

The most common and numerous monsters that dwelled deep beneath the Horkensaft Kingdom were undoubtedly the various subspecies of shardlings. However, that did not necessarily mean they were the top of the food chain. The only reason those crystalline bugs had so much presence was that they reproduced way too quickly. They also weren't much of a threat unless someone or something brazenly walked into their nests. At least, not compared to the other beasties that roamed these depths.

Truthfully speaking though, there was no such thing as an undisputed king of this underground ecosystem. The shardling hives and their queens were a contender for the title, but that was only because of their overwhelming numbers. In terms of individual strength, however, the most dangerous one was without a doubt the borewurm.

This species of creature looked like a cross between a segmented worm and a centipede that was anywhere between one and ten meters long, depending on age. Its conical head opened up into a three-jawed mouth lined with teeth, which it used to burrow through the earth and chow down on prey. The dozens of legs sprouting from its body at all angles helped push it along its private passages. The array of limbs also gave it good mobility should it find itself in a huge cavern or some other kind of relatively open space.

When it came to combat, borewurms mostly relied on their brute strength since they did not have corrosive attacks like the shardlings. Which was probably a good thing, since they really didn't **need** to spit acid or poison to kill their targets. Whether it be by biting, body slamming or tail swipes, their opponents would end up smashed and crushed in short order. A borewurm's defenses were also quite formidable, as its entire body was covered in highly durable purple scales that gave homage to their draconic heritage. Their hides were so tough that even Katya's mechanized soldiers and their otherworldly armor-piercing ammunition had trouble punching through it.

"And zat eez vhy ze most effective method to keel zem eez to feed zem my bots, who vhill zen detonate and blow zem up from ze eenside."

"... I see. So that's what you meant when you said 'zere vhaz no vhei' for me to win."

Fizzy was currently riding aboard a Knight transport on her way back from the umpteenth shardling ant hunt. She and Katya had been going over potential targets for the golem's continued growth since those crystalline arthropods had proven to be insufficient to let her reach her immediate goal. Something she had nobody but herself to blame for.

Shardling hives had a habit of sending out their strongest individuals first when dealing with a threat to their nests. This made for a bountiful harvest of Levels for Fizzy, but that was only during the first and sometimes second attack. After that, the only ones left in defense of the shardling tunnels were the hatchlings. There were still hundreds of them, but they were so

pathetically weak that the vast majority of them didn't give out a single drop of XP and were only good for Skill Proficiency fodder.

Things turned from bad to worse when golem's Slayer of Shardlings Perk got upgraded to Hunter of Shardlings on her 2,000th kill. At that point the ants began actively avoiding her, making it that much difficult to hunt them down. It got so bad that three out of the four shardling hives Katya knew of had already relocated elsewhere, queens and all. As for the last one, it got wiped out by a single borewyrms after Fizzy and Katya decimated the toughest part of its swarm.

In short, the pint-sized Paladin and her gun-toting escorts had over-hunted and massively depopulated the shardling monster population in their immediate area. Objectively speaking, this was actually a good thing since monsters were aberrations that could potentially devastate entire continents if left unchecked. What this meant for Fizzy, however, was that she would need to find a new subjugation target if she was to reach her goal within any sort of reasonable time frame.

She was almost there, too. Over the past six days, she had managed to advance her Metal Golem Job to the point where she was a quarter of the way from Level 49 to Level 50. It was quite infuriating to have her Rank Up be so close, yet so far away. Part of what made her situation so annoying was that she was splitting XP between that and the Paladin Job. Even if she were to do things like fight bare handed or avoid using any of the related Skills, it would still sap a significant chunk of the XP.

Therefore, she gave up on trying to prioritize one over the other and instead focused on wiping out the enemy as efficiently as possible. It was alright even if it meant her Metal Golem Job would suffer in the short term, as there were always more monsters to kill. The downside of this approach was that she had overestimated her impact on the shardling population and ended up running out of easily accessible prey. The upside was that her Paladin Job had gone up to Level 46 and then some, which allowed her to pick up another Skill. One that a Paladin instructor back in Azurvale told her to watch out for.

[window]**Beacon of Faith**

Description: True devotion to the Gods can only be expressed through sincere faith and continued worship.

Requirements: Level 35 Paladin, Holy Scripture, FTH 200

Type: Passive

Activation Time: N/A

Cost: N/A

Range: Self

Effects: Gain additional FTH from all sources equal to 10% of the original amount (minimum of +1).

Increases the amount of FTH lost when violating a Taboo by 100%.

Increases the effectiveness of the FTH Attribute by 1% per Level of this Skill.

Provides an additional +4 FTH per Level of this Skill.[/window]

Theoretically speaking, it was something she could've picked up much sooner and gotten more benefit from. Unfortunately, theory and reality were known to disagree from time to time. Even if it was a Level 35 Skill, she didn't manage to meet the rather outrageous 200 Faith (FTH) requirement until about two days ago. But now that she had it, her divine abilities would grow at a much more rapid pace. The FTH Attribute was vitally important to a Paladin, after all. Not only did it boost the effectiveness of her holy magic, but the Strength of Faith Skill meant it would also amplify her melee damage. It could help improve her defenses as well if she were to pick up Radiant Presence or Bastion of Light at the higher Levels of the Job.

Ultimately though, even if she did mismanage her XP distribution, it was only a temporary setback. Surely it wouldn't be much longer before she reached her next Rank Up. That wasn't the main reason why she was feeling somewhat agitated right now. That particular cause was something else entirely that had been bothering her over the past week. Well, technically it was **two** things, but not being able to rejoin Boxy aside, Fizzy hated that she was neglecting her Arclight Artificer Job. Her salvage frenzy in Katya's junkyard had brought it up to 93% of the way to Level 60, meaning it too was on the verge of crossing a threshold. Achieving that Level would give her the Electromagnetism Skill, which would open up a whole new venue of research and development. Even if it wasn't something she could put into practice right away, she could still work on ideas and designs inside her head during downtimes.

Wait, wasn't there a solution to that particular niggle right under her nose?

"Say, Katya," she spoke up after making her mind up. "Since we have a lull in the monster hunting expeditions, would you mind helping me assemble something instead? I just need to borrow some tools and materials."

And by 'borrow' she of course meant 'appropriate with no obligation of return, reimbursement or recompense,' which was just a fancy way of saying 'stealing.'

"Assemble, you say?" asked the otherworlder over the radio.

"Yeah. I had this portable electric power pack when I came down here, but I lost it when I was crossing that molten ravine just before meeting Jeeves."

"Ohh! Yes, I remember zere being somezing like zat in ze security footage from ze Vault. Ze output vhas razer impressive - eet overloaded my sentree's seestem to ze point where eet go boom. You say you make zat yourself?"

"Well, yeah. I'm an Arclight Artificer, remember?"

"Right, right. Sorry, Feezy, eet slip mind. Eet has been busy several days."

"Yeah, tell me about it."

"So, zis pack, eez vhepon to use against stonekin?"

“Well, no. I doubt it would be very effective since it wouldn’t hold up to Stonesinger magic. Like, at all.”

Whether it be Withering Sands, Echo Blast or that Magnetize-like wave, all of those would turn the power pack into useless scrap. And those Stonesingers would keep trying to nail her with those things, regardless of the fact that they barely worked on her. The golem was sure of this, as she had been on two more outpost raids after the first one, though they went more or less the same way. The stonekin were extremely stubborn by nature, even more so than dwarves, so they had some difficulty adapting to this new variable on the battlefield. Therefore, it would probably be some time still before they thought up some way to stop Fizzy from breaking through their lines and smashing their defensive barrier generators.

But until such a time came, the golem and the android would continue to use the same strategy they did during the first assault. Except for the part where they waste time and resources taking meatbags prisoner. Fizzy was particularly unwilling to do that after what Rotadin went and did to her. Yes, his selfish actions did provide her with a very good understanding of the stonekin mindset, but that didn’t mean she was fond of the mental intrusion. She was a golem that was supposed to be invulnerable to such things, so the fact that it somehow happened despite that detail was highly unsettling.

At the very least there seemed to be no permanent issues. Both the transplanted memories and the habit of saying the word ‘bloody’ every other sentence faded away after a day or two. There were some lingering images and sounds, of course, but it was only at the stage of someone trying to remember a dream they had a week ago. The only remaining things that were still clear were the impressions and conclusions Fizzy had made based on what she saw at the time.

“So zen vhy bother making zat if eet vhill be useless?” asked Katya.

She actually wanted another weapon to help fight against the Original Artificer’s battle-bots, but she obviously wasn’t going to say that out loud.

“I just feel like I’m going to go crazy if I don’t find something to tinker with soon. And, no offense, but trying to figure out your automata will only drive me mad with frustration. Believe me, I’ve tried. I just need to make something from scratch to settle down a bit, you know?”

“Dah, I do. My feengers, zey also eetch from time to time, so I can understand zis feeling. And now zat you mention eet, I am becoming curious about how skeeled you are. So I vhill help you vhit zis project, but only if you let me observe and ask questions.”

“That’s fair enough, I’d say. I have the schematics all in my head, actually. Should I write them down somewhere?”

“Maybe later. For now, just tell me vhat you need and I shall make ze preparations.”

Fizzy then began listing off the raw materials she would need to make everything happen. The biggest problem was the enchanted electrostatic fluid that would serve as the battery and would

also be needed for some of the circuitry. It required an Alchemist's touch to make and the raw materials for it could only be found on the surface, so the golem was expecting to have to improvise a replacement or workaround of some kind. This was where Katya's hoarding habit came in handy, as it turned out she had several drums of the stuff tucked away in a warehouse somewhere. It was over a century old, but she claimed it was still good because of her 'meticulous storage practices.'

Which was just a fancy way of saying she put the stuff in an airtight bronze barrel and forgot about it.

Katya did offer Fizzy an alternative, though. In the event that the fluid turned out to be unusable, she would be willing to provide her with a miniature fission reactor of her own design. One that produced electricity by using radioactive material for fuel. This obviously made the golem more than a little uneasy about using it. Especially since Katya's reassurances that this one would not leak or blow up came across as rather hollow when she refused to elaborate on what she meant by 'this one.'

Upon her return to Novyy Dragunov, Fizzy was greeted by Katya's stand-in body and was led to a workshop with all the necessary tools and materials waiting for her. She immediately got to work, using her Geomagnetic Grip Skill to warp and bend the various metal panels and plates into the right shapes. Doing the finer parts was a mentally taxing exercise, as she had to focus to her utmost in order to get them just right. Fizzy could have just use a forge to do all that, but that way she wouldn't get to practice with this new ability.

As for Katya, she mostly played the role of an observer while the golem worked. She asked a question every now and then and dropped a few suggestions, but for the most part seemed genuinely interested. The otherworlder didn't offer any comments on Fizzy's performance when handling the tools though. All of her attention was focused entirely on the electrified metal backpack that was being assembled at high speed over a time frame of three hours.

[window]You have created a customized Electric Charge Pack of Uncommon quality.[/window]

"Damn, only Uncommon," grumbled Fizzy when she was done.

"Vhat, reely?" asked Katya with a raise of her eyebrow. "But you assembled zat perfectly, no?"

The golem placed a hand on her creation and gave it a thorough inspection with her Metallopathy.

"Hmm, it's probably because the fluid you gave me was a bit dodgy," she concluded after a few seconds.

"Nonsense! I meex zat batch myself!"

“Yeah, but you did that over a century ago. There’s no alchemical mixture that would keep for that long without losing its potency. If anything, the fact it seems to work at all is kind of amazing.”

“Yes, eez true I suppose... Vhill you be trying to make anozer one, zen?”

“No, that would be kind of pointless. You said it yourself - I assembled it perfectly. I need to get my hands on better quality materials before I try again.”

Fizzy needed to either make an entirely new device based on an original design, or produce items of Superior or higher rank. Otherwise her Arclight Artificer Job would gain next to nothing in terms of XP, as evidenced by how it was still at 93% past Level 59. This was the struggle of artisans - they had to constantly challenge themselves if they hoped to advance their craft. Simple uninspired mass production of low-quality goods would get them nowhere once they passed the Level 40 mark.

“But, ze pack. Eet vhorks?” asked Katya expectantly.

“Yeah, it should. Mind if I give it a test run?”

“Not at all. Pleez, be my guest.”

The golem picked up the charge pack and strapped it to her back via a pair of rubberized belts that went over each shoulder. Once she made sure everything was in place, she reached around and flicked the switch on the side to bring the thing up to ‘vaporize’ in one go. The pack stuttered for a moment as it started up. A series of electrical arcs began jumping between the golem’s skin and the metal bench she was standing next to without much incident.

“You seem unpleezed, Feezy,” commented Katya.

“Yeah, its output definitely isn’t as good as the old one,” lamented Fizzy, “but I guess it’ll have to do.”

Honestly, it was almost like comparing a candle to a campfire, but such was the difference between items that were two grades of quality apart. Not to mention the old one had gotten a very tasty performance boost from a successful Upgrade. Fizzy briefly considered doing the same to this, but quickly decided against it. The thing could become much worse if the Skill failed, and the overall increase would be rather minor if it would succeed. It simply wasn’t worth the risk.

“Oh! I have good idea!” exclaimed the plastic fembot. “Feezy, zis pack eez vwaterproof, yes?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Zen vhe should bring it to zis underground lake nearby. In zere lives type of kraken - vwater monster zat look like giant octopus. I use eet as model for ze Rooks, actually.”

"Wait, what? There are **krakens** down here?!"

"Eh, zey are not as beeg or strong as ze ones zat live in oceans on surfees," explained Katya. "But, zey should still give good Levels for you. I didn't suggest zem at first becoz undervhater combat eez pizdets. My boolets, zey not vhork so good in zere. But zis charge pack vhill make eet eezy fight!"

"... Are you sure about that?"

Fizzy had heard of those monstrous molluscs before, but her knowledge on the subject was limited to rumors and hearsay, much like the vast majority of the general populace. As far as she was aware, Krakens were exclusively saltwater monsters so large that they could eat entire battleships. They were by no means the only dwellers of the deep, but they were the undisputed biggest threat to intercontinental ship travel.

This meant that land-dwellers like Fizzy rarely had to worry about them, so they were largely ignorant as to what they could do. Therefore, the golem had no idea if Katya's confidence in her subpar creation was warranted. She might have had more confidence if it was her old portable power generator they were talking about, but she had some reservations about this inferior copy's performance.

"Very sure," declared the android. "Zey cause big problems for me vhen I had to import goods from south seas. Eez how I found out zapping zem eez very effective."

"Oh, so electricity is their Bane?"

"Yes," confirmed Katya with a nod. "Hit zem vhit strong current and zey go up in een smoke. Vhorst case scenario, I pool you out of lake vhit cable and vhe try somezing else."

"Alright, let's go give it a shot!"

Fizzy and her newest creation were loaded onto a Knight and transported out of Novyy Dragunov. The ride this time around only lasted four minutes, which was much shorter than what she was used to. It usually took up to a few hours for the mechanized vehicle to transport her to her destination, though mostly because the 'road' was terrible. The paths it used usually consisted of tunnels dug out either by stonekin, monsters, or Katya's own automata, so it was common for them to be winding and bumpy passages.

"So, this is the place, huh?" said Fizzy as she hopped off of the armored transport's back.

"Looks a lot like the lake where we caught Rot- I mean, that stonekin."

The stone pillars covered by fluorescent fungi almost made her think she was in the same place, but this body of water was much smaller than that one. It was more like a pond than a lake, to be honest. Judging from the piping everywhere, it probably served as a water source for Katya's manufacturing needs. Whether that was the reason it looked so small was unclear, but it

made the golem wonder if krakens actually dwelled in a shallow place like this as she got geared up.

“What the...? Something isn’t right here...”

The golem had set her wrench down on the ground while she fastened her power pack to her back. Except that, once it was firmly buckled into place, it felt somehow weird and foreign. It was supposed to have more or less the same design and specs as the original, so how come it was so... heavy?

KHHRRRRRRRANK

The source of this odd feeling was revealed when the backpack let out a loud whirring noise and began drilling into the golem’s back.

[window]Your torso has been pierced. HP - 647.[/window]

“Katya!” shouted the golem. “Is this you?! What are you doing?!”

She unbuckled the straps and clawed at it, but the thing had latched onto her like a tick and wouldn’t be removed. At least, not with the pathetic amount of strength she was putting into it.

“Me? I’m just dealing whit a traitor before she has ze chance to stab me in ze back!” said the voice in her ear. “Did you not zink I vould not notice vhat you are doing? Zo you take me for a fool?”

Indeed, Ekaterina Dragunova was not one to let even the smallest of details slip past her. She had seen right through Fizzy’s preparations to face her, so she had struck first. And she had done this by swapping out the golem’s charge pack for an identical looking one. That was why she had demanded the thing be transported in a luggage compartment separate from its owner.

“Bullshit! You’re the one that was going to betray me!” insisted Fizzy. “There’s no way a selfish cunt like you would ever hold up your end of the bargain once you got what you wanted!”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I guess you vhill never find out now. But you vhere right about one zing - I always got vhat I vwant. Be eet ze Realmstone, or your!”

“Oh, yeah?! We’ll see what you got once I tear this thing off and... and I... and I find... where... you...”

The golem’s words began to trail off. Her vision became blurry and the whirring noises emanating from her backpack suddenly grew muffled. She thought she heard Plus calling out to her, but even the voice in her own head was growing distant. In fact, it was becoming increasingly difficult to even form coherent thoughts. Her body became limp and she fell over onto her side with a thud. It was almost like her consciousness was slipping from her, but that wasn’t quite right.

Her golem core was being overwritten. The thing that served as both her heart and her brain was currently being, for lack of a better word, hacked by Katya's device. Mental attacks made with magic had no effect on her, but a physical intrusion like that was another story. And the otherworlder knew what she was doing, too. Golem crafting was the closest thing this world had to robotics when she arrived here, so it was natural she'd strive learn everything she could about them. She knew more about the subject than Fizzy herself did, and not by a narrow margin, either.

This interest that bordered on obsession was probably why, upon reaching Level 100 of the Automata Artificer Job, Katya had gained access to Universal Control Rod. This Ultimate Skill gave her the ability to make a device that could perform a hostile takeover of a wild golem's core and make it into her obedient servant. Truthfully speaking, Katya wasn't intending to do use this initially since the golem was cooperating. However, that incident with the prisoner and the golem's overall suspicious behavior had rapidly changed her mind.

She therefore decided she would take matters into her own hands, but she needed time to prepare. Much like people, each golem was unique in their own way, and Fizzy was even moreso. It had taken Katya several days of analyzing the mithril golem's construction before she understood it well enough to make a custom Universal Control Rod just for her. She needed to be careful, though, as she would get only one shot at this. Not only because capturing the golem alive would be extremely difficult if she failed, but also because she had a very limited supply of the adamantite drills necessary to pierce her mithril hide.

Still, she made good time on her secret project. Her Fizzy-controlling device had already been prepared when its target raised the topic of assembling a power pack all on her own. Katya then demanded she be an observer, though that was only so she could make a replica to serve as the control rod's disguise. She then fed Fizzy some plausible story about krakens and electricity to create this situation where the golem would willingly strap herself to it without thinking too hard. If the former gnome was more well-read and knew that a kraken's Bane was actually fire magic, she might have spotted Katya's bluff.

But she didn't, and the golem was now squarely in the palm of Katya's hand.

"Stand up," she commanded.

The mithril golem shuddered briefly, then rose to its feet with a series of stiff, clumsy motions.

"Hmm... Take five steps forward."

The golem complied once again, though its awkward gait very nearly made it trip over its own feet. This made Katya somewhat baffled. Just because she was suppressing Fizzy's ego didn't mean the golem should have suddenly forgotten basic functions. Its past experiences, knowledge and habits should have been unaffected, yet it was acting like its 'muscle memory' had been affected.

Did she perhaps make an error in the control rod's construction? She activated one of the buzzing Bishop bots and sent it out of the nearby Knight. The drone silently scanned the golem without Fizzy's knowledge or consent, much like it had been doing over the past week. And through it, Katya was able to confirm that the remote control device was functioning flawlessly. Of course it was. She wouldn't undertake this endeavor unless she was absolutely sure of her success.

And yet the mithril construct was not behaving as it should. Now that Katya had another set of 'eyes' on it, she noticed it was making tiny, barely noticeable movements. Almost as if it were shuddering or trembling. This only added to her confusion. The only way it would make this sort of reaction was if she had failed to thoroughly dominate the golem's consciousness. However, that was clearly not the case. The thoroughly blank look on its face and the unfocused, vacant stare in its eyes was evidence enough that Fizzy was completely under her control.

What Katya had failed to realize during her observation period, however, was that Fizzy had done everything in her power to conceal the true nature of the Parallel Plot Skill.

"Pa..."

The golem's mouth suddenly opened up, and a single syllable leaked out.

"No..." exclaimed Katya through the earpiece. "No, no, no, no!"

"Ra..."

"Stop zat!"

"Llel..."

"I command you to stop!"

"One..."

Fizzy's left eye suddenly let out a bright green glow as the efforts of her alter ego finally bore fruit.

"You just made a bad move, lady!" exclaimed Plus with a triumphant smile. "Nobody messes with Fizzy on my watch!"

"Chto za huinya?" cursed the otherworlder. "Who are you!?"

"I'm the one that's going to turn your ass into scrap if you don't give me my friend back!"

"Vhe'll see about zat! Nobody denies Ekaterina Dragunova!"

The robotic arm gripping Fizzy's core suddenly put the squeeze on it as it tried to jack into what was essentially her nervous system. This was something Plus was immediately made aware of, as the right side of her body stopped listening to her and suddenly went limp.

"You think I'll let that happen! Holy Light!"

The divine magic enveloped the body and immediately began repairing the damage inflicted by Katya's machine. However, it had burrowed itself so deep into the golem's back that the magic was incapable of forcefully ejecting it. At least it briefly restored her motor functions, allowing Plus to jump up and slam down onto her back hard. The iron shell that looked like a power pack was smashed, but the thing it was hiding was more or less undamaged and continued trying to hijack the body through force.

"Suka blyat! Stop what you are doing! You want kill Feezy?!"

"As if! Fizzy's way too tough to die from something like this! What do you care, anyway?"

"She's no good to me dead!"

"Well, that's too bad, isn't it?!"

Plus tried to stand up and slam her back against the floor again, but her right foot suddenly kicked out from under her and made her faceplant against the stone ground. The Parallel entity and the otherworlder continued their struggle, each trying to wrestle control over Fizzy's body from the other. Plus was at a disadvantage here, because she was on a timer. There was no telling if she could be able to assert herself again if her MP ran out and Parallel Plot was deactivated.

She then realized something - Katya could not control Fizzy's Skills. That was probably why she was trying to overwrite her personality rather than directly subverting her mechanical muscles like she was doing now. Which meant that there was nothing stopping Plus from enacting the Engine of Destruction. Or Magnetize. Or Geomagnetic Grip, for that matter.

"Feezy, stop yourself from using any Skeels!"

However, the otherworlder had predicted her intentions and ordered her thrall to get in Plus's way. Granted, she was grasping at straws with that command, but it was working. The golem's alter ego suddenly found herself struggling against both Katya's direct manipulations and her original self's subverted will. It wasn't quite two on one, but it was enough to keep her from using her body's abilities to fight off the mecha-bich's influence. Fizzy was even trying to say the words 'Parallel Zero' to completely shut off Plus's access, so things were definitely not looking good for her alter ego.

But Plus kept on struggling and didn't give up. Partly because she was Fizzy's clone, but mainly because she knew it wouldn't be long before she got some backup. After all, her continued attempts at fighting against Katya's control were doing wonders for one Skill in particular.

[window]Proficiency level increased. Parallel Plot is now Level 7. LCK +4. INT +2.
You have learned a new Spell: Parallel Two.[/window]

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

A new voice screamed inside Fizzy's head as the Paladin's second Parallel self suddenly woke up.

"I'm... I'm alive?" she muttered. *"I'm alive! Ah, crap. I'm alive, aren't I?"*

"That you are, sis!" cheered Plus.

"Sis? ... You're Plus, right? And this is Fiz-? Hold on! What the fuck is going on?!"

Being 'born' into a body that was currently fighting against itself was not the best way to start one's existence, to say the least.

"Look, we'll have plenty of time to figure that out later! Right now I need you to help me get this thing off our backs! Can you do that?"

"I... I don't know..."

"Well, you better figure it out quick!"

"Parallel-"

"-Two!"

The golem hijacked her own chant, and her right eye let out an emerald flame-like glimmer much like her left as a result.

"Look, you keep the right side under control, I'll handle the left!" shouted Plus inside Fizzy's head.

"I'm-! Trying-! But this-! Fucking-! Arm-! Isn't listening-!"

"What ze hell?! What are you doing in zere?!" shouted Katya when she noticed the added resistance.

"Breaking free of- Parallel Ze-bra! Zebra! What even is a zebra?! I don't know just- Parallel-NNNNNNNNAAAARGH! This is fucking insane! I know, isn't it great?!"

However, all she got in response was a trio of voices each trying to use the same mouth at the same time. Under the circumstances, she really had no idea how to react.

“Okay, now I need you to turn on Engine of Destruction! Can you do that?”

“I’ll try!” responded the newcomer. *“Just a little... more... there!”*

There was a loud thunk from somewhere inside the golem’s body, which began to rapidly heat up as it thrashed about. Now that the Engine was generating MP, Plus resumed healing herself and diminishing Katya’s control over the body while her new ‘sister’ tried her best to keep Fizzy from turning it off. This lasted for a good minute before Plus finally managed to rip out Katya’s control rod with Geomagnetic Grip.

However, the blasted thing didn’t go peacefully.

[window]Your core has been heavily damaged. HP -716.

Maximum HP reduced by 500.

The effectiveness of the INT and WIS Attributes has been reduced by 50%.

Automatic HP and MP recovery are now disabled.[/window]

“Oh, crap! Holy Light!”

Seeing those problematic side effects, Plus panicked and tried healing the damage with magic. The gaping hole in the golem’s back was sealed up without much incident, but her insides were another story. Katya’s machine had taken a thumb-sized piece of Fizzy’s mithril core with it when it was yanked out. Meaning that the mithril golem’s crippling injury was not something that could be fixed up so easily, as she was technically missing a part of her body.

“This is bad, this is bad, this is bad!” muttered Plus in a frantic manner.

“Come on, really?!” complained her alternate self. “How in the fuck did you manage to break Fizzy?! AAARGH! I barely even woke up and I’m already neck deep in shit!”

“Vhat-”

“You stay out of this!”

Now that the two of them were more or less in control, both Parallels moved Fizzy’s left hand up to her ear and ripped Katya’s radio out of it.

“Fucking bitch! Look what she did to us! What are we gonna do about this, Plus?!”

“I don’t know! I’m thinking!”

“Well, I’ll tell you! We go back there and we shove our collective fist up Katya’s ass! That’s what!”

Even though she was barely a few minutes old, this new entity still had access to Fizzy's memories. It was a lot of information to process all at once, but at this point in time she was well aware of who was to blame for her rude awakening.

"Are you crazy?! We're missing half our max MP, a fifth of our max HP, and Fizzy isn't responding! We should retreat and recuperate before-!"

Plus's argument was then rudely interrupted by the sound of gunfire from the side. She immediately raised up Fizzy's shield and crouched behind it to protect her head and upper body from the hail of bullets. It would appear that Katya had given up on making Fizzy her minion and had instead decided to scrap her and had rapidly deployed the dozen or so Pawns that she had packed up.

"Fuck! Okay, you win! Let's get out of here!"

Realizing that her elder sister had a point, the freshly spawned Parallel worked together with Plus to organize a retreat. She moved Fizzy's legs to get her away from the trigger-happy robots while her other self used a combination of holy magic and Geomagnetic Grip to cover her. She also made sure to pull in the high-tech Iron Teeth wrench with Magnetize and grip it securely in her right arm before focusing on falling back. It was the closest thing they had to a weapon, so leaving it behind was not a smart idea.

Running away was a bit of a problem in and of itself, however, as there was nowhere to hide in this wide open space. Neither of the two Parallel entities were willing to engage the enemy in open combat, either. The Pawns were far too agile and had too much room to evade any melee attacks, not to mention there were too many of them for the sole golem to take on alone. It might have been different if Fizzy herself was around or if their core was still intact, but neither of those things were true right now.

And so, having nowhere else to run to, the two of them ended up steering the mithril golem into the nearby lake. The normally still waters startled bubbling and boiling over the instant her red-hot frame made contact. Fizzy's body was entirely submerged in water after a few more seconds and kept walking along the bottom of the underground basin. Much like the Original Artificer had declared earlier, her bullets instantly lost all speed the instant they made contact with the water's surface. This allowed Plus and her new companion to widen the gap between them and their pursuer without suffering any additional damage from them.

They then spent the next few minutes wandering around the bottom of the lake. It didn't look like much on the surface, but it was much deeper than it appeared at first. In fact, the golem had been heading 'downhill' the entire time, yet there seemed to be no end in sight. Well, there wasn't much of anything in sight, to be honest. The only light source down here was the golem's own superheated body. Simple water was unable to completely quell the heat coming off of the Engine of Destruction, so the mithril frame continued to glow with a dull orange light as it boiled its way across the underwater terrain.

"So. What now?" asked the newcomer internally.

"I don't know," answered Plus. "Fizzy! You awake yet?!"

Unfortunately, much like the last twenty times she tried, the original did not respond.

"Great. I've only been alive for like five minutes and I'm already going to die surrounded by total darkness. This is just fucking fantastic."

"We'll be fine. It's not like we need air or food to survive down here."

"So what?! We're lost! The fucking core feels like its barely holding together, let alone that our HP and MP recovery is fucked! We won't even be able to move if we shut off this stupid Engine thing!"

Indeed, without the MP generation of that Skill, neither Parallel would be able to control the golem until the primary owner came back online. Thankfully Plus was still able to chant healing magic under these conditions, otherwise the self-inflicted damage would also pile up. Though that did mean she had to open her mouth to chant. Which resulted in her insides being flushed with filthy lake water. It was hardly a pleasant idea, but at least it wasn't dangerous or life-threatening.

"And what happens if we meet a kraken down here? Did you think about that?"

"Nah, not gonna happen," declared Plus. "You honestly think that off-worlder was being serious? This was obviously a trap to make Fizzy lower her guard!"

"She could've been telling the truth! She didn't lie about the 'boolets' being useless underwater, right? I bet she was planning on feeding us to the fucking thing if things didn't go her way! Fuck! Why not just find one and jump into its fucking mouth already?!"

"Teresa's tits, girl! Why must you be so negative?!"

*"Oh, I don't know. Maybe because the very first thing I had to do after gaining awareness was to **fight for my very life?!"***

"That settles it! I'm gonna call you Minus!"

"Please don't."

"Too late! You're already Minus! And don't try to say you're against it! We're both technically the same person, so we both know you think it fits!"

"... Yeah, okay. You have a point there. But what are we gonna do about the core situation?"

"No idea. I didn't even think to retrieve the broken core piece during our strategic retreat."

"You mean that messy, shameful escape?"

"Strategic. Retreat," repeated Plus assertively.

*"Whatever you say. Though to be honest, I doubt taking that broken bit with us would do us any good. We already lost an arm - good job on that, by the way - and we had to visit a golem technician to get that fixed. No idea if there's anyone alive that knows how to fix a fucking **core**."*

"Yeah..."

"Also, and I'm really sorry to say this, but I think I was right after all."

"Huh? About what?"

Just then, Plus noticed a massive shadow pass overhead, right on the edge of the bare-bones illumination given off by Fizzy's heated plating. Its exact size and shape were hard to make out, but it was impossible not to notice the bushel of tentacles trailing behind it.

"About the krakens," answered Minus.