in my chest. It overflowed, a smile forming over my face. Torix's fire eyes narrowed, "Are you alright, Daniel?"

I met his gaze, cool and easy, "Absolutely. Better than fine."

The lich leaned back, "If you say so." Torix gestured at the walls, "Then it's time we leave this place. I've seen with my own eyes what my son's work has spawned, and I'm satisfied. I believe we need to destroy what remains."

Kessiah pushed herself up on quivering knees, "You...You did record the runes, right?"

Torix nodded, and Kessiah let out a gasp, "Alright. Let's get rid of this mess."

Torix tilted his head at her, "I thought you were so eager to open the rip in dimensions? What happened to your gunho display of enthusiasm?"

Looking hungover, Kessiah dragged her hands down her face, "Oh shut up already."

Torix cackled, walking towards the edge of the stadium. As he did, he formed a walkway from his mana once more. Once up a step, he turned to me, "Are you coming, disciple?"

I jogged forward, "Of course." I ran up the steps, finding myself gazing down at BloodHollow's center. Stuck in place, I peered at it for the last time.

The runes, ancient and old, carried their archaic power from the ritual, still ebbing with energy. Minions of Torix, most of them denizens of the cave, carried mana thread across the cavern's edge. This place, it left a bad taste in my mouth. Baldag-Ruh's hissing, my first fight with the bat and bears here, even the stomach sinking loneliness, it all piled up in that moment.

But so did the good times.

The victories here. The laughing with Torix and Althea. The moments of absolute peace. They meant something to me. Since Schema's system arrived, I made more friends than I'd ever had, Michael and Kelsey were still alive, and I owned power that I earned. Maybe not all on my own, but for the most part, yeah. And it was mine. It wasn't chained to someone else. It was the first thing I could call my own.

Owning something like that felt good.

This place both stood as my biggest obstacle and greatest ally to this new life of mine. I put a hand on a wall covered in strange etchings. Hitting it with my fist, I gave it a begrudging nod of respect. It was time. Turning to Torix, my eyes watered a bit. Torix spread out his hands,

"What's going on with you?"

I grinned, "Man, hell if I know...Let's get out of this place." I murmured, "It's about damn time I leave for good."

We all three walked out, and as we did, Torix kept the glowing thread of mana connected to his finger. He sent many minions down various corridors. They held dozens of these crystals. While leaving, Torix gestured at the walls,

"This is for destroying evidence. The mana in the crystals is volatile, and they will detonate with a trigger. I used them extensively before this."

With that mystery cleared, we left BloodHollow for the last time. I checked my status screen again. Oddly enough, I gained no levels or ambient mana for my armor. I didn't even gain any skills like I thought I would. Feeling the armor across my skin, it writhed under my instruction, the living metal terrifying yet awe-inspiring at the same time. It was more than enough.

Stepping from the place for one last time, we approached the Sentinel. He stayed a tall, standing figure beside Schema's doorway into this place. Knowing I could, I checked out his status.

Sentinel of Monolith | Lvl 5,000 - A Sentinel sent by Schema to guard a volatile rift for a planet newly assimilated by Schema. They carry dimensional slicers that can cleave apart dimensions, their armor is unbreakable, and their minds are infallible. They are protectors of the most dangerous rifts, and they serve only Schema.

[Fighting one is death]

Giving the guy my regards, I raised a hand, "Good luck, Sentinel. Just so you know, some guy named Yawm's coming here. You may want to bail."

The Sentinel stated, "I may. Goodbye. Please, never come back."

What a heartfelt goodbye, but I never intended on seeing him again. Anyway, we stared at BloodHollow through the magical doorways of Schema's dungeon. Torix raised his hand with the thread. His eyes flared red, and he whispered to himself,

"Goodbye, Alfred."

Torix pulled, and the entire dungeon quaked. A cacophony of detonations roared in, and Torix spawned a forcefield over the Sentinel. The dust plume rose in the distance of the cavern, bats tumbling and howling in the pyroclastic flow. This heated dust cloud slammed into our shielding, roaring past us along with deafening blasts.

When Torix pulled his shielding down, he turned away without a second glance. I stared at the tumbled boulders, stunned by the lich's strength. I followed the necromancer and remnant as they stepped out into the world, the green turf soft and inviting on our feet. Althea walked out from one of the trees framing the view in BloodHollow's exterior.

She smiled at us, a sunset hitting her just right. My heart skipped a beat before I scoffed at myself. She and I? Yeah right. We met up before all of us sat down, having a meal under glowing oranges and flowing purples of a day's closing. Torix and Kessiah gazed at the sight. The necromancer murmured,

"Hm, perhaps this dirtball isn't as bad as I thought."

Kessiah nodded, "Maybe so."

We stared for a while, just enjoying the view. After a few minutes, the silence stretched out into a long, awkward pause. I peered around, wondering why no one else said anything. I snapped my fingers, "Hey, you guys awake?"

No one replied. I turned my head around, finding nothing moving at all. The sun in the distance stood still. I blinked at it, my thoughts racing in my head. I tapped Torix's side, "You alright? Anyone?"

I stood up, grabbing the sides of my head. Time froze in place outside of me, and I couldn't explain it. A surging panic thundered up my chest. I took heaving breaths. I'd be alone again, just like in BloodHollow. The presence in the back of my mind reminded me otherwise.

But so did something else.

A void, spawning from something far beyond the stars, cracked into space. From within the dark portal, a single eye opened. Something from the other side gripped my arms, pulling me inside. As I slid into the depths of darkness, a voice louder than time and stronger than planets quaked into my ears,

"Come, Harbinger."

31 Etorhma, Eater of Worlds

I ripped through the portal, everything around me blacker than coal. Schema's HUD disappeared, and its presence dampened to nothing. Menu screens ceased opening. My health and stamina bars disappeared. The general structure Schema offered split from me. Amid a maelstrom at sea, I spiraled in confusion.

My only anchors amidst the primal chaos latched onto me as two firm, formless tendrils. They pulled me through this unending ocean. After minutes of being dragged, I swooped through the cloud. Space changed. Ahead of me, a floating eyeball with two limbs floated in space. Literal space. Surrounding me, asteroids hovered in every direction, planets and stars floating in the distance.

They existed in pristine clarity. Countless galaxies floated in the distance, even their tiniest lights visible. No atmosphere stood in my way, and my enhanced eyes took it all in. It left me unable to

move or breathe, the vastness both haunting and beautiful. I gawked at it, frozen in that moment for a few seconds or an eternity. In that place, I couldn't tell the difference.

Frozen in place, I stayed inanimate. The voice from before radiated out with a quake through time,

"I understand you are curious, little one. Time does not exist here as it does where you came from. This is to your benefit; this vast void would kill you otherwise. I learned this from other summoned mortals. They did not fare so well without this precaution."

After he spoke, I moved again. Without gravity I only looked around. After a moment, my eyes met the basketball sized eye. The two arms shifted in an awkward, unrealistic way. Their forms carried no tangibility, yet holding me, their strength proved unknowable and unbreakable. Pulling against one, they resisted and yielded at the same time, as if these lingering shades were memories of what they once were.

Describing that place required more than words. The whole place made me feel...Off, unsettled, but most of all, I was insignificant. I tread into a domain that I'd never equal in my life, and whether by luck or misfortune, something pulled me here.

I narrowed my eyes at the basketball-sized eye, "What are you?"

Its voice pulsed through space and time alike, "I am Etorhma."

I trembled at the voice, but the tiny creature lacked impact. I frowned at it, "I thought you'd be bigger."

The voice shook my bones as it spoke, "Glance upward."

I peered where my up currently was, and my whole perspective changed. Up was now forward, and Etorhma lounged in the distance. Larger than a moon, Etorhma floated like a behemoth in space. Imagine a white mountain that took up your entire view. Now imagine it had split into several large chunks, with a reddish glow ebbing from between the crevices. As you looked deeper into the cracks, a fleshy, red skin led towards the unseeable center.

All these cracks converged towards a base below it, shrinking until they converged into a ball with a thousand limbs sticking from it. The reddish flesh slowly changed to a purple hue on these limbs, which were basically dozen jointed fingers. The ends of these things blended into the black space behind them. They shivered in my sight, my brain struggling to comprehend them.

My sanity tread upon that fine line, my ignorance a blessing. I glanced back and forth before saying, "Uhm...It's good to meet you?"

"You as well, Harbinger. I've summoned you. You would like to know why, would you not?"

I blinked, shocked by his normal way of speaking. Etorhma, being an Old One, carried stories of his madness across space, according to Torix's books at least. I believed Etorhma would be abominable, an endless evil that destroyed planets. His name said as much. What I met here sounded less terrifying than that. If anything, its demeanor acted as an invitation.

That comfort scared me.

I blinked, and I fumbled out, "Uh...Yeah. Y-you read my mind."

"I did not. I respect the privacy of thought that your dimension has. It's an interesting rule to work around. It is time, or a semblance of it, to discuss why I called you here."

The light between the mountain's breaks brightened as Etorhma spoke, "There's something I need you to do. That extension of you, it has changed. It may now devour many permanent, unyielding objects, even concepts and ideas. Despite the impossibility of it, that armor has even eaten parts of myself, though infinitesimally small."

I gulped before murmuring, "You mean...Through Althea?"

"Yes. What a quaint name for what she is. This Althea is close to the center of this mess I'm sending you to clean up. As you may imagine, you are not the first I've called here. You will not be the last. Many of those I've touched roam your universe. One of them you know, Yawm of Flesh."

My eyes widened, Yawm sounding worse by the minute. One of the multi-jointed limbs jerked before Etorhma let out a thunderous whisper,

"He was a loyal servant of mine. He lost sight of sanity long ago, I'm afraid. He believes in an unholy union of the old and the new. That thing you know as Althea was his creation. He found one of my other Avatars. Yawm killed him and used me to create Althea thereafter. In the end, you are much closer to what he is trying to create than anything he made. That hivemind that made you was talented, to be sure."

Baldag-Ruhl's reputation kept spiralling upwards. Etorhma ebbed, "Yawm of Flesh will bend you, if you allow him to."

I frowned, "Yeah, I'm not letting that happen."

"Good. You do not share his twisted vision. Yawm wishes for your kind to be melded with mine. He wishes for a new flesh, one that is neither old nor new. What he creates will rupture the fabric of all that exists. Even I and those like me will be torn asunder. You will stop Yawm for me. You will devour him."

I sputtered, "I mean, I can try...But, you said the fabric of everything? You can't honestly have put this on my plate. There's got to be better candidates out there."

The unknowable being let out the lightest chuckle, and my entire being quivered out in fear. Etorhma echoed, "Do not fret, for there is time, at least in your dimension. I am merely informing you of what you've been tasked with. I would interfere, but that is...Difficult for me. While I am beyond your dimension, its limits still capture me when I choose to dabble there. My tools turn to mush and muck and ash."

My deep frown turned into a deeper grimace as Etorhma continued, "It is innate in you, however. Destroy Yawm and the others who believe in his ideology. Hunt down their fragments once he has perished. Decimate all that he stood for. You are the Harbinger of Cataclysm, a sign of what is to come. As Harbinger, you are the only one who knows how to stop the ensuing cataclysm that Yawm shall bring."

Both inspired and confused, I listened as Etorhma rumbled, "Stop the cataclysm you omen. Show them the might of your mettle, and the wrath of your will. Obliterate until they are but pieces of oblivion, a memory for only those left living after their ends."

I tapped the edges of my legs with my hands, "That's uhhh...A lot of pressure. You sure there isn't some other dude who's willing to do all this?"

"There are many who are willing. There are none who are able. Besides for you. Rise or fall. The fabric of time depends on it."

Thoughts tumbled in my head like food in a blender, and I mirrored a blender as I spoke. Mush came out,

"Alright. It doesn't look like I have much of a choice."

I blinked at myself. What the hell was I even saying?

Etorhma resounded, "What a fragile concept choice is. Despite the vast power I wield, you have far more freedom than I in this matter. Your choice will decide whether we will retain existence, or something new will come to replace us. Be ready, Harbinger."

Everything went black for a fraction of a second before my eyes popped open. Torix, Kessiah, and Althea were beside me. Not a second passed during my journey into Etorhma's domain, yet my bones ached and my mind throbbed. Sweat dripped off me, and my entire body shivered. The three here turned to me, and Althea frowned, "Are...Are you alright?"

I tried lifting my arm, but it refused my command. I mumbled, "I...Well, maybe not."

Torix's fire eyes narrowed, "Your entire bearing has changed. Sweat. Shivering. Even your mind is a jumbled mess. Tell us what just happened?"

Feeling returned, and I moved a finger. Relief passed over me, and I murmured, "I think I just met Etorhma."

Kessiah leaned over, her eyes narrowed, "You're sure about that little man?"

I narrowed my eyes at her, unable to move my head yet, "You tell me. I have no clue."

Althea chimed, "Something happened to you. You stepped off this plane and onto another one. It was a blip at most, but you're not wrong about it."

My fingers and legs moved in slow motion, "Man...Etorhma can control time."

Kessiah gasped, "You...You actually met Etorhma?"

I rubbed my temples, trying to massage out a headache, "Uh, yeah, and I'll be honest, he isn't even that bad a guy. Or a girl. He's more a thing, really."

Althea stammered, "W-what did he sound like?"

I tried remembering the events hazy and jumbled, "Like...Like he was talking to my entire life instead of just me. He spoke through me, but I heard the echoes."

Torix's eyes flared red, "Why would Etorhma contact you?"

My face wrinkled, "To kill Yawm."

Torix raised a hand to his chin, "Really now...That means Yawm is associated with Etorhma on a personal level. Is there anything that was said about their history?"

I rested my face in my hands, "Uh, my head...I think they mentioned Yawm taking one of Etorhma's Avatars out or something."

The three silenced. As my entire being settled back into this plane, I let out a deep breath. Feeling back in ship shape, I frowned at everyone. Kessiah and Torix peered down. Althea peered at them with concern. Torix's eyes flamed a pure white, and Kessiah's breathing became uncomposed.

Kessiah scratched the back of her head, "Alright, I'm done. Get me out of here, Torix. Now."

A jagged edge slid into her last few words, her demeanor turning desperate. Torix raised his hands. They shook as he spoke,

“Now, this isn’t...This doesn’t mean we can’t escape.”

I raised a brow, “Escape? I thought you guys wanted to kill Yawm? That’s what you made it sound like.”

Kessiah and Torix stared at me like I killed their families. Kessiah’s brow furrowed, “Gah, this world is so backwater.”

Torix pinched the bridge of his nose, “Daniel...Avatars of Old Ones are some of the most powerful, defiant presences within all of Schema-owned space. They define eras. They decide epochs. We are not their equal in any way. If Yawm has managed to kill one-”

Kessiah snapped, “We don’t stand any chance of killing him. None. Nada. Zilch. We’re going to die. Your entire planet is doomed. It’s over.” Kessiah stood up, her fear infectious. She pointed into the distance, “Now Torix, get me the hell out of here. We had a deal.”

I sat up and snapped, “What the hell happened to you guys and your big talk earlier today? We took Althea. You guys just ripped open dimensions too. You honestly think Yawm is just going to stop chasing us? I don’t think so.”

Torix stood and placed his hands on my shoulders, “The situation has changed. We’re no longer in a position to fight Yawm. He’s beyond us.” Torix lowered his hands, “Kessiah, I’ll begin the warping ritual immediately, as I promised.”

I pointed at my chest, “What about finding my friends, huh? Let me know where they are at least.”

Torix raised a finger towards Kessiah, “Let me handle this situation, then I shall handle our arrangement.”

Kessiah propped her weight on one hip, displeased but not outright livid. Torix raised an arm, spawning a portal. A deathknight walked out. Torix gestured to it, “Take Daniel to projects forty and forty one. Ensure my disciple uses a safe route outside of the town nearby. I don’t wish for any accidents.”

I leaned back, “You’re not coming with me?”

Torix scoffed, “Me? Why would I come with you?”

A nervousness crawled up my spine at the thought of meeting my friends alone. I scratched the back of my head, peering off, “Er, you’re my master, right? I just thought you’d want to get to know them.”

Torix crossed his arms, “Hm...How to say this. You see, I’ve been keeping an eye on them for well over a week now. You’re more than welcome to meet with them, and I wouldn’t dream of

stopping you either. That being said, they aren't ready to see someone like me or Kessiah. They will panic at the sight of us."

I furrowed my brow, "I mean, maybe at first, but they'll warm up to you guys. Michael let me go on family trips, and Kelsey's family even paid for my lunch. They've been good friends, and I'd like them to meet you guys."

Kessiah smirked at me, "You honestly think that a bunch of green, backwater savages will be fine with us?"

I scowled at her, "Yeah. I do."

Kessiah jeered, "You've got a lot to learn, kid."

Anger flooded in. I muttered, "So do you. About me and where I come from."

Kessiah blinked before her cynicism waned. Pity spread over her face as she mouthed, "Oh...You're serious."

I shouted, "Damn right I am."

Kessiah and Torix turned to each other, each of them saying a lot with a look. Not being a part of the conversation, I spread my hands out wide, "What is it? Got something to say?"

Torix raised a hand, "I think it would serve you better to go alone."

I snapped, "If that's how you guys want it, then alright."

Althea tapped my shoulder, and I glared at her. I grunted, "What?"

She made herself small, "Uhm...Can I come with you?"

My animosity tapered off, "Oh...Really?"

She grabbed her hands behind herself, "Yeah, sure. I want to see this place. It's Earth, right? It looks pretty lush with life."

My eyes widened and my brows rose, "Well, er, thank you."

Torix sighed before shaking his head, "Do as you wish. Please, at least introduce yourself before showing them any extraterrestrials. Your friends may be less welcoming with Althea than you'd imagine."

Remembering how someone shot me, I recoiled. I peered away, "Yeah, ok, I can do that. It's to keep her safe."

Torix waved a hand, "Speaking of safety, I'll have a shadow elemental follow you both. It will assist with your secrecy, and it shall give each of you time to escape should one of Yawm's summons find you."

Surprised at his goodwill, I nodded, "Thanks."

Torix's eyes brightened, "You are my disciple, after all. It does me well to keep you alive. Good luck to each of you." Torix flashed his grimoire, casting a spell in an instant. A muffling aura spread over Althea and me before Torix murmured, "That shall silence you both. It shall wear off within an hour, but that should be enough time to arrive at your friend's residence."

Torix turned to Kessiah, "Now, about this warping. I'll need somewhere with a lot of stone, preferably somewhere with soft rock like marble. That is the easiest place for the required carving."

Feeling a bit bad about my outburst, I raised a hand, "Guys, I know where I place like that is. Come on, let me show you."

Kessiah frowned, "I thought you had to find your friends?"

I shook my hands, "That can wait. I know Torix is keeping them safe anyways."

Torix swung out an arm while tilting his head, "Then show us the way."

Our resident necromancer cast silencing magic over us all, and we crossed through the forest surrounding Springfield. Before nightfall, we got a view of Springfield, the leaves changing color with the coming of autumn coming soon. Trees in the distance, especially close to the city's center, shifted color early. Reds, oranges, but especially yellows crisscrossed those towering spires near the heart of the town.

As we passed, I pointed out a few herbs and other species along the way, selling Springfield a bit to them.

I grew up here after all.

Passing towards the opposite side of the small town, we kept our distance from other people. Given how Yawm hunted for Althea, we wanted no witnesses of us passing if at all possible. Having loose ends would've made a complicated trip even more so, but worrying about it proved pointless. Few, if any, people littered the town's outskirts. It left me a little confused but more concerned than anything.

People still roamed around in chaos, no group having formed or rallied here. Even worse still, the shambling, robed summons of Yawm roamed the countryside at random. We avoided them

for now, but the sheer presence our enemy cast left a sinking feeling in my chest. That worry rested in my stomach like an anchor ready to pull me through the ground.

But, it wasn't all bad. Far out of the townscape, people found refuge in random houses darting the countryside. Campfires popped out here or there, the endless green hills draped in night. Those bonfires signalled people were alive, and I took solace in that. We avoided their paths, crossing creeks and tearing unturned turf. An hour later, we neared the abandoned quarry. It rested far from the city, having been left after the turn of the century.

Burrowed into the side of Mt. Verner, the quarry's white marble glistened in the moonlight. Large slabs of unharvested marble laid out, reflecting some of the sunset. The orange clay dried out from the lack of rain. Trees bordered the entire expanse, caging the sky in at the bottom of the pit. At its base, the last few patches of harvested rock made a tiny cave.

It was like a hideout. That's probably why Kelsey, Michael, and I had hung out here sometimes. Kelsey drove us here a few times since she had a license while Michael and I didn't. I smiled at the familiar place, graffiti of all kinds covering the nearby shacks and blocks of marble. We weren't the only kids visiting this place, the quarry being a hangout for many.

When we reached the inside of the quarry, I leapt into the bottom the pit. My feet sunk deep into the clay as I landed, squatting down. I spread my arms to Torix, "This should be perfect, right?"

Torix hovered down, inspecting the slabs, "Why, I do believe so. This is better than what I'd hoped for. You've done well."

Althea hopped down with high leaps, her steps making almost no sound. Even the dull hum of nearby cicadas overwhelmed her landings. As a burst of wind pressed from all sides, I grinned at Torix, "We'll leave you both to it then."

Torix reached out, snapping several torch stands into existence. He sparked bluefires into them, making this place lit and homier. Kessiah lifted her hands, "Gah, I'm tired. Going to bed."

Kessiah pulled a glass sphere from her pocket, a ring of metal surrounding the device. She fiddled with it before a white sphere wrapped around her. I gawked at technology, but I silenced my curiosity. I had waited on finding my friends long enough. I waved at Torix's death knight, "Alright. Let's go."

Heading out, Torix gave us one last round of silencing magic. Althea never needed it, her traveling and movement both flawless and graceful. I trudged through the dirt with heavy stomps by comparison, so I appreciated the cover of quieting magic. Into the night we ran, traversing more greenery and underbrush. Half an hour passed as Althea and I crossed empty roads.

Smothered by empty cars, the metal covered wasteland ran beside many empty houses, each a husk of its old self. This left cicadas and grasshoppers dominating the soundscape instead of the highways. Despite the desolation, the stars shining brighter than I'd ever seen them glow.

Staring up at the sky, I breathed in a deep gulp of air. It tasted better, the lack of smog and light unveiling our planet's beauty. It also came with a creeping loneliness.

One I aimed to end soon. We approached where Michael and Kelsey hid themselves, the both of them embedded within a log cabin out in the woods. No light leaked out, but a few fires and oil lamps lit the house's insides. The two story building showed no signs of decay, maintained by the humans within it. From the garage, the light smell of gas drifted into the wind. Peering from afar, I found gas kegs lined up along with a muddy, battered jeep.

I grinned. They used an offroad vehicle and siphoned the gas out of other cars to make their way around. They hunted too, a butchered deer hanging upside down on meathooks in the garage. Its blood drained into a bowl. Outside the garage, Michael's family owned a garden, one with new patches of tilled soil for winter vegetables. They even dried food rations for later.

Althea whispered, "Why are they hanging an animal like that? It's going to attract eldritch."

I murmured, "The blood makes the meat taste worse, and hanging it makes the meat more tender."

Althea furrowed her brow, "That's not worth the risk."

I frowned at the cabin, "Maybe not anymore, but they don't know that. Not before I tell them."

I stood up, ready to walk up to the cabin. Althea put her hand on my shoulder, "Remember what Torix said? You're going to get attacked if you walk in like this."

I facepalmed, embarrassed by my impulsivity. I took a breath, "Yeah...Thanks for the reminder. Almost messed up there. We'll wait for the right time. I don't want to mess this up."

Althea nodded, and we walked over towards a cove to rest. Even out in the open without cover, I remained comfortable. The elements no longer bothered me. By comparison, Althea shivered, so I took a few minutes building a shelter for her. I piled dead wood in a circle, staggered the large branches, then piled pinestraw and leaves over the crisscrossing twigs. The entire time, Althea helped and asked what each plant was, how it got here, and what happened to it.

We spent a few hours explaining all of that, and it kind of surprised me how little Althea knew about, well, everything. It reminded me where she came from; a lab with only concrete walls and surgery tables to keep her company. Remembering that gave me more appreciation over my own situation. Despite the trails, I at least got to see the open world. Althea hadn't.

Protecting us from that open world, I got the shelter fixed up to a decent standard. It protected us from the wind while we both laid out in the darkness. Painfully aware of her presence, I couldn't fall asleep beside Althea. Her breathing kept me awake, along with other, ahem...thoughts. Trying to get some sleep, I paced outside and fell asleep after a few minutes.

As I laid out under the open sky, Althea's voice whispered to me,

"Uhm...Am I making you uncomfortable? You can have the shelter if you want it."

My eyes popped open before I raised my hands at our hut, "Wait...What? I was asleep."

She murmured, "I was wondering why you're out there instead of in here."

I lied, "I prefer sleeping under the stars."

An edge of disappointment leaked into her voice, "Ok. I get that...So, for me, it just feels safer when you're in here. That's all...Sorry for waking you."

Althea knew nothing about Earth, so she might assume the worst. I mentioned bears and wolves before, creatures she familiarized herself with via dungeons. Those stories painted a grimmer picture than our actual reality showed. Knowing I caused this, I crawled back into our hut. I flopped down, "Feel better now?"

I couldn't see her face, but her voice lightened some, "Heh. Yeah...Thanks."

I turned to my side and closed my eyes. Half asleep, I murmured, "No problem."

Thinking I'd be unable to sleep, minutes passed before I fell into that familiar abyss. My eyes snapped open. Daylight leaked into our hut as I woke up. Althea nestled under a bunch of leaves on the other side of the enclosure. I snuck out, watching out for dry, cracking branches that might wake her. After sneaking away, I spied on the log cabin again.

Activity swarmed in the inside of Michael's home, people active, voices laughing, and everyone having fun. I wanted to run in and say hello, but I waited for Althea to wake up first. A long and boring hour later, Althea did. She rubbed her eyes while muttering, "Gah, it's so early. Why is the light attacking me?"

I gazed at the enclosure, my eyes razor sharp, "You didn't sleep well?"

Althea peered up, "I did...Considering we're on the ground. It's better than the cave in BloodHollow." She got beside me, and she squinted at the cabin, "What are you waiting for?"

I sighed, "I'll go in after the hunters leave. I heard them talking about it earlier."

Althea turned to me, her brow raised, "Oh, you're using your head this time?"

I lifted my hands up in mock surprise, "I know, I know. *Stunning.*"

Althea let out a laugh before we waited. A few minutes later, a group of people I didn't know walked out of the house. They held their rifles in hand, carrying large bags on their shoulders, and knives on their sides. After packing up into a jeep, they headed out. Without that group of

gunners able to kill me, no more obstacles stood in my way. It was time to head out and meet my friends. Having someone to talk to would make this so much easier.

Looking forward to that, I willed myself to stand, but my legs stayed where they were. I looked down at them, surprised my hands shook a little. I blinked, squeezing them into fists. I gritted my teeth, ashamed of my fear. Doubts raced in my mind. What if they hated me now? What if they changed and we were no longer friends?

Those fears grounded themselves in nothing, yet they surged under my skin like maggots in a corpse. I leaned my head onto a hand, disappointed in myself. I mean, I faced death and smiled. Why was seeing my friends this damn hard? I fought a sinking feeling rising in my chest. I breathed faster, my frustration mounting by the second.

Althea whispered, "Daniel. Er, what are you doing?"

I muttered, "Getting ready."

We stayed there for a few minutes. Althea frowned at me, "You're afraid, aren't you?"

I scowled at her, "How would you know?"

She raised a brow, "Oh come on. Your hands are shaking. I can hear your heart beating like a drum in your chest. It's obvious."

I grabbed the sides of my head, "Oh man, maybe it's better if I just leave. They're doing fine without me."

Althea smacked my shoulder, and I turned to her. She chided, "I'm not coming out this far just so that you can back down right here and now. Go be the brave idiot who likes to fight all the time, ok? If not for you, then for me. I want to meet some people...Geez."

I stared at her, stunned by the outburst. I gave her a nod, "Alright, alright. I'll go get it done."

I stood up, and Althea gave me a pat. Her hand landed heavy on my back, and I used the momentum to slide down the hill. I passed through the front yard, my metal boots clanking on the concrete driveway. They banged louder than I thought they would, and after a few claps, a voice sounded from within the home. I sprinted back towards Althea, tearing the yard's grass apart. Getting beside her, Althea frowned at me,

"What was that? Not exactly brave."

I frowned, "Just shut up and watch."

Michael stuck his head out of the house. Scars traced his pale cheeks, neck, and arms. His brown hair matted onto his head, his face sinking in since the culling. In general, the guy leaned

down a lot since I last saw him. He glared around, his eyes hard. Michael shouted, "Who's out there? Come out." He pulled the rest of himself out.

He hobbled together several beast shells over his shoulders, back, and chest, lacing them together with rope. A potion stayed on his right side, several knives across his chest in leather satchels. Even stranger than the makeshift armor, a visor covered one of his eyes. It came from a dungeon, its worth exceeding everything else he owned. Rifle in hand, Michael yelled,

"Hands where I can see them."

I shouted so he could hear me, "Hey man. It's me. Daniel."

Michael's eyes widened, and his jaw slackened. He stammered, "W-which Daniel?"

"Daniel Hillside. You know, your friend."