

27 An Invasion

I rolled my shoulders, shaking off a bit of fear. Getting ready for the fight, I cleared my mind, "Eh, it doesn't matter anyway. My armor's eating it, not me."

Torix sighed, "Hm...I suppose you're right about that. Regardless, we have far larger problems on the horizon. You two will stay here. I will be the one to handle these two."

Althea chimed, "I can offer ranged support."

I said nothing. Even holding a candle beside Elthodriiss or Kelto overestimated my abilities. Some battles were better left unfought, and this was one of them. Torix moved a palm to Althea, "Child, you would be consumed in seconds by their mind magic. You lack the fortitude to survive even a stone toss from Elthodriiss. That eagerness of yours is how we caught you in the first place."

Althea peered away, her face flushing. She murmured, "Yeah...Sorry."

Torix stood tall, "There's nothing to apologize for. This was merely a teachable moment. Now, if you learn nothing from it, then you may apologize for that." Torix peered at her, "Understood?"

Althea perked up, "Understood."

A surge of curiosity flowed through me, and I gestured at the sphere Torix made, "You know, it would be a lot easier to turn her in instead of fighting. I know we both agreed to help Althea, but there's got to be something more to why you're doing this."

Torix paused. He tapped the edge of his chin as he glanced up. His eyes turned green, "This time with the both of you...It's been rejuvenating. It has reminded me of a different time in my life, one where I looked forward to the future. A time where I saw potential in the coming days. For that reason, and others, I desire to continue this relationship as it is."

Torix's eyes turned to their normal navy blue, "Right here, right now, I'm choosing to follow this impulse of mine, along with the responsibilities it entails. Alas, there's no time for dwelling on such matters now."

Torix focused on the ball of energy that revealed the two others outside. The ball's spinning stopped as it stabilized. Torix gestured at it, "You may watch the fight from here. Perhaps you two may even learn a thing or two about magic."

Torix's energy blot carried him outside of the colosseum. Once he left, I scratched the edge of my head, but my fingers met metal, scraping my helm. Stopping myself because of the grating

sound, I had a lot of unanswered questions about Torix. That's the problem with questions; they're a lot easier to ask than to answer.

Taking me out of my thoughts, Althea's lavender hair brushed my shoulder spikes, "Torix sounds like he's been through a lot."

Memories about Alfred and what happened to him flooded into my mind. I nodded, "Yeah, he has."

Althea frowned, "He never talked about it. Has something happened since he came here?"

"Yeah. He was looking for his son, and he learned he passed in this cave. Now he's studying his work."

Althea peered around, "So that's what the runes are for. Woah. He has an awesome son. It makes sense why Torix looked for him."

Althea couldn't have known, but she reminded me about my father as she spoke. Torix, despite his faults, at least looked for his son. My father hadn't. Other past moments pressed in from my bitterness. Cigarette smoke. Boozy breath. Fists and Yelling. I sighed, "I don't really want to talk about it."

Althea leaned back, peering off, "Are-are you ok?"

I stepped off, "Yeah I'm fine."

She raised her hands, "I just wanted to talk about the whole family thing. I never had one. I grew up in a lab while doing simulations here or there. I was, uhm, curious about it all."

I fell into a pit of my own making. My gaze turned hard, harder than a brick breaking a man's jaw. I knew what a family was like, but I also knew what it was like to lose one. My family had died of cancer, my mother's body wasting to the disease. My father's spirit died with her. Seeing it unfold, being helpless to it...I found it harder watching something fall apart than never having it in the first place.

I kept those thoughts to myself, but they showed on my face. Althea took a step back, her lips curving into a frown. She murmured,

"Ok, I'm not trying to say anything crazy here."

We sat there for a tense moment before I got my emotions under control. I hated being like this, but sometimes it just up and raged through me. I quashed those emotions, knowing that snapping at Althea wasn't fair. I turned to her,

"Look, I'm sorry. You're not doing anything out of line. I'm just being ridiculous." I pulled my helmet off my face, the metal flowing down my back. I ruffled my hair, "Bleh, I'm being stupid. Don't worry about it."

Her eyes were piercing, "I'm here to listen, if you want to talk."

I stared back, and a tense silence passed over us. I broke eye contact first, pointing at Torix's sphere, "I'm good, but thanks. Come on, we're supposed to watch Torix's fight."

She hopped over, glad for the distraction. We paced up, finding Elthodriss and Kelto Drainer still inspecting the Evergreen Ravine. They found no spears or traps left from our fight, the lingering weapons having been removed before. Torix's minions eliminated all signs of Althea and my battle, but despite that, Elthodriss sniffed us out.

His enormous, hulking form floating across the ground with nostrils over his chest smelling the dirt. Finding our scent, Elthodriss turned towards BloodHollow. Kelto pointed in that direction before his hulking guard stood upright. They paced off from the dungeon at the Evergreen Ravine. Before they left, Torix floated up to them with his form garbed and blurry.

He used illusion magic to disguise himself. Torix spoke with a warped voice,

"Why, hello Elthodriss and Kelto. What are you doing here on this ball of mud, might I ask?"

They glanced up towards him, wordless and spooky. They stared for a moment before Drainer, the controller, spoke with a voice like sandpaper,

"We are here to capture 3298. It's an unknown. Do you know where it is, mage?"

Torix shrugged, "Bah, so many circumstances have occurred as of late. I can't seem to remember if she was here or not."

Elthodriss, the berserker, spoke with a voice far gentler than his controller. Despite his humane tone, unnerved me more, "We never mentioned her gender. You do know who and what she is, so where is she?"

Torix interlocked his hands behind himself, "Why would you need her?"

Drainer snapped, "You know what we omen, don't you? You've heard of his name spoken in rumors alone, but you're a fool if you ignore those tall tales. They speak of Yawm's coming. He is a blinding light, an atomic fire, even an endless darkness."

Torix tilted his head, "Ah yes, the old fashioned blinding light and endless darkness combo. Quite logical indeed."

Althea and I laughed before Elthodriss spread his hands, "We can smell the presence of Etorhma on you, or at least *near* you. This tells us you may be a friend yet. Despite your lack of kindness to us, we both have nothing but respect for you. You may return that favor by having enough respect for Yawm to tell us where 3298 is."

Torix's eyes flared red, "I do recall having my own requests denied by one of Etorhma's cults long ago. I asked where my son was, and they offered me no help. They didn't even have the time for someone as small or pitiful as I. It's quite ironic that one of Etorhma's cults needs my help now, isn't it? I wanted a request fulfilled, and now one is asked in turn."

Drainer roared, "You don't want us against you. We will have Yawm tear your soul from that body you have and put it into something more painful. Squirming. *Agonizing*."

Torix crossed his arms, "Ah yes, then where is this Yawm if he is so powerful and uncaged?"

Elthodriss put a hand in front of Drainer, "He sleeps now, but his strength builds. We are merely the minions of his Followers. Yawm is far beyond us, and he can't allow 3298 to escape. In fact, Yawm is more than willing to throw a batch of resources at finding her." Elthodriss gestured to himself, "We alone should be enough proof of his intentions."

Torix narrowed his eyes, "You're weaker than even my minions. The only example you serve is a lesson to those that won't surrender to me."

Elthodriss shrugged, "And yet, Yawm of Flesh exceeds you in all ways. Shouldn't our allegiance speak for itself?"

Torix burst into laughter, long and loud. He raised his hand, "Do you honestly think I don't know what you're doing here?"

Elthodriss and Kelto Drainer turned to each other and then back towards Torix. The lich spread his arms, "You're pawns buying time while others from your little cult seek out the dimensional rift that occurred here. I know this, so cease your lying."

Elthodriss clapped his hands, "Clever, but that doesn't change the fact you've refused to hand 3298 to us. We may save you yet, but further defiance will seal your fate."

Torix rippled with dark energy, "Oh, threatening me now? Unwise of you."

Drainer leaned forward before his head slung back. Elthodriss turned towards his companion, the berserker's eyes wide, "You're attacking us?"

Torix lifted his hand, "Attacking you? I would never do something so trivial." The necromancer's eyes burned black,

"I'm killing you."

Torix raised his other hand, and a rippling wave of energy sizzled between Torix's arms. The coursing mana ebbed out like a bending bar of steel, the sound forcing me to cover my ears. Even through the orb, it crippled me. Streaks of dark, arcane magic undulated and melded within Torix's palm, the all consuming black siphoning nearby light. Torix pulled his arms further and further apart,

"Why, I do believe that's enough chatter."

Elthodriss shook as Torix pointed a finger at him. Torix seethed, "I'll allow my actions to speak for me."

Clawed, shadowy hands spawned below Torix, each the size of a house. The hand's fingertips lurched into reality, pulling it apart. From the tear, a behemoth marched out. Orange skin and many limbs squirmed out with vitality. Taller than trees, the tentacle legs of the creature crashed into the earth with deafening booms.

They toppled forests. They smashed boulders. Spines of bone rose up from the beast's back. The legs and arms of the creature, elongated and blue, led up to a faceless monster. Patches of bone plates formed scales on its chest. Over those plates, parasites swarmed. Torix relished in the display of his own might,

"I've never understood people's ignorance regarding necromancy. It's such a simple yet profound concept." Torix's eyes remained pitch black,

"Why fight with one when you may fight with many?"

Even through the orb, Schema recognized Torix's monster,

Moloth, Behemoth of the Abyss | Level 1421 - Once a mindless creation of eldritch, a worthy necromancer harvested this monstrosity from a fringe world and trained it as his own over time. Moloth owns an endless hunger and longing for destruction. Despite this calling, Moloth remains loyal to Torix for unknown reasons using unknown methods.

This creature can move with a surprising speed despite its massive frame. The blue skin on its limbs is laden with a potent neurotoxin and acid. The creature can absorb creatures melted in its hands and tentacles through the orange skin on its body. Some speculate this is a form of predigestion. Regardless, it is brutally effective versus most foes.

The monster even has parasites on it's skin that protect it when small creatures swarm it. These tiny monsters can chew and devour most anything they touch. Interestingly, these parasites are a species unique to Moloth and his kind.

Avoid this creature at all costs.

Moloth's body shivered before Elthodriss raised his palms, "We don't want your anger."

Torix generated sharpened ice spines above his head, "And yet, you have it."

Torix lobbed the ice spines at the two of them. Elthodriss picked up Drainer, carrying him out of the crossfire. As he ran, Elthodriss's body expanded underneath his robes as Drainer's aura thickened into a bloody mass. From the ground, other robed members burst out of the ground. Each carried misshapened bodies from the results of experiments.

They shambled towards Torix, who opened several portals. Torix cackled before shouting, "You do realize a trap is only effective if it catches its victim unaware?"

As Torix finished his words, Moloth moved with speed. Its hands rippled the wind and tore the clouds. When the beast's hand collided with the ground, giant wedges of earth split upwards as the ground gave way. Two cultists howled out as they sizzled under Moloth's hand. The behemoth lifted its fist and wiped the two member's remains onto its chest.

Moloth's skin absorbed the molten bodies. Althea gagged behind me while I grimaced. Even after all my experience, this monster left me disturbed. Torix stiffened, his demeanor changing. He peered up at us, and his voice radiated through our sphere alone,

"Althea. Daniel. Be ready. A few minions are coming into BloodHollow. This cult has sent them out in mass, and they must have followed me on my way over. I was careless. Avoid or kill them if you can, as they will do horrific things to you. Now is the time to prove yourself, disciple."

Althea and I looked at each other as Elthodriss leapt from the ground. Like a napalm explosion, the berserker barreled through the air and collided into Torix's behemoth. Moloth leaned back before grabbing Elthodriss in its hand. With a quick swipe, Moloth threw Elthodriss. Yawm's underling blurred in the air, the ground exploding as he collided with it.

Even the slightest touch from Moloth sent the tiny cult members flying like cannonballs. I peeled my eyes from the sphere, not having time to stare in awe at the battle. I turned towards Althea. She kept her gaze on the orb. She murmured,

"We-we have to prepare for battle." She tore her gaze just as I did, "What skills have you been working on these past few days?"

"Burrowing, Blitz, Deflection, and some other stuff. I was trying to come up with a counter for your harpoons."

She grabbed her elbow, "Yeah, I'm trying to see if I can't mold an arm cannon of my own. It could regenerate then, and I'll be able to fire harpoons whenever I want. It's a work in progress."

She lifted her hand, her eyes set. Her jaw clenched shut as her left arm deformed, the muscles and skin splitting. Bones formed into lines and plates, interlocking with a smooth shift as they clinked together. I stepped back as a horn expanded from Althea's right palm, spiral rivets covering the lance. She placed the spike into the ammo compartment of the new harpoon cannon.

She tapped the rifle, "My eldritch abilities let me pierce most defenses. We can take advantage of that."

I raised a hand, "That's how you pierced my armor and how you cut through stone, isn't it?"

A small smile leaked onto her lips, "Heh, yeah."

I looked at a tunnel, "Eh, I doubt its the eldritch that lets you do that. My armor eats monsters for breakfast, but you slice it with ease. I think it's more likely that your ability comes from something else. Either way, we can't beat these guys if they're on Elthodriiss or Drainer's level. We're going to need some sort of strategy to stand a chance."

Althea aimed at a tunnel, "I can fire at them while you keep them distracted."

"We could do that." I glanced towards the colosseum. Tiny rocks laid out all across the floor. A sudden shock of inspiration electrified me. I turned to Althea, "Alright, here's the plan. I'll create a tunnel system underneath the colosseum using my Burrow skill. We'll place boulders across entrances on the bottom floor. You'll fire pot shots while I keep Oppression active."

Althea frowned, "What do you mean Oppression? Is that what hurt me that one time we fought each other?"

"It is. So for this to work, you'll have to give me some space."

"Do you think we can set it up in time?"

I lifted my arms, "I have shovels for hands, and you can chop stone like butter. We got this."

Althea's arm reformed back to normal, and she cringed in anguish as it did. Taking a breath or two, she growled while spawning two curved scooper claws. I raised a brow, "Holy shit...You've really got the hang of that ability, huh?"

A drip of sweat poured from her brow, "I-I'm trying. Let's go."

Over the next hour or so, I created a labyrinth of tunnels underneath the colosseum. I created a couple dozen entrances spread throughout the staggered steps, avoiding the runes as I did. Althea found and placed boulders over each of the entrances. After we finished the set up, we ran through the underbelly of the colosseum, marking it in our minimap.

We planned our escape routes, came up with a kiting strategy, and estimated how long each kill would take. I'd draw aggro in the middle while Althea would lift a boulder, fire a shot, then set the boulder down. Her strength made that possible. If needed, I'd hold the enemy down while she ran to a different entrance. Althea came up with the kiting strategy, buying us more time.

Regardless, we waited underneath the emptied colosseum, glancing through peeping holes. Althea carved these spots out with a claw as if drawing in water. Minutes passed, yet none of Yawm's evil minions flew in. After a while, I grew bored. I whispered to Althea,

"I mean, this dungeon's pretty big. It will probably be a long time before they show up...You want to check out Torix's fight again?"

She stayed focused, "Come on. These are powerful enemies we're facing. They will rip our guts out if we aren't careful."

I turned, frowning. She was right, so I closed my eyes and mentally prepared myself. A few more minutes passed before a set of footsteps echoed down a hallway. I sprinted towards the middle of the arena before activating Oppression. Althea sprinted over towards the side opposite of the noise. In came one of Yawm's minions, garbed in robes.

Summon of Yawm | lvl 250 - A being Yawm spawned for a singular purpose of capturing subject 3298. Fast, powerful, and extremely cold, this being hugs victims before freezing them completely. It then carries them back towards Yawm. Be careful as it will numb you quickly, rendering you helpless before taking you to Yawm.

For the level requirement, I had to admit, the creature lacked pizzazz. Being a catch and grab sort of monster, its combat skills lacked oomph. I walked underneath it, not too difficult a feat. It scrambled to find me, its senses overwhelmed by pain. Despite its lack of combat effect, being near it took a toll on me. It amazed me how loud a creature could gurgle.

When I cut on Oppression, the creature let out a slight squeal before running around with far more vigor. Harpoons impaled right through the monster, each spear slicing into the ground right after. The summon howled in anguish as each lance landed. Our combined onslaught of damage finished it fast.

Too fast.

The creature died in a few seconds from a spike through the rough approximation of a skull. Althea grabbed the experience for the most part as her offensive capabilities maximized here. Considering Obliterator's requirements, I wasn't too bothered by it. With that handled, I pulled the creature into one of the many entrances of my labyrinth before whisper-shouting at Althea,

"Ah yeah. We beat the hell out of them."

She stared at her harpoon cannon, the biomass bleeding from the concussive forces of firing. She spoke through gritted teeth, "We...We did."

Her cannon oozed pain and discomfort. I blinked at her, "So...Are you alright?"

She heaved a breath, "Oh yeah, I'm fine...Let's wait for another one. Hopefully, it's a long time before it shows up."

I kept my eyes on her, making sure her transformations remained contained. My armor indulged in the beast's corpse before more footsteps echoed in. Taking a glance at Althea, she maintained her composure. Trying to help, I whisper-shouted again, "Make sure to handle your status."

Her eyes widened, and she facepalmed. She murmured, "Thanks."

She put points in her skills, and our confidence improved even more. Taking several walkers out wasn't out of the question anymore, especially if we executed well. Oppression could hit a whole group, and her spears could pierce through many foes if she lined her shots up. This made slaughtering them far simpler.

Right as they got close, a message popped up at the absolute worst of times.

Evolution gained. III Harbinger of Cataclysm unlocked. Evolve Y/N?

I frowned before hovering my hand over no. The evolution would have to wait until later. Before I selected no, a tendril of my armor shot outward and selected yes for me. The living metal betrayed me. Adding insult to injury, the transformation hurt more than the last one did. Far more.

As if magma replaced my blood, long needles of armor dug into my body. They sank deep, hitting bones and marrow. Oppression shut down. My breathing sped up. I gasped for air, everything flashing white. Like being covered in bullet ants, my armor writhed under my skin. A countless number of tendrils shifted within me, my entire body engulfing in fire.

My Pain Tolerance reached ninety three earlier, so only 7% of the pain trickled in. That 7% defied reason. It oozed in as an all consuming misery, and my mind roared out at the thought of the pain's unmitigated might. Writhing on the ground, blood seeped from me, my eyes, my nose. My everything.

I gurgled on it. I drowned in it. I bit my lip, gritting my teeth, and I clenched my fists while crawling on the ground in pain. I tried keeping quiet, but breathing required coughing. I spit out pools of blood, the sanguine stream drenching me. With every ounce of my strength, I stopped my screams. In that eternal quiet, the anguish mounted.

I blustered out bubbles of blood from my nostrils, mucus mixing with it. I sat in silence, but within my mind, I screamed while I lived out a nightmare. Every single nerve in my body was on fire, and I lived it out with an absolute, keen awareness thanks to my perception. Those fire lines traced my entire being. As they crawled, understanding dawned on me.

The armor carved out my nerves, and it replaced them.

It continued. I drooled over the ground. I convulsed, the excruciation driving me insane. From above, a banging sounded. After a minute or two, the rock above me collapsed as three of the robed summons poured in. One opened up, its body showing beneath the robe. Dry, yellow skin crinkled like parchment, lines of strange runes crisscrossing it. Six arms spread wide and energy ebbed.

Mana channeled into its markings, and cooling energy dripped out. It snatched me up, the limbs colder than ice. The frigid feeling splintered into my chest, my blood icing over in seconds. It seeped deep into my bones. As I grew numb, it stole the pain away. Despite the ease of suffering, I fought to keep my eyes open.

The monster crawled back up the wall, holding me in its mass of arms. The monster leaped up the steps, its flat feet landing with surprising elegance and strength. By the time we reached out of the colosseum, the cold wrapped all around me like a loving embrace. My eyesight darkened, my vision's edge closing in.

Snapping me out of this haze, an intimidating, feminine voice shouted with pride,

"So this is the garbage Torix told me about? He wasn't kidding about the title, but look at you. The only cataclysm you're ushering forth is your own."

28 Kessiah Crow

Something picked the summon up, and I along with it. A sudden warmth flooded me, but not from whoever held us. This heat roared out from within, boiling my blood. Red steam radiated from my body as the arcane bonds binding me together reformed. The magical constructs no longer saturated my flesh in a chaotic, unstable flow. They reoriented into long, smooth lines that connected with the tendrils and wires spread across me.

The millions of armored spines in my body connected, wrapping between my nerves. The pain receded as the armor finished its invasion. Removing it now would remove all the bones in my body. Not having to fight the evolution's agony, my mind cleared. Fighting the summon holding me, I opened my eyes and pushed with my legs.

The arms wrapped around me like bands of steel, holding me tight. I activated Oppression, and it squealed. The voice below simmered, "Ooh, interesting little aura there, at least for your level."

The voices hands ripped and gouged the summon apart with absolute ease. I fell out of captivity, staring down. Dark blood pooled beneath me. Turning my head to the stadium, other summons laid out below, their bodies strewn about like a murder scene. I shook my head, overwhelmed by the scene. Above me, a woman stood with confidence, arrogance oozing out of her.

She propped her weight on one hip, resting her hand there too. She snapped her fingers, the blood rushing off of her. Seeing her without the blood, she reminded me of a human but with bright, purple red skin. Her snow white hair contrasted that tone, the flowing locks smooth instead of dry like most dyed hair.

Going for an edgy, urban look, she shaved one side of her head. She grinned at me with pointed teeth, a scar crinkling straight across her nose. She offered a hand, so I took it. She jerked me up, almost tearing my shoulder out of socket. She gave me a hard pat on the back, and I coughed up blood from my evolution. The woman snarked,

“Hah. Weak.”

I glared up at her, but she met my eye with a cool, mean gaze. The ‘white’ of her eyes colored pitch black, making her yellow irises pop out at me. It gave her a crazed look. I raised an eyebrow, “Who are you?”

“Hah, so Torix didn’t tell you? I’m his ‘friend.’ Call me Kessiah. Who are you, *little man*?”

I closed my eyes, knowing she’d be hard to deal with already. I shook off the tremors left over from the transformation, “I-I’m Daniel.”

She thumped my chest plate, “Quit stuttering.” She looked me up and down, “Oof, it looks like Torix’s requirements for a disciple have dropped? Lucky you.”

I raised my brow, “You must be a riot at parties.”

“When people can take a joke, yeah. I am.” Kessiah turned to the lower levels of the stadium, “Cool runes. I’ll check them out while you guys clean up this mess. Buh-bye.”

She sauntered away, giving me a second to think. Prioritizing my evolution, I pulled up one of my hands, and the metal bending like thick clay instead of still steel. My armor shifted without as much struggle in general. Before I inspected my status, another thrall of Yawm ran out of a cavern. Covered in a robe, its mangled form beneath squirmed out from its many arms.

It ignored me, staring elsewhere. I peered around for Althea, finding her locked in combat with a summon of her own. Althea gouged it apart, in control of the situation. This new summon of Yawm beelined right for her. Not having time to think, I charged towards the creature, my feet digging into the stone. The monster hopped onto a stepway while I landed beside it. Using the

momentum of my landing, I redirected my dash's force into my arm. Pitching it like a baseball, my fist walloped directly against the summon's skull.

The crisp connection of my fist thwacked with the sound of metal on bone. My hand shot back like I fired a cannon from it, the inertia shifting in an instant. I wobbled on my feet, stumbling back. The thrall's head flashed into the step's stone, away from my fist. The skull smacked against the ground, bouncing off with the sickening thud of breaking bones.

I grimaced, the bones of my arm creaking. Evolution or not, these things exceeded my level by leaps and bounds. I tossed my hand back and forth, trying to get feeling back in my limb. A pair of footsteps echoed behind me, and I turned around. Two cold arms smothered my sides, the summon gripping around me, its arms unbending as railroad tracks.

It pressed me against the cold runes, and I crumpled against it. Unable to move, I willed my armor out. Several spikes expanded from my chest, digging into the creature. These spines drilled deep into its chest before the monster released me. It stumbled back, and my chest spines retracted with a quick snapping pop of metal.

The summon dripped blood from its new wounds. From the tear in its robe, a slanted mouth opened, dull molars covering a tongueless mouth. It splashed out blood from its maw, and I stampeded towards the damn thing, turning on my heels as I unleashed another heavy hand toward it. My fist dug into its side, keeling it over before I turned on the balls of my feet once more.

I swung my fist like a hammer, tucking the blow close to my side. My punch smashed into the monster's mouth. The momentum of my blow blew my hand back, like I detonated a handful of gunpowder in my palm. The beast's jaw broke as the face shot back into the wall. The body slumped onto the ground before a cold arm slammed into the side of my head from behind.

My face slapped into the wall. Turning around, another thrall stood over me. My reflexes kicking in, I avoided the next blow of the creature before a bone spear slid into the head of the new thrall. The bullet killed the thrall cleanly, flinging its body back before I turned and faced the monster I struck and impaled earlier.

The summon's robes fell off as it stood, revealing a set of glowing blue sacs over its back. Several eyes glanced around, scattered across its body. More mouths and necks led up to the bulging skull of the creature. Two squirming tentacles writhed with glowing blue veins pulsing down the tips of them. I grimaced, everything Yawm sent our way grotesque and deformed.

The summon stepped up and turned sideways, whipping an arm at me. Instead of dodging, I caught the tentacle against my side. My feet dragged on the stone for a few feet, but I stayed firm. I jerked its arm to me, knocking the beast off balance. It stumbled to me, and I thunked

another strike against one of its many mouths. Teeth clattered on the ground as the creature whipped back.

Still holding the arm, I pulled it again. It flopped towards me, and I slammed another fist into its face. It dangled back, a spear bursting several of the blue sacks on its back. The glowing goop gushed out as the creature squealed. I held down vomit before pulling the creature towards the center of the cavern. As I threw it out into the colosseum, one of Althea's bone spears punched right through it.

The spear drilled through the monster and flew towards my chest. My training kicked in, and I whipped my hand out as fast as I could. My tendons and muscles screamed at the effort, but my hand hit the spear's dull side. I shifted its trajectory, the projectile sliding past me. My hand shot me back as I stumbled sideways. Falling onto the side of the wall, I peered up at a ding from gaining a level in Deflection.

Taking a breath, I pulled myself back up, thinking of better ways to divert the spear. Turning around, no more thralls stumbled about, and the cavern quieted down. I let myself drop down again, losing tension in my body. I peered up, the evolution consuming my thoughts. Althea shouted at me, "Sorry about that, er, miss."

I waved her apology off, not wanting to talk. I closed my eyes, letting the situation pass. Taking a deep breath, I pretended the air was my memory of my evolution. The anguish, the metal creeping in, and the blood drenching me, it filled into my chest. I let it out, pretending that memory was in that breath. Standing back up, Kessiah chimed,

"Hey, you never know. She may have been aiming at you. You're an unknown, after all, so you're worth a lot of experience. To her, at least."

I rolled my eyes before glancing at my notifications. Dealing with another smartass could wait till later.

III The Harbinger of Cataclysm (Body Type, Legendary) - Armor mirroring eldritch skin and an unknown substance. This extension of your body can absorb rift energy, also known as ambient mana, for evolutions. These evolutions may add other special effects.

Note: Cannot be removed, only altered. Armor is regenerated with health.

0/16,000,000 Mana left till next evolution.

Effects:

A Harbinger's Might - Increases Damage reduction cap by 2% | Current Max: 97%

Skin of Eldritch - Additional 15% increase to total health | Current Total Health: 115%

The Walking Calamity - Gives unique ability III Oppression | Current Damage: (8000 + 25% of health/min) within a 150ft/45m radius

An Undying Force - 2% of health added towards health regen per minute | Current regen added before multipliers: 54.66

Loathed and Abhorred - Decreased Charisma by 20% | Current Total Charisma: 80%

- From a different world I rise. We usher forth creation through ruin. Our might is our union, our hunger a weapon. All crumbles in our wake, and the remains linger as our feast. In that indulgence, we find our strength.

The evolution came with both the good and the bad. For the most part, the positives outweighed the negatives. The health bonus, damage resistance, and Oppression aura all augmented further. The new health regen bonus also synergized well with my skills and fighting style, giving me immense staying power. I appreciated all these bonuses.

But then the not-so-good parts reared their ugly heads. Losing more charisma sucked. While I never expected to be a celebrity, I wanted general social acceptance. Most people did, but if my charisma kept sinking, my demeanor would leave me alone in the long run. That unnerved me. Further still, the armor's quotes and ability names sent chills up my spine. That came from the armor showing signs of life.

It smiled and feasted without me willing it to do so. Alright, whatever. Clicking the evolution screen then and there? That was a different story as it left me helpless. That stood as the first example of my armor fighting against me. Knowing it might get whilier in the future, I resolved myself to fight it, however I could. I committed to upgrading it, and like any other battle, I aimed to win.

Moving on, I noted two more levels gained from the thralls overall. When I checked my attribute screen, I found myself at level 105. That meant I lost attribute points for Obliterator already, but a point or two wouldn't matter in the long run. Using the attribute points, I increased luck to twenty four. I inspected the results.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Character Screen

Health - 2,733/2,733 | Health Regen - 579/min | Stamina - 1,040/1,040 | Stamina Regeneration - 31.5/sec | Damage Resistance - 97% | Mental Resistance - 97% | Physical Power - (+)353% | Damage Increase - 5% | Evolution: 0.05 Million/16.00 Million

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

Level 103 | Attribute Menu

Strength [30] | Constitution [36.3] | Endurance [51] | Dexterity [30] | Willpower [30.3] | Intelligence [30] | Charisma [9] | Luck [21] | Perception [30]

My bulk amassed to a respectable level, all the modifiers adding up. The per level bonuses gave me extra stats across the board, putting me in a good space. Staring at my status, Kessiah tapped my shoulder. I jerked my head up, stunned she reached me without me even hearing her. She smirked down at me,

“Your last name is Hillside. *Hillside*. Wow.”

I frowned, “What’s yours?”

She opened her status and turned her identification towards me. My jaw dropped.

Kessiah Crow | Remnant | Level 2,398 - A member of the remnants, Kessiah is a wanderer like most of her species. The remnants, as a whole, lack gratitude and work ethic. This is why they ran from their responsibilities like children. Unlike nearly every other developed sentient species, the remnants devalued the revolutionary changes that Schema brought about. Now other races have to pick up the lost ground while the remnants just wander around aimlessly. They lack meaning. They lack purpose. They are parasites.

Their origin aside, this species lives unusually long lives due to genetic telemerization. This, combined with genetic tampering on a mass scale, means the remnants lack any identifying features. This goes against Schema’s laws against genetic modification. For this reason, the remnants have been exiled since Schema’s inception.

Without a home of their own, the remnants float through space on space shuttles. They are volatile, disgusting abominations of nature. Never trust one and kill them on sight even if you must risk your life.

The level alone meant Kessiah’s arrogance stemmed from her abilities, not delusions or the like. Knowing she might tear me apart at any second, I stiffened up, “Your status doesn’t mention much about you. It just talks about the remnants, and it looks like Schema is maybe a little biased.”

Kessiah narrowed her eyes at me, “A little, huh?”

I rolled my hand, “It’s a joke.”

She raised her brow, “Huh. You’re not much of a comedian.”

I let my arms fall to my sides, “Tough crowd. Your joke wasn’t any better. It doesn’t matter. Aren’t you supposed to be inspecting the runes?”

"I got bored."

Althea hopped over, her arm still deformed. As Althea got up to us, Kessiah towered over us both, half a head taller than me. Kessiah raised an eyebrow, "Where's Torix?"

I furrowed my brow, "Can't you use your status to find him?"

Kessiah tapped her temple with a single finger, "You need your minimap filled out for that, and I've never been on this backwater dirtball before. This planet is so green that no one has maps of it uploaded either." She crossed her arms, "Not that I'd pay the credits for something like that. Not here."

I pointed at the walls, "What about the runes? Do you recognize them?"

Kessiah tilted her head, "Huh. Not really. These do remind me of a few markings I'd seen before in a few other remnant ships, but only the wealthier ships had them. I never learned how to carve these out, but I can start them up if I have too. That's why I'm here."

I hopped down the stairwell, towards the corpses, "I'm starting the cleanup."

My armor devoured the summons of Yawm, and Kessiah leaned back from the sight. She raised an eyebrow, "Hah, Torix wasn't kidding. This ritual and the results are wild...Crazy even."

My armor reached into a summon, spreading tendrils across it and sapping its energy. The metal's feeding changed since the evolution, being less grisly and more drain-ey. Althea turned away and murmured to Kessiah, "So...When will Torix be back?"

Kessiah leaned to her, "What was that? I couldn't hear you?"

Althea spoke up, "When will Tor-"

Kessiah smacked Althea's back, nearly knocking Althea over. Kessiah grinned, "Pshh, of course I can hear you. From our messages, he should return in another hour or so. Maybe. Who knows how long he'll be playing with the bodies. The whole necromancer thing comes with the territory."

Finishing the bodies, I pointed at a tunnel, "Alright, great. Awesome. I'll be training in one of those caverns. Way over there."

As I walked off, Althea spoke to Kessiah,

"How did you and Torix meet?"

Kessiah clapped her hands together, "Hey, we'll tell the story together. That should make the tale come to life."

Kessiah's attitude put me on edge for some reason, and I couldn't pin down why. Wanting distance between me and the remnant, I hopped up a few of the stadium's steps in the opposite direction of her. Sounding at me, a series of stomps ended with a hand gripping my armor. The fingers dug in, bending the metal.

Kessiah leaned beside my head, "You're training, right? Why not let me help you? I could show you a few pointers."

I grimaced under my helmet, and Kessiah's grin deepened. Althea chimed from across the room, "I-I wouldn't mind if you trained me. You know, if you want too."

Kessiah put a palm up to Althea, "Naw, not interesting. You-" She pointed at me, "You look like fun. Come on, let's talk."

Althea nodded before saying with reverence, "Uh, alright...Thanks for considering it, Miss Kessiah."

Kessiah frowned and pointed at Althea, "Don't call me miss."

A chuckle escaped my lips, and Althea shot me a pointed glare. Kessiah leaned her face beside mine as she said, "No need to tease her. Besides, you've already got a date with me."

I pushed at Kessiah, but she didn't budge. I ended up pushing myself away while saying,

"Yeah, good luck teasing me with that. I'm young, but I'm not that young."

"Bah, you're no fun."

"Neither are you, *Miss Kessiah*."

She peered down at me, "Huh, you have a mouth on you? Come on, let's see what kind of brawling style you've scraped together."

She walked over towards the center of the colosseum, waving for me to follow. I stepped up, raising my fists, "So, I'm a bruiser. That's pretty much it."

Kessiah waved off my words, "Simple isn't always bad. Let's see how your execution is."

She lifted her hand, and a starry portal spawned over her. A jade bow fell out with a sheening quiver, landing in her hands. Kessiah tilted her chin, "Come on, *Harbinger*."

I stomped my heel into the ground, charging towards her. Kessiah launched an arrow with motions smoother than a clean shave. The arrow whistled in the air, streaking towards me.

Using my training, I found the right angle and jerked my hand to divert the arrow's course. The projectile slid off my arm and deep into the stone beside me.

Kessiah's eyes widened, "Ahhh, nice. That armor's tough. Sucks that it can't block your eyes."

She fired another arrow, and my helmet shot out, chomping it into oblivion. I smiled as Kessiah leaned back. She mouthed, "Huh...So the armor's a little better than I thought. Big whoop."

She fired several more arrows, but I knocked them off course, sending them into random directions around me. Kessiah raised an eyebrow, "Are you doing that on purpose?"

My armor and I grinned, the crimson slit on my helmet turning into a jagged line of teeth. As I reached her, she stood with her left arm out in front. She shot out a quick jab with her left hand. It slammed straight into my face, flipping me on my feet. My vision spiraled, but my head remained clear. I flopped on the ground as Kessiah peered down, "Ooh, did that hurt?"

I rolled onto my stomach, pushed myself up, and swung at her in a crisp, clean motion. She tilted her head back, the wind whirling off her hair. She grabbed my hand, and she pulled me. My vision spiraled again. Landing on my back, she kicked my ribs, tossing my entire body away. My ribs shattered at her touch, and I tumbled, gasping for air. Before I stopped tumbling, her foot stamped my chest.

The ground cracked beneath me, her speed, power, and experience outclassing me. She leaned over, her smile menacing, "Is that all you got?"

She pressed down before I grabbed her leg. A spike of my armor drilled up, digging into her foot. She wrenched her leg up, pulling me with it. I flung up before she snatched me with a single arm by the neck. Holding me up, she tilted her head at me, "Show me some of that tenacity Torix talked about."

She let me go before grabbing me again, shifting her grip from my neck to my helmet. Her hands bent metal before she jerked me into the ground. Cracks ebbed out from my impact, stone bending and breaking. A throttling echo bellowed out, a cloud of powdered rock covering us. She slung me out of the cloud, and she dashed forward. She kept pace with my tumbling.

Smiling at me, she lifted an arm and crushed me back into the ground. I sputtered out blood before murmuring, "So...This is training, huh?"

She stood up, distaste spreading over her face, "Yeah...Right."

She got off me, and I pushed myself up off the ground, my knees shaking a bit from the beating. She crossed her arms, "You're tough. I'll give you that."

I blew blood out of my nose, letting me breathe again. I glared at her, "Oh, why thank you so much for that. Really sweet of you to notice."

She ran back up, throwing another jab. She slowed down a lot, falling back into my perception. I ducked under her fist and turned on my feet, slicing a heavy hook into her side. My blow landed as if I slammed my hand into a brick wall. Despite the lack of give, my bones held firm, the magical bindings and armor strands giving me rigidity.

Kessiah pursed her lips, "I felt that. Good."

As she spoke, she pulled her punch back, aiming to elbow my temple since I was beneath her arm. I shrugged my left shoulder, causing the elbow to slide over my head. Right behind her passing elbow, she snapped a right hand at my jaw. I lifted my head up, Kessiah's right hand passing right beneath my eyes. Pulling my torso in a slight arc, I weaved around her left arm.

I let my fist trail with me, my right hand building momentum before I smashed the heavy hook right into her cheek. My fist met another wall of stone. I winced, my arm creaking from my hit's rebound. Kessiah existed as a moving diamond, harder than steel and unyielding as hate. Despite that, my bones didn't break. Attacking remained an option.

She sped back up, her punches blurring. Four strikes landed against my sides and stomach, each hit breaking ribs. Unable to defend myself, I shot out another slicing hook at her face. My metal gauntlets squealed on contact, my poor hand bending on her face. She let me hit her, so I smashed another right hand at her. Kessiah laughed as I took a step back after my own punch.

She got under my skin with that one, so I gritted my teeth and lunged back at her. This time she kicked at my legs. Reading her move, I shot out a palm towards her leg. My hand pushed her foot so that it slammed into the ground, stone shattering under her strike. Low to the ground, I lunged forward and created an arc with my arm's trajectory over my head. I let the swing veer wide, feinting the punch towards her face. She pulled her chin back, her easy smile comfortable while the wind of my strike tussled her hair.

Tucking the overhand in, I changed the hit's angle. The centrifugal force increased. More inertia built in the strike as it slammed into her stomach. Yet again, my fist met a wall of stone. This time, bones broke in my hand. My pinky knuckle snapped along with something in my wrist. I grimaced as Kessiah shot backwards. She hopped on her feet,

"You know what? It's actually been a long time since I had someone actually try to fight me up close. It's so refreshing."

I bolted towards her again. This wasn't the time to stop. In my mind, she fell back for a reason. Whenever I reached her, she rolled her eyes, "Alright little man, fun's over."

She moved her hands and legs faster than falling pianos. They carried the force of pianos too, each collision ripping against me. I adjusted myself to her speed, however. Since dodging exceeded my capabilities, I angled my arms, shoulders, and face so that her strikes would slide off. I even bent my armor to maximize the effect.

Three strikes veered off course, leaving me no worse for wear. Others landed. Two strikes throttled my face, my head whipping about. Keeping my focus, I tightened my arms against my core as several kicks, punches, and palms slid across me. Kessiah kept on attacking, her strikes growing in volume. My senses stretched as I pushed myself to deflect her blows. Every one of her attacks flowed into her next attack, giving me no time for rest or for a counter.

These attacks kept crashing into my sides, shoulders, and helm. The metal of my armor screeched, sparks shooting off the edges of it. I kept some ground, only taking a few steps back after a minute or two. Kessiah's eyes narrowed as a few more minutes passed, her assault unrelenting. At her current pace, I gained a sense of her timing. Random strikes and angles turned into patterns and monotony. The momentum of her attacks formed a rhythm, one I could latch onto.

After finding her pace, I stopped reacting and started predicting instead. I let two kicks skid off my armor before leaning straight into her next punch. Sure of my punch's timing, I tilted my head. Her fist shot past my face. The strike wove past me like a speeding car, both fast and heavy. Despite the enormous power, it slipped right by, and my hand crushed straight into her face.

My fingers, my bones, even my poor skin split and tore and ruptured. The armor crinkled as the strike landed with a pristine display of force and skill. In the end, her face outdid my hand, and pain exploded throughout my arm. It hurt less than missing her would've, more out of pride than anything. I deflected the next kick in her combo before shooting another punch with my left hand directly at her face.

The bones in my arm crunched as they had at the last punch. A kick from Kessiah landed straight into my stomach right after, keeling me over. She uppercut right into my chin, sending me flying backwards. I rolled on the ground a few times before putting a hand on the ground. It crunched. I glared up at Kessiah, my ribs broken but my will strong. I jerked myself up with vigor. I stomped over towards her.

Kessiah stared at me, "You know, I never imagined Torix would take a pugilist as a disciple. Odd."

My vigor aside, I lifted my arms, the broken bones flopping about. I winced at them, and Kessiah rolled her eyes, "If you still want to fight like that, then be my guest."

My anger inspiring me, I bent my armor over my forearms into long struts. They reinforced the bones, letting me fight again. Kessiah went forward with another jab, but I caught the timing, my

fist clapping against her chin. A small frown formed on her lips. She created two speeds of striking, one slow and one fast. This threw off my timing, and her blows rained in with the encompassing injury each hit entailed.

Injuries mounted, but I pushed myself forward. Her superior weight and strength made Kessiah a puzzle, one worth solving. After an hour of us duking it out, I incorporated a few of her movements into my own style of fighting. She slid on her feet from one attack to the other, launching kicks, punches, knees, and elbows. I tried the same stylistic implementations, and they worked well.

Her style squeezed from all angles with pressure, but it exhausted me. Unfortunately, Kessiah never neared fatigue. She fought without approaching her limits while I stretched my own. I leveled Deflection much faster than blocking arrows could. Other notifications sounded, but I ignored them, focused on the fight. Before I realized it, sweat dripped from between the joints of my armor. I heaved for breath as I struggled keeping up with her.

Kicks and punches, once easy to deflect, snapped against me with ease. Weaving in attacks went from something I did every now and again to a rarity. In time, my retaliation's shout turned into a whimper. In those exacting circumstances, I never stopped. My boosts in regeneration meant broken bones healed in minutes. Kessiah never relented in her assault, keeping it vicious and visceral.

She laughed when she heard my bones break. She giggled when I slipped on my feet. One of her punches loosened a tooth, and she stared down at me,

"You make for a fun punching bag, you know that?"

My gaze turned hard as metal. I redoubled my efforts. I had to push, push, then push harder. The lack of life or death made me lazy. Not anymore. I clung to victory like a raft in the sea, that trump my survival. My mind raced as every skill came into the picture. Scorn, Desperation, and Death's Dance all came in like a sudden surge of strength. I pushed through the exhaustion, activating the Ferocity and Challenger skills.

All the bonuses overlapped, enhancing my efforts. I left nothing on the table. I'd rip this Kessiah apart or die trying. When her strikes came towards me, I bended my armor to deflect her blows, reducing the movement required for dodging. The volume of my attacks increased tenfold as I freed up more of my movements for them.

I countered her strikes whenever I could, landing multiple attacks in a row at times. I chained them while dodging. In response, she increased her pressure, normalizing my boosts. I no longer trained in this match. I fought with the aim of killing her. Kessiah laughed and snickered at my struggling, enjoying the added difficulty.

Her eyes opened wide as I hit them. Her lips smiled when I smashed them. She didn't enjoy the pain; she enjoyed the challenge. I acted as a fighter who could stand against her. In my eyes, I existed as a fighter who'd outclass her.

She jumped back, "It's been so long since I met a real hand to hand fighter. They're so rare now. People always want to use guns or magic."

I pounded my heels into the ground, sprinting towards her. Kessiah waved an arm in a wide circle, "You reminded me of just how rusty I've gotten."

I countered her next strike, then her next kick before she raised an eyebrow, "You must have learned striking before Schema did? Your style reminds me of brawling on the ships with other kids, so long ago."

Her movements grew more fluid. Her strikes took on better, varied angles. From predictable to chaotic, I struggled to deflect them now. Her smile hungered, and her fists bloodied. She no longer pressed back, her joy taking over. She laughed out,

"You remind me of my brother Calyx. He and I would fight like this all the time."

My everything willed against her, my entire being honed in on this task. I fought with every piece of myself, grasping at any way of winning. Her own style reflected my own, turning primal. We sat there, my skill broaching new horizons while hers returned to its rightful place. She kept speeding up until her strikes exceeded my reaction times.

The hits crunched my armor like crumpling aluminum foil in a child's hands. Kessiah's onslaught broke my bones like snapping sticks. I fell onto my knees after a few hits from them before coughing up blood. Kessiah stopped her kick, right beside my face as she whined,

"Alright, Torix. Why did you stop me? I wasn't going to kill him."

I gasped for air as Torix walked out of the darkness of a side cavern. He kept his hands locked behind himself,

"Of course you wouldn't, but there's no need to break his pride...Or his neck."

Kessiah sighed before laying her foot onto the ground. Kessiah spread her arms to Torix, "Hey, at least now I know why he's caught your interest. Speaking of which-"

Kessiah turned herself to me, sitting on her heels. She lifted my chin with her finger and mouthed at me, "You've caught mine as well."

Barely breathing, I fell over to my side, fighting for air as my chest heaved. My stamina stayed at zero, below the minimum amount. After a minute of catching my breath, I sat up. My bones came back together, the arcane bonds reorienting into struts. This body of mine hated chaos,

and it restored order in place of turmoil. That desire resulted in a vehement, feverous regeneration.

Torix walked on stairs made of his dark mana towards us. He could've just floated, but the guy liked a dramatic entrance. Lifting a hand, he snapped his fingers, another unnecessary gesture. Our battle, bathed in my blood, cleaned up in a flash. Torix turned a hand to Kessiah,

"I'd love to thank you for saving my disciple and his companion, but I don't know if you truly have. After all, it would seem this training of yours is far more dangerous than the summons themselves."

Kessiah rolled her eyes, "You're soft."

Torix's eyes flared red, "And tearing down a prominent fighter, in his domain of expertise no less, isn't? This does little for his confidence, I can assure you."

I muttered, "I'm fine."

Kessiah gestured to me, "See? The man himself said so."

Torix stared at her, both of them passing a tense silence. Torix hissed, "Fine."

Kessiah put a hand on the necromancer's shoulder, "I knew you'd come around. Now, let's talk about this ritual. When are we going to spill it into the little man's guts?"

Torix's gaze turned towards me, then back towards Kessiah, "We may never."

Kessiah's eyes turned to slits, and she gripped his shoulder, "Hah...Here's the thing. I don't think I heard you right. That wasn't the deal. You know I don't like it when you try to remake our deals."

Torix pinched the bridge of his nose, peering off, "I understand Kessiah, but this is a difficult ritual. It's effects, we won't know about them until far into the future. I've learned little about the inner workings behind it, and the boy, he's not aware of the risk he's undertaking. More than his life is on the line here. His sanity. His dignity. His *Sentience*. All of it could wither away."

Kessiah let her hand down, "Not my problem."

I stood up, pushing through my mental exhaustion. I rolled my shoulders, "It's for your son, right?"

Torix peered towards me, his eyes flaring bright, "Must you speak of every-"

"Oh," Kessiah cut in. Her eyes widened as she found a place to dig in, "So that's what this is all about."

The remnant smiled wide, like a hyena finding prey, "This is going to be fun. Very, *very fun.*"