

The New World

Chapter 14: The New World

Stacy crossed her arms and deadpanned, “Really? Let’s hear it then.”

David looked around with confidence, “So here’s what we’ll do. We can reanimate the golems and then set them off after the Sentinel. While the Sentinel’s distracted, we’ll sneak past the gateway.”

An awkward silence passed over us before Stacy and I peered at each other. I raised my hand, “David...Do you know how to reanimate golems?”

David frowned, “Well, uh...No.”

Stacy facepalmed, “And how long do you think the golems will keep the Sentinel distracted?”

David blinked, “I’m pretty sure if it’s level one thousand, the golems might keep it busy for a few seconds.”

I sighed before glaring at the guy, “Ahh yes. He then kills the golems in a second before killing me. Of course, of course. An excellent plan David, truly.”

David pointed at me, “I don’t see you coming up with any better ideas.”

I shrugged, “We don’t have the resources to pull off any crazy stunts. Let’s try talking it out, and I’ll let you guys lead the way.”

David crossed his arms, “Why do you think that’s going to work but not using the golems as a decoy?”

I gestured one arm to my left, “Because one plan involves not indirectly attacking the sentinel.” I gestured to my right, “On the other hand, the other plan *does*. That makes one of them intrinsically better.”

Stacy shrugged, “Well, let’s get moving guys. We won’t know until we show up.”

David and I nodded before we started packing up. Peering at Alfred’s diary, I wanted to carry it with me, but my armor got in the way. Responding to what I wanted, a portion of my chest splintered open. A maw of metal metal reached out, wrapping tendrils around the book. It swallowed it before anyone could respond.

It lurched back to me, pulling right into my chest. I gawked down at myself in horror, "What in the hell was that?"

My horror paled when compared to Stacy and David's own, and they stared at me, each of their expressions blank. I raised my hands, "Guys, I wanted to hold the book. That's it."

Like galena crystals weighing us down, a heavy stillness passed over us. This was no simple silence. The quiet carried a cutting edge of wild fear in it, and as I stared at David and Stacy's eyes, I found that terror. It oozed out of them. Then and there, a pang shot up my chest, and I peered down, cringing inside.

They were going to leave. I just knew. David spoke first, his voice cold, "Uhm...Yeah. That...It's totally fine."

Stacy raised her hands, "Absolutely. Hey, it happens to the best of us."

I furrowed my brow, "Yeah...for sure."

David waved his hands, "Yeah, so like, the Sentinel will definitely let you leave wearing something like that."

A weak smile traced my lips while I peered up. My new helmet covered it. "Good, I'm glad you guys agree. Come on. Let's go."

They packed quicker than usual, and we walked off towards the Sentinel. After a while of fighting off the stronger bats, I paced ahead of the others. I shouted behind me, "Keep your distance."

I willed Oppression, and the aura reared out. A swollen bat swooped down towards me. I narrowed my eyes before catching it. I raised it up over my head and slammed it into the ground. Like a gelatinous blob, it exploded outwards like a squishing watermelon.

David and Stacy stared at me as I slammed my hand into the head of another bat. It splattered into goo before one of them tried diving at my back. It caught on my new thickened spines. The blood dripped down my back before I pulled it off and ripped it in half. Other bats withered to darkened slush in Oppression's aura.

David spoke to Stacy, thinking I couldn't hear him, "Man, he does seem different, doesn't he?"

I frowned, my gaze turning hard. Another bat took the dive to me, and I growled while smashing its teeth in. I slung some gunk off my hand, speaking with a cool edge to my voice,

“Sorry guys if there’s too much gore. It’s kind of hard to kill bats any other way considering I’m using my bare hands.”

Stacy shouted back, “Don’t worry about us.”

I didn’t anymore. I got them out of this damn cave, and now they treated me like a monster because my armor freaked out. Yeah, it was scary, but that didn’t make *me* scary. I wasn’t my armor, after all.

Either way, I made excellent time despite the two of them holding me back. We ended up spending several days walking on the outer edge of BloodHollow before reaching the Sentinel. During that time, their fear showed more but so did my resentment of the situation.

I tried taking the armor off, but it wouldn’t budge. There weren’t any plates to speak off, and the only thing I learned was how to get the helmet to peel back. It left an eerie impression even on me, having the metal glide backwards like that. When it did cover my face, an crimson light ebbed out at all times too. It did me no favors when trying not to scare people.

Like before, I became accustomed to silence again. I trained as we walked, practicing punches and my footwork. It was calming for me like meditation or something. By the time we reached the sentinel, I could tell the two of them wanted out and so did I.

When we reached the Sentinel’s pit, David approached it, “Alright, so here’s the plan-“

Fed up, I leapt into the pit. I lost levity as gravity pulled me down. My stomach floated in my chest before I landed fifty feet down on the edge of the pit. I kept my feet steady, grinding my way down to the ground before landing several hundred feet below.

I walked over towards the sentinel, my damaging aura off this time, “Yo. What’s up?”

It turned to me, whipping its spear. It crackled with violet lightning as the Sentinel glared at me, “You wish to come this close then, riftkeeper? Know that I have not chosen to let you live. Schema has done so.”

In a flurry of spinning the Sentinel cleaved the bladed edge of its spear through several nearby boulders. Sliced fragments slid down the crags, glowing magma left on their cleaved edges. The Sentinel scoffed,

“But if you choose to die now, then let it be so.”

I raised my hands, taking a step back, “Woah, steady there hoss. I’m back from earlier. I killed the boss, and I want to get out of here.” I grimaced at the boulders, “Not get sliced up for doing what Schema asked.”

The Sentinel bent over and took a closer glance at me. After a few seconds, it planted its spear down,

“You...You are the human I saw before. How have you devolved into this...Abomination.”

A surge of anger coursed through my mind, but I held my tongue while mouthing, “Baldag-Ruhl wasn’t something I could beat without carrying a few scars. Now, do you mind letting me out now?”

The sentinel stood back up, not quite twice my height anymore. He still dwarfed me while peering down, “Unknowns are normally allowed to leave, but based on your records, you are an exception. Your presence is too volatile.”

I stamped its spear down, “I will destroy you if you attempt doing so.”

I held my eyes shut for a second, a spiking, violent anger surging up my chest. This entire situation in BloodHollow, from start to finish, was unfair. I wasn’t given a tutorial. I got put in some armor I couldn’t take off. People, who I thought were my friends, were now terrified of me. Standing here after having pulled through it all, I was being told I couldn’t leave.

I snapped at it, “What the hell is wrong with Schema? I killed the dungeon keeper like it asked. It’s dead. Me? I’m not the threat here. *It was*. I got the core and was told I could leave. I’m supposed to be able to get out of this dark, miserable hole now. I need to get out of here.”

“You cannot?”

I threw my hands up, taking a step closer to it, “Do you just expect me to stay here forever?”

“Yes, unless you are authorized to leave.”

I took a breath before opening my status, willing the Sentinel to see it, “What about this message. It says I can leave.”

The Sentinel peered at the message, “Hm. That is the appropriate authorization. You may leave at your leisure.”

“Then I’ll be going.”

It raised a palm to me, announcing, “Halt. You are not allowed passage. I will only warn you once.”

I showed it the message again, and the Sentinel replied with frustration,

“Human, perhaps you are hard of hearing. I will repeat myself – you may leave at any time.”

I tried stepping up to the gate, and the Sentinel lifted its spear, “You have chosen death.”

I shouted at it, “Are you bipolar? Either that or you and Schema are lying to me.”

The Sentinel slammed its spear back down, “Do not speak blasphemy in my presence.”

I rubbed my temples, “But it gave me a message saying I can leave. Now, I can’t. Isn’t that lying?”

The Sentinel leaned back. “Yes. Wait...But no...Fine. I will allow you to pass.”

I spread out my hands, “It’s about damn time.” I turned to David and Stacy, “Alright guys. I’ll come get you guys down the wall.”

Stacy and David had crawled about halfway down the pit to my surprise. They steep slope didn’t really deter them, each of them feeling their way down. It reminded me of mountain goats. I pursed my lips,

“Damn guys. You never told me you were rock climbers.”

Stacy shouted, “It’s the system. I got this dexterity perk, and that is the *only* reason I am doing this crazy bs.”

David spoke with a shaking voice, “Same.”

They got down about ten minutes later. As they got closer to the Sentinel, they gaped in awe at its majesty. Of course they would. I did too. The carnage it left behind only added to its impression, and I was glad it was on our side. If anything, it could’ve cleared this dungeon with ease.

Wondering why it didn’t, I looked up at it,

“So, uh, Sentinel guy...Why don’t you kill the monsters yourself?”

It stated, “Ambient mana corrupts over time. You are a perfect example of this disgusting, abhorrent phenomenon. Schema cherishes us Sentinels, so it wouldn’t waste our might on something so paltry.”

I put my hands on my hips, “Oh yeah, instead of killing the dimension destroying monsters, Schema has you guys standing in front of doors. What a prioritizer, let me tell yah.”

The robotic entity processed what I said over a few moments before gazing down at me, "Ah yes, I remember this emotion from long ago. I believe it is hatred."

I furrowed my brow, "Good. Let's get out of here."

David peered at me like I was crazy, "Your balls are made of steel man. I'd never talk to that guy like that."

I shook my head, "It's not that I'm brave. I just know how these things work. They obey orders, and thoroughly."

The sentinel simmered, "Lucky for you, simpleton."

I shrugged, "Last time I checked, standing in front of a door was a lot less complicated than killing monsters. You sure I'm the simpleton?"

The Sentinel stared forward, "Yes. No more speaking."

I waved a hand at David and Stacy, "See you guys on the other side."

The doorway opened, revealing the outside of the cave. I paced out, finding myself on the edge of a hillside. A patch of green turf gave way to the vibrance of a forest. The warm wind hit my face. The sunshine beamed down on me. I could hear birds singing, and the rich smell of earth and trees hit me like a truck.

I'd never missed the forest so much. I quelled a wave of emotion as I stepped out. The grass and dirt hugged my feet with a soft embrace when compared to the stone. I rubbed my feet against it, relishing the sensation as Stacy and David walked out from behind me. The Sentinel slammed the hilt of his spear, snapping the doors shut behind us.

The Sentinel's voice radiated from our surroundings, "I have decided that Instead of making the decision on my own, I will leave it to Schema."

The Sentinel rumbled, "Remember this human – Schema is much harsher than I. Disrespect it, and you will suffer."

That seemed like good advice, so I nodded before a voice popped up in my head. It was cold, the kind of cold that burns your hands and numbs your nose. The closest thing like it would be the eldritch energy that Baldag released. To me, this wasn't something sentient. It was a machine through and through.

"Unknown variable detected. Owns entry key ID 84295730549. Entry allowed. Access denied. Entry allowed. Access denied. Higher clearance required. Assistance request sent...Assistance request accepted."

Stacy and David sat in the turf as the biting cold stopped in an instant. A warmth came and replaced it. The voice like Morgan Freeman and an old british guy came back up,

“You seem surprised. I’m Schema. Well, a portion of it. You just spoke with one of hundreds of personal AI’s of mine. Unlike me, they are limited in scope. I automate most functions with them. Now, explain the situation in detail using your own words. I need to understand your situation before I can act.”

Grateful for an outlet, I explained Baldag-Ruhl’s story in detail, along with Alfred Worm’s own take. Schema listened intently, asking pointed questions at times. He spoke with the familiarity of an old friend. By the end of the conversation, my animosity towards the AI melted. I just couldn’t bring myself to dislike him.

After finishing with how the Sentinel sent the request, Schema sighed, “This is a difficult situation...On the one hand, you are a tremendous risk. I hope you understand that. There are volatile energies in that armor, and they may grow over time. You could very well unsettle the careful balance I’ve created.”

My heart sank. I even mentioned quite a few heroic details about my time there. They obviously didn’t do much. Schema’s voice rose, “That is, unless you aim to help keep my balance stable.”

I opened my status, “Check this out. I need ambient mana for my armor’s evolutions anyway. Surely that’ll help with the balance thing.”

“Ah, your armor can absorb the rift energy? Interesting...I’ve decided what I’ll do. I’ll allow you to leave this place if you accept a detailed and extensive set of requirements. They will include the clearing of other rifts, killing less stable Unknowns, and reaching a quota of ambient mana absorbed every month.”

Hope rose in my chest as Schema said, “This is non-negotiable. If you choose not to accept, I will strip you from the system. You will become this rift’s new keeper.”

As it appeared, I clicked the yes button to whatever terms Schema gave me. Staying in BloodHollow simply wasn’t an option. Schema radiated warmth, “Good. Your decisiveness will help you in the future. It will help me. Goodbye.”

The presence left, snapping away in an instant. Without knowing it, I let out a huge lungful of air. I breathed out the tension as messages appeared.

Proof of Loyalty – There are things that fall outside the realm of Schema’s control or even understanding. You are what is sent to kill these things, whatever they may be.

0/3 Unknowns killed | Timeline(10 years left)

Proof of Societal Adherence – Clearing a dungeon is a tall order, and many choose to avoid it. You have been commanded to destroy many.

0/3 Dungeons cores obtained | Timeline(1 year left)

Experimental Procedures – You are a monster. Become he who eats monsters.

0/2,000,000 ambient mana eaten | Timeline(1 month)

Glancing at the requirements, they weren't bad by any means. In all honesty, I intended on doing this even if I just messed around. Well, besides for the Unknown part. I didn't really know how to even begin looking for one, but I had ten whole years ahead of me. I'd worry about it if they turned out to be super rare.

Turning to the doors, I shouted, "Yo Sentinel. If you can hear me, I just wanted to say thanks for giving me this chance."

The Sentinel spoke from all angles, "I did nothing. Turn your praise from me to Schema. He is your true saviour."

I gave that some thought, hoping it was true. Peering around, David and Stacy disappeared. I squeezed a hand into a fist, thinking they darted away while I wasn't looking. I grimaced. I didn't need them then.

They both walked out of some trees, carrying a few squirrels. I beamed a smile at them both, finding myself beaming despite myself. They came up and we roasted the squirrels over a fire. Simple as it was, the change in flavor made all the difference. We indulged ourselves on these delicacies.

As we did, my armor peeled back without me thinking about it. It responded to basic needs so far, like, you know, using the bathroom and stuff. The only thing it didn't do was peel off. Thinking about it coming all the way off, I shivered. For some reason, that thought disturbed me.

As we finished the squirrels, David scratched the back of his head, "Hey, you know...We never really thanked you for saving us or getting us out of there. I mean, it's like-

I put my hand on his shoulder, "Don't worry about it. When I saw you guys looking so pitiful, I had to save you guys."

Stacy smiled, "Yeah, well, thanks anyways."

A comradery came over us, and the awkward tension from the last couple days just oozed into ether. We joked around. We talked about our builds. We just...Had a good time. Ending the hoopla, Stacy leaned towards the fire,

“What are you going to do now, Daniel?”

“Hm. I’m going home to check out if anyone’s there. After that, I’ll probably look for my friends. What about you guys?”

David winced, “I’m getting ready to get screamed at by my parents.”

Stacy’s shoulders went slack, “Yeah. Same.”

I shrugged as I said, “You know, maybe we can clear a dungeon later. If I’m looking for someone, I’ll hit you guys up.”

An uneasy look passed over them. David gave a curt nod, “Uh, yeah. Sure.”

Ah. They were just trying to leave on good terms. A part of me wanted to call them out, to make them say it out loud. I chose not to because I wanted us to avoid the drama. I took a breath and stood up, “I have to go guys. This was fun.”

They nodded and Stacy said, “Looks like it’s time for our parents to kill us.”

I banged my leg, a metallic ring echoing, “My old man’s going to need a miracle to get that done.” I raised hand, turning to my hometown, “See you guys.”

I walked off while they gave me a wave. Moments later, I ran instead of walking. People walked because running every came with issues like ruining clothes, getting sweaty, and destroying joints. Not worrying about all of that, I got moving. I dashed right through thick brambles and dense underbrush. I darted over thick boulders and fallen logs.

I wielded my new body like a wedge, and I drove it through the forest with glee. It was fun just experiencing the system’s gains, and it let me wind down after all the pressure in the dungeon. I kept that pace for a few minutes before stopping far away from anyone. Surrounded by a sea of green, I wondered what Oppression would do here.

Making sure no one was close, I activated Oppression. The aura’s impact manifested over a few seconds. The world around me died. All the leaves on the trees fell, brown and dried. The trunks twisted and contorted under oppression’s might. Brushes coiled into dead branches. The birds fell to the ground, turning to slush in seconds.

I shut Oppression down. I shivered for a second, staring at my hands. What happened in that cave was no dream. It was as real as the wind on my back and the sun lighting my way forward. A part of me knew this was real even without testing anything. The system and Schema were as solid and substantial as gravity.

And yet, a part of me denied everything up till now. After seeing the devastation somewhere familiar, the denial lodged in me withered away like the trees. Seeing an old

playground fall apart like that tended to have that effect. It gave me a sense of urgency and unease as I ran towards my old home.

I came across the first inklings of the city. There existed an old, industrial center on the way home. As I passed it, the system's effects showed themselves. First off, no one dotted the streets. It was a ghost town outside of disparate campfires spread throughout the landscape. I found them via smoke plumes drifting in the air.

Those drifting spots rose up from all angles. A few fires raged from those spots. Quite a few buildings burned down like barbecue joints or certain restaurants. I found factories standing amidst crumbled pillars. Adding to the emptiness, lots of empty cars haunted the roads, making them nearly unusable.

Some of those cars showed scuff marks where people ploughed through blockages and sidewalks. Many cars smashed right into poles, other cars, and even buildings in certain spots. People left everything out in the open, from shopping carts to baby carriages. My stomach sank at the thought of what happened to those babies in the tutorial.

I didn't dwell on it.

I kept moving. As I passed through stores, I found them already raided. People robbed the owners blind, taking anything that wasn't bolted to the floor a while back. Some shopping carts went missing, the buggies used to carry the goods elsewhere. At least people weren't starving. Yet.

I passed the industrial district, getting more towards the suburbia of Springfield. It was wedged between the main town and the industrial sectors. People looked for leisure in the former and work in the latter. A lot of the factories were abandoned by now, the industrial jobs going elsewhere.

Well, the suburbia followed suit in the system's wake. There wasn't any power, and cars still littered the streets. I walked over broken glass from shattered windows, and I found people using fires outside to cook food. I tried waving at one group, but they screamed at the sight of me.

I gritted my teeth at that, a bit scorned by them howling despite my cordial wave. Either way, I kept to myself afterwards. I didn't have the energy to explain my situation to everybody, and despite only seeing that group for a few seconds, I learned a lot.

Scars littered them, from their hands to their faces. I wasn't the only one that battled it out. That was good. Lots of people weren't adjusting well yet, but some made their mark already. The survivors would pool together, and like humanity always did, they'd make it happen.

Hoping I'd find some people I knew among them, I found my father's old apartment. Our apartment. The power wasn't on, as I expected. Passing the parking lot, I found dad's

beat up convertible sitting in the parking lot. At the sight of it, fear raced up my chest. Leaving the car alone wasn't a good sign.

Don't get me wrong, I hated my dad. He was a grade-A jackass of the highest order. My resentments aside, I didn't want the guy dead. I ran up the exposed stairwell on the side of our apartment. The metal stairs clanked before I reached the second floor of the place. I found the doors to each apartment building broken down, including ours.

I ran into the familiar studio apartment. As always, trash littered the floor, but the kitchen reeked like something died in it; Dad had left the refrigerator door open. Without the power working right, flies and bacteria were well on their way to making our food into a disgusting slop. I leaned over it, everything a bit smaller than it used to be.

The ceilings were shorter than I remembered. I walked around, finding no trace of dad anywhere. A pack of half emptied beers laid beside his bed, and someone tore the place upside down searching for valuables. They didn't find anything, of course, but it still felt awful having someone tear through our stuff.

I reached my bed, the futan. I kept all my clothes folded under it, along with my school supplies. My boxing gloves were still squeezed between the wall and the sofa. I took them out, staring at the worn, faded leather.

I took a breath, closing my eyes. What had I expected, exactly? A warm welcome? People glad I was home? It wasn't going to be that damn easy. If dad survived the tutorial, and that was a big if, he probably came home for a hot minute and left. He got what he could before bailing.

Knowing he might've left, I searched for signs of what he did while he was here. I peered around, not finding his boots anywhere. He always came back from his construction job with mud all over them, and they left footprints on the carpet. Getting him to stop doing that was the same as getting him to clean up. It was a waste of time. That bad habit did leave its mark, however.

I found those footprints leading outside. Using my better eyesight, I found some footprints less aged than others, still kind of moist. I also found the same boot marks on the doors of our neighbor's apartment. The bookmarks led inside each building. Walking out of a ransacked apartment, I leaned my head against a doorway before kicking in a nearby wall.

My dad survived all right. He came back here and looted our neighbors. I tapped my head against one of the kicked in doors. Waves of burning, searing shame passed over me. Sometimes, I just wanted dad's blood out of me. It was like a festering infection under my skin. I wanted to just get the hell away from him, to be somewhere he wasn't.

I reared an arm back and smashed it into the doorframe of our apartment. The wood crushed in, sheetrock snapping like tissue paper. I smiled at the wounded entrance. I let out a laugh. An epiphany struck me, and it was so obvious after thinking about it.

I never had to see him again.

I reared a foot back, kicking into one of the walls of our room. My foot smashed through a stud, and my leg ended up piercing the wall halfway. I let out another laugh, pulling my foot back out. I never had to come here again. The world had changed in its entirety and I along with it. This place was me clinging to normalcy, but that was dead and gone.

I let out another laugh. On impulse, I ran through our apartment, smashing furniture, our tv, and my old bed. I laughed so much I scared myself. I turned the fridge over, throwing dishes and breaking the glass. I flipped the sink, tearing the pipes with a heaving shove. I ravaged the walls, and I tore dad's mattress in half too.

It was a goodbye to this place. It was a goodbye to everything my life had ever been and would ever be. I ripped the walls off and smashed the windows. I laughed like a madman, the catharsis so sweet and intoxicating. This hellhole was where I got beat for so many years. Now, I returned the favor to the walls that watched me the entire time.

As I walked out of that place, the roof caved in where dad normally slept. Dust piled at the bottom of the room, and it looked like a molten hailstorm turned the place inside out. The mastermind behind it all, I wiped my hands clean of the place, smacking my palms together with satisfaction.

Damn. I needed that.

Taking a step away from my old life and into a new one, I began my search for Michael and Kelsey. The first obvious place to search was where they lived. Kelsy stayed in a nicer part of Springfield's suburbia while Michael was in a forested home. Choosing the closer of the two places first, I walked the streets in that direction.

Passing the abandoned cityscape, I found a few loners or vagrants. Some of them looted shops or homes. Others searched for others while shouting aloud. On a street near Kelsey's home, I walked up to one of these individuals seeking a loved one. It was an older man, mid forties with short hair. His clothes were covered in sweat and grime, but he cleaned himself up since the tutorial.

He shouted the name Ashley over and over. Trying to strike up a conversation, I jogged up with a hand raised,

"Hey man, have you seen a girl nam-"

His eyes went wild at the sight of me, the guy on edge. I stopped approaching and raised my palms, "Woah man, calm down."

He took a pistol out of his back pocket, and my blood froze over when he pointed it at me. Without any preamble, the barrel flashed several times. My chest thudded with several heavy impacts, blood seeping down my stomach. I spit up blood, peering down. Several bullets lodged into my chest, cracking through my chest plate.

I glared at him, fear warping into fury. I darted sideways, moving my head and staying low. He fired twice more before his gun began clicking. I dashed towards him right after as he scrambled to load another clip.

Before he could reload, I was upon him. I grabbed him with a hand, lifting him up. I grabbed the gun out of his hand, and as I pulled it away from him, several of his fingers snapped. He howled out in anguish as I threw the gun down. Parts flung in all directions before I stomped the plated steel. It bent underfoot, the barrel unusable now.

I roared at him, "What the hell was that? Huh? Why did you fire at me?"

My armor grinned a crimson red, the ominous light leaking out. Jagged, metal teeth lurched open, and the man I held lost the little reason he had left. He tried pulling and jerking at my hand, but he was weak. Holding there, I watched his eyes go bloodshot as he scrambled for an escape.

I wanted to give him a firm slap, but even now, I couldn't really gauge my strength. I held a fully grown man up with a single arm. It required serious effort, but that wasn't possible before the system. The man hadn't invested in constitution yet either, so he was soft and pliable like a loaf of bread.

Unlike bread, he'd scream if I squeezed.

So I dropped him. He fell down and back, scrounging for an escape. Like some kind of animal, he sprinted away while grasping his broken fingers. I peered away before spitting up some blood. Looking down, I swallowed before turning around. A few prying eyes peered on from within homes nearby, but they stayed to themselves.

Not wanting to get shot again, I hopped several fences before laying down in a cluster of bushes. Looking down, blood dribbled from my wounds like dripping faucets. I shook off some fatigue before resolving myself. I took a shaking hand and reached into a wound.

Like fire dampened with ice, a tolerable pain surged up through my shoulder. I reached around until I found something hard. Pulling a lead round out, I gasped as it fell onto the dirt beneath me. I followed the same process for all the other bullets, cringing as each metallic round fell out of my chest.

By the end of it all, I heaved for breath. Pain Tolerance or not, this wore me down quickly. My chest healed up before I stayed in the bushes, afraid of other people at this

point. If anything, it was a miracle I survived the six rounds in my chest. It left my health at around half, which meant a series of headshots could still kill me.

After several minutes, I regenerated. Coming up with a different approach, I snuck through the suburbia's back yards and foliage. It wasn't the best cover by any means, but it was better than walking out in the open. I kept my helmet up as well, not wanting a stray bullet to kill me instantly. People seemed a bit too trigger happy to take that risk.

I reached Kelsey's house, and I found the upper class home in shambles. They used a cut and fill style home, one built partially into the hill. Something pried a gaping hole into the bricks of their basement. It was like a giant creature erupted from the lower level of their home. That made the roof cave in on the upper floor, ruining the home.

Creeping around and peering in windows, no one stayed within. I knocked on the door, breaking a window on accident as I did. It didn't matter. No one was home, and walking in through the unlocked door, I could see why.

Massive rats nested here. Peering at me as I walked in, they chewed at canned food and bagged groceries. The beady eyes locked with mine, and I inspected them.

Sewer Rat | lvl 6 – Sewer rats are some of the weakest creatures to spawn from dungeons. They escape often and rise from the depths of different areas, often times within days of the system arriving. While not dangerous alone, a pack of rats can swarm a sleeping or vulnerable adventurer, chewing them apart in minutes.

You have nothing to fear from these creatures.

They swarmed me. Rats crawled from all angles, knocking over furniture, antiques, and glassware. I kicked the first rat, and it splattered. The gunk got in the eyes of two other rats who let out tiny howls. I swung at two more rats, making them into a red paste across the room. Entrails and guts spilled as I culled the local population, and when half of them were dead, the rodents retreated.

I followed them, inspecting rooms for clues about Kelsey as I did. I found little to work off of. I wasn't as lucky here as I was with my place. Nobody owned a pair of muddy boots here. In fact, it didn't look like they did more than peer inside and leave. That's why I couldn't piece together anything tangible.

Reaching the basement, I found a cavern leading underground. It reeked of sulphur and soil. Claw marks smothered the walls of the tunnel, and pieces of broken concrete and brick sprawled out into the basement. Something tore out of this place from the ground up, and it was loose in the neighborhood.

I didn't really care about the trigger happy population here. I kept myself focused, trying to find clues about Kelsey. Peering into the tunnel, I found it fed into the sewer below

the city. Curiosity flamed in my chest, and there might be hints about Kelsey's whereabouts down there.

Taking the dive into the unknown, I went back underground after having left it earlier that day. Unlike BloodHollow, this was an entirely different kind of dungeon. Nothing quarantined the beasts into the place, letting them run amoc. This was where the rats in Kelsey's home retreated to, so I followed the swarming tide.

It was a different world down there. Vibrant greens grew all over the place. Glowing mushrooms lit the way as I crushed and pulped the rats nearby. Pacing down the tunnel and into the sewer proper, life overtook the concrete walkways.

The foliage carried a neon shade to it, bright beyond belief. I gawked at the sight of everything, purple and violet flowers leaving glowing trails of sweet smelling pollen. The rats feasted on this buffet of life. Along the way, I found glowing patches of green algae over the sewer's waters. One patch of the algae shot out and pulled a rat into the water, disappearing into the depths below.

I kept my distance, hugging the edges of the walkways. I killed rats along the way, keeping Oppression deactivated for now. I didn't want to kill someone on the surface above me. Pushing forward, I left a trail of red muck and killed rats behind me. In this wondrous path, I forged a trail through the teeming life.

I stayed on edge the entire time despite the low level of the monsters here. The reason for that was simple – my armor trembled. Like a stone landing in a well, tiny ripples crossed over my skin as I left corpses behind me. Unnerved but still undeterred, I pushed through the vines. Inevitably, I found crosswalks where portions of the sewer connected.

Here, tiny wooden walkways built up between the gaps of water. I inspected one, finding crude knotwork holding it all together with vines. Trying to figure out what happened, I zoned out at the variety of miniature architecture I found here.

From behind me, a whistling knocked me out of my trance. I covered my neck, and an arrow snapped across my shoulder. I turned around, finding rats on their hind legs. Standing upright, they glared at me while other members cruised in from all angles. Like little soldiers, they came at me with sticks, swords, and shields.

I raised my hands, "Woah now, I'm not here-"

More arrows snapped against my chest. I pointed at a tiny archer, "Hey, stop-"

A stick smacked against my cheek, a stinging pain dousing my mercy in an instant. The rat soldier swung at my face again, but I caught the stick. I pulled it to me before swiping my hand sideways. Its skull crushed against the wall to my left as I growled,

“You want more? Huh?”

They attacked in a swarm. I kicked them to pieces. I shattered their bones. I ripped them apart. Despite my dominance, they showed no fear. Something pushed them forth, but I wasn't about to make excuses for my enemies. They chose to fight me, and I would crush them for it.

Going deeper into this microcosm, I used my minimap for direction. Winding twists and abrupt turns followed the homes overhead. I followed the tunnels, finding endless waves of rats both standing and on all fours.

But I found no trace of Kelsey or Michael. Getting ready to leave, I found a developed section of the rat's civilization. Here, a gate stood between me and one of the sewer's deadends. I kicked the wooden stakes apart, the wood splintering. A large rat wore a crown of vines and bioluminescent flowers.

He screeched at the other rats beside him, and they tried defending themselves. I rushed them, goring them apart in sprays of blood and guts. Grotesque but effective, I left them and their bodies mangled. The boss was only level twelve at this point, after all.

Peering around, I found trinkets from the surface littered about. Perusing it all, I got insected kitchen utensils, broken bottles, and a weaponized stapler. I shot out some ineffective staples from the jury-rigged junk before finding a pile of picture frames. In the pile, I uncovered a cracked frame with Kelsey on it.

It showed her mom, dad, and extended family on it from a few years ago. I lifted it up, grinning at it. Instead of searching for only her, I could use this to find people related to her now. That opened up my inspection immensely.

Finding what I really wanted, I walked past a chainmail vest not even worth carrying. Kicking it aside, I strutted past the rat king's body. As I did, my metal chest plate crinkled before launching out. The jagged, crushing teeth chomped into the rat king's body.

I stumbled back as my armor tore the corpse into bite-sized chunks. Unable to stop my armor, it swallowed the rat's body before I could even respond. A cold sweat dripped down the back of my neck as I stayed pressed against the wall of the dungeon.

I peered down, disgusted with the armor. Looking around, I found one of the tiny swords the rats used earlier. I pried at a piece of armor on my arm, trying to get it off. I pierced into the flesh, trying to gouge it off. I tore off a plate, and it peeled off like a crab's shell. To my horror, my skin came off with the armor. That was nothing.

Peering under the plate, tiny, metal, and squirming feelers wriggled towards my flesh.

I scrambled back to the edge of the wall, grabbing the sides of my head. The plate slapped back down, and it fused back to my skin. I didn't feel the legs crawl into my arm. I didn't even feel itchy either, the plate's return entirely natural. If anything, trying to peel it off had felt like flaying myself alive.

And yet, I wanted it off. I wanted the armor the hell away from me. Sitting there, panic turned into self pity. I was a monster. I couldn't find my friends. I couldn't even talk to anyone anymore. I had hoped that getting out of the cave would've made me less isolated. If anything, I felt worse. People avoided me like I was some demonic creature.

It...It was like I was howling at the top of my lungs in a crowd, but no one could hear me scream.

I blinked away tears from shock before controlling my breathing. As I calmed down, I pulled myself together. I already put so much into surviving this whole process. I was sure as hell not going to let this armor stop me from following through. I held onto the hope that I'd get out of here, find my friends, and they'd help me.

And I'd help them too.

Hoping for answers, I checked my character screen, wondering if it could explain anything. It actually did. I gained twelve hundred ambient mana from the rat king. It wasn't much compared to what I needed, but it would be enough to handle Schema's quest, in time. Well, assuming I faced stronger enemies.

Either way, the flood of panic passed before I started looking for a way out of the sewers. Several manholes led up to the surface nearby, but dense underbrush smothered the exits. I kept wondering around for an easy one to pry up through before a few voices echoed from afar. Curiosity came over me, and I snuck my way up to the discussion.

As I closed in, I realized the voices weren't human.

One wisped its words light like air,

"Stay on your toes. You never know if we'll need to kill a native."

Fear raced up my spine while another voice laughed,

"There's nothing here above level ten. Don't worry about it. We'll take a few cores, sell them, and live somewhere nice and safe. It isn't like a native could...What was that?"

One of the rats came running up to me from behind. I glared at it, wishing it would die. I kicked it into paste. Hearing the commotion, two reptilian humanoids ran in, each of them thin and gangly. They peered around with horned brows, needle teeth, and flicking tongues. One hissed,

“Who’s there?”

I hid behind a cluster of vines, my body blending in with the dark stone. Peering from behind the vine’s cover, I got a good look at them. Magenta scales covered one, sparks of violet energy radiating from its right hand. The other, a forest green color, brandished its claws while keeping a sword holstered. They wore gear crafted from monsters of all kinds, feathers and claws adding to their aesthetic.

Schema finally identified them for me.

Gelg Monok, Skeptile Scavenger | Level 112 – A scavenger of the Skeptile people. He roams newly assimilated planets, attempting to harvest dungeon cores before the native populace can. These behaviours have put a bounty on his head, foregoing Schema’s protection policies.

Therefore, this creature should be killed on sight for experience and other rewards.

Moronos Golgon, Skeptile Scavenger | Level 132 – Showcasing an affinity for arcane magic, this skeptilian mercenary inflicts unmitigatable damage. His class and build was designed for damaging and killing sentients. These behaviours have put a bounty on his head, foregoing Schema’s protection policies.

He roams newly assimilated planets, hunting for unobtained dungeon cores. Therefore, this creature should be killed on sight for experience and other rewards.

They met my eye before the pink one opened his right hand, the sparks coalescing into streaks of violet lightning. His hand thrummed with chaotic energy as if he held a ball of entropy in his hand. He simmered,

“Oh, an *unknown*. This one’ll give us experience, unlike the last one.”

Chapter 15: The Might of Magic

The magically imbued scavenger shot out a bolt of violet lightning at me. Dipping behind the patch of vines, the lightning sunk into the greenery. Portions of the foliage disintegrated, patchy holes left of it. The other scavenger sprinted towards me, not even unsheathing his blade. The claw happy one snarled,

“You have to work on your aim.”

The magic in the purple skeptile’s hand shook with energy, “You’re getting in the way. We have to kill this thing before that necromancer finds us.”

I shouted back to them, "What necromancer, exactly?"

Instead of answering, the purple one unleashed his magic once more. I dove into the infested water, preferring raw sewage to death. Above, a flash of power coursed through the cavern. I pulled myself up to the other side, my eyes locked in on the wielder of lightning. The magenta lizard man channeled his energies while his bruiser friend jumped over towards me.

I snapped a jab at its mouth, and he slapped my fist sideways. Heavy and hard like stone, his hand actually moved my own. A quick jolt, I whipped a right cross straight at his chin. He landed on his feet before my fist hit his teeth. A few of them snapped as he wobbled back. I went forward, hitting him the stomach with a jab before he swiped at me.

I ducked beneath before whipping up. I hit him hard in his stomach, and the lizard man grunted as ribs cracked. He shoved me away while shouting,

"He's stronger than he looks. Kill him."

I moved my head at random, trying to be hard to hit. A coursing bolt whipped beside my head, striking stone and singing its surface. Lingering in place, the stone glowed yellow from the heat left behind. The green one charged me, taking his sword out.

Impatient and eager, he aimed right for my neck. I leaned away, and the blade struck one of my shoulder spikes. Sparks flooded the dim cavern, and his sword struck the concrete wall. It sunk in. I tackled the handle of the blade, and it snapped as the skeptile jerked his hand away.

The purple one shot another purple bolt towards me, and I jumped this time. I dodged the lance of lightning, but I hit the ceiling. Dust fell from the cracks I left behind, and I flopped on my face. The green skeptile ran up and kicked my face hard.

His steel tipped boot dented my helm, caving it in until it smacked me. My vision flashed white before I rolled back into the sewer's center. I grabbed the other side's grating and pulled myself up before lightning flashed into the water. It hummed and crackled before the green skeptile jumped over towards me again.

I jumped up, pulling my knees close to my chest. When the skeptile landed, I stomped my heels. The concrete caved beneath me, setting the green one off balance midway through his landing. I grabbed at his throat, squeezing hard before rearing my fist back.

The wind whistled behind me. Ice shards sunk into my side, and the cold pierced deep into my chest. Growling out, I smashed my fist into the other skeptile's face, and his body went limp. Grabbing the back of his head, I pulled him into the wall before headbutting his face. It resisted my first strike, my vision going white. I slammed again. His head lurched with a sickening thud.

I roared before smashing his skull again with my own. A crack radiated throughout the cavern while the other skeptile shot lightning at me again. I pulled his partner's corpse in front of the blast. It singed and sparked before I dropped it and charged. I reached the mage, and he formed plasma knives in his hands.

He swiped at my face, but I pulled back. The blade sliced through stone, leaving glowing rock wherever he scorched. Two swipes later, and a blade sunk into shoulder. It burned like wildfire as I screamed out. The skeptile lunged its dagger at my exposed throat. I watched the dagger come at me, and fear soared into the forefront of my mind.

Before it landed, My armor's helmet opened, exposing the same jagged maw as before. It clamped onto the skeptile's hand. The sorcerer dropped his blade as bones, sinews, and muscles snapped. The sorcerer pulled a handleless arm away from me.

Taking initiative, I dashed forward and hit him with two jabs. Sweat flew off the back of its head, its skull whiplashing backwards. I kept my arms tucked against my sides as the lizard roared out in pain. It pointed its hand at me again, but I jerked his palm up.

Purple lightning arced over my head, cleaving straight through a spike of my armor. I pulled him towards me with his arm. A quick haymaker cracked his cheekbone, knocking him unconscious. Like the last skeptile, I grabbed his face and headbutted it hard. Teeth fell off my helm. Another headbutt. More blood and teeth.

I smashed my face into his like a hammer, pulverizing his skull into a thick stew. I let out an animalistic roar, tossing the headless corpse aside before turning around. The green lizard guy squirmed against the wall. I walked over before lifting a heel over its head. With a wet crunch, his face caved in as I stomped down.

The concrete cracked beneath his head, one fissure forming. I heaved for breath before I wiped blood off my helm. Cracking my neck, I took a minute and let the adrenaline flow through me. Sometimes, fighting felt good, though I'd rather not headbutt everything to death all the time.

Peering down at my armor, I gave it a begrudging nod out of respect. Yeah, it was creepy as hell, but the damn thing saved my life. In that same vein, I'd rather live as a monster than die as a man. Waving off some shaking hands, I searched for the hand my armor bit off, but I couldn't find it. It probably fell into a null void or maybe my armor, but I hoped not.

I chose not to think about it as a notification sounded.

Level up! Five level ups!

At least something good came out of the blood bath, and I dove into any distraction from the blood on my face. Staring at my list of perks, I found my choice for my next level thirty attribute – dexterity.

My choice was based on the fight. The stone still sizzled from the plasma blades of the mage, as did stone in the distance from his lightning bolts. Despite my armor, I wouldn't be able to tank that kind of damage. If these scavengers had landed those bolts, I'd be dead.

Thoughts of death passed over me, but I numbed to them somewhat. What was once trembling turned into a slight shake. It passed in a minute or two, and I moved on. The perk screen pulled up right after with fewer options than before. I had two perk points, however.

To my utter disbelief, that pitiful rat boss had given me a dungeon core. My armor had eaten it while devouring the rat's corpse. Thinking of the skeptile's descriptions, I connected the dots. Bosses like that rat king were why those scavenger's came here. They wanted easy dungeon cores for easy money, and I happened upon them at the wrong place and time.

They mentioned a necromancer as well. Avoiding someone like that would take priority. Before checking out my status, I put my hands on my hips. I stared down at the bodies. These guys were literal aliens, and I just killed them.

I shook my head, wrestling with that reality for a moment. The system and its changes happened so fast, and I couldn't wrap my head around it. At this point, there was no telling who and what would land here soon. I glared forward, knowing I'd need to be ready when it arrived.

Whatever *it*

was.

I put five points into dexterity and opened my perk menu.

[Powerful(Strength of 15 or more) – Your strength is admirable. Doubles carrying weight.]

[Smart(Intelligence of 10 or more) – Your intelligence is good. Doubles effective memory.]

[Flexible(Dexterity of 10 or more) – Your dexterity is good. Doubles flexibility bonus.]

[Lithe(Dexterity of 15 or more) – Your dexterity is admirable. Doubles reflexive and reaction time bonus from dexterity.]

[Graceful(Dexterity of 20 or more) – Your dexterity is excellent. 1/10th of dexterity added to perception. Physical oriented skills are learned twice as quickly.]

[Perceptive(Perception of 10 or more) – Your perception is good. Doubles sensory bonuses.]

I picked the perks Graceful and Lithe before finalizing. The change coursed over me like the euphoria of an amazing stretching session. Tugging joints and tight muscles lengthened, and no part of my body felt foreign. Every fiber of every muscle obeyed my commands. I didn't feel jumpy either.

It was like I practiced every movement a thousand times. With limbs like water, I opened my attribute screen.

Level 87 Attribute Menu

Strength [30] | Constitution [36.3] | Endurance [51] | Dexterity [20] | Willpower [30.3] | Intelligence [10] | Charisma [4] | Luck [3] | Perception [12]

I needed ten more levels before the per level perks arrived in all its glory. I prayed I'd turn into a deft titan once the perk went through. Gawking at the carnage from our fight, I needed some oomph in my build. I mean, Oppression handled mobs and groups, so I kept my build and skills aimed at one on one combat.

If it all came together like I hoped, I'd be airtight in battle. I liked that.

Magic could come later but for now, I stuck to the old tried and true strategy of punching things. It hadn't failed me so far, and I doubted it would. My armor helped ensure that. Speaking of armor, I walked over towards the skeptiles and checked their gear for something useful.

Compared to my current platemail, their tanned hide bent like aluminum foil. Taking my time, I found nothing of note. They had no money, valuables, or anything on them really. I frowned at the bodies, thinking they put everything on the line to get here. Space travel might be expensive or something.

Either way, I walked through the rest of the dungeon, killing rats for extra experience. The passive activity gave me time to think. I peered at my notifications, staring at the status updates for the scavengers. It mentioned a bounty system and how Schema protected normal people. Considering I faced no consequences for killing those aliens, having a bounty seemed pretty bad.

Avoiding one on my own head took priority, as did learning Schema's laws. I tapped my teeth together, wishing I went through the tutorial again. I needed every bit of information I could find because things were changing fast. When Schema came, so did a lot of differences in how everything worked. The possibilities were endless, and I didn't want to get washed away in the chaos.

I glanced around the sewer room for a bit longer, wondering if anything hid itself. While searching the place, the throne of the rat king looked strange. Surrounded by matchstick woodwork, its stony surface contrasted everything around it. I walked over, feeling around it. A stone panel pressed down as I did.

Darts shot towards me from above. They bounced off my armor like rain on a window. I shrugged before a set of stone tablets lowered around the dungeon floor, revealing a spiral staircase leading down.

Part of me wanted to continue exploring, but I needed to prioritize. Finding Kelsey and Michael took priority. I put a placeholder on my minimap for exploring this later when I had the time. Walking around, I found a manhole less covered by the underbrush. After climbing the stairs up, I pushed my legs against the cylinder of stone around me.

That kept me in place as I shoved hard on the manhole cover. It shoved off with some effort, and I pulled it off before hopping onto a suburban street. Keeping myself somewhat hidden, I sprinted over towards a backyard. As I did, a scream erupted nearby.

I closed my eyes, sighing as yet another distraction presented itself. Not wanting to just let someone die, I hopped a fence or two before finding a home invasion. A pack of skeletons, blue fire glowing in their eyes and swords in their hands, raided a home by kicking the door down. They pulled people out of their homes, throwing them into a circular pit.

I dragged my hands down my face, my helmet peeling away in time for me to do so. A piece of me just wanted to leave them behind to be butchered. I couldn't save everybody, and my own friends could be getting killed. Even from a casual glance, Michael and Kelsey weren't in the group.

I turned to leave before a few children howled in the pack of people. Turning back, the people's levels sat somewhere between five and ten. The skeletons were in the mid thirties. They stood no chance, but the skeletons would be child's play for me. I took a deep breath before running in. It would be a quick adventure. In and out in twenty minutes.

I got near the group, and of course, people screamed at the sight of me. Ignoring them, I smashed through a skeleton before another snapped his sword on my back. I grabbed his skull by the eye sockets, crushing his head into a different skelly warrior. Several packs of the creatures peered on from nearby houses, and they swarmed from all directions.

I killed a few before pulling them away from the pack of people. Flying in from above, a skeletal dragon flew in, breathing plumes of blue fire. I gasped at the sight of it.

Undead Korgah | Level 281 – This undead creature is controlled elsewhere, and its flames can melt metal.

Run.

I turned around and sprinted straight for the manhole I ran out of. Playing hero would get me killed, and it wasn't like I could save these people anyway. Leaping right down the cylinder of stone, the metal stairs whipped by my vision before I clipped one of them. I banged backwards, my head slapping into concrete.

Like the ball of a pinball machine, I hit every side of the sewer entrance on my way down. Flopping onto the stone ground, I stayed there for a second while feeling pain from the fall. Dexterity or not, that wasn't my smartest move.

I pushed myself up with a grunt, looking up. Above me, the glowing eyes of a skeleton peered into the manhole. One leaped down, following the same pattern I did. Not quite as robust, its dry bones splintered before it collapsed beside me.

I stomped its skull beside me before the army of undead came down the stepway. I gawked around, wondering where to run before smacking myself in the forehead. Duh, the dungeon entrance.

I sprinted towards the rat king's throne, my stomps echoing in the concrete tunnel. I ripped through a few vines and bushes before reaching the throne. I ran down the stairs, as the clatter of bone on concrete filled my ears.

I sprinted down the circular walkway, reaching a hallway. I ran down it, pillars of stone lining my sides. They carried glowing blue torches, spawned from magic. A cold, ringing silence filled the air along with a mist hugging the ground.

Unable to appreciate the sights, I found a doorway with a circular slot on its surface. Ornate markings covered its surface, the patterns flowing like the growth of branches or roots. I rubbed my temples, looking behind myself. None of the undead monsters found this place yet, but they would in time.

Racing for a solution, I looked around. Dark metal held the blue torch fires, and the mist moved when I kicked at it. Yeah, not exactly useful information. From behind, a few skeletons entered the hallway, swords brandished and eyes glowing. I wasn't scared of them, but I was of what they omened.

I rolled my hands before snapping my fingers. The circular slot was the same size as the dungeon core. As I thought about that, my armor deformed before revealing a pitch black orb from my chest. It glowed with a yellow outline. Popping out, the core landed in my hand, and I held it like a tiny eclipse in my fingers.

The dungeon cores looked as valuable as they were.

Not having time to sit around, I put the core in the doorway, and the orb floated midair. Tendrils of light leaked into the patterns, energy coursing through them as light expanded all around the glyphs.

The skeletons got close, the door taking its sweet time with this magical incantation. One of the creatures reached me, and I smashed its face into a nearby torch. The blue fire streaked across my vision as another swung a sword overhead. I grabbed its hand before another skeleton swiped at my side.

The steel sank an inch deep before another skeleton jumped over the other two. I stabbed at my face, but I tilted my head sideways, my neck bending unnaturally. Dexterity already paying off, I slammed my fist into the side of a skeleton crushing its ribs. I tore a skeleton's arm out of its socket before crushing its skull with its arm.

Jerking the sword from my side, I slammed the metal edge into the other skeleton's head before the door slid open behind me. I turned, running into a massive cavern. Skeletons fought their way inside, but I kept shoving them back. The stone doors slid closed while I kept the tide of undead at bay.

The doors slammed shut, powdering bone as they did. I turned away from the door, leaning against it. I took a deep breath, collecting myself after the chase. The incoming torrent of undead never stopped, meaning they could keep me held up until something stronger arrived, like the necromancer.

If it summoned a level two hundred, well, *anything*, then there was no telling how powerful the necromancer was. A minute passed as I got a grip on my situation. I couldn't get a break, that was for sure. Looking up for the first time, torches lit dozens of colossal pillars stretching from the top of the cavern to the bottom.

Wooden bridges stretched out from these pillars, connecting makeshift shacks at the midway points of these massive columns. Gremlins, goblins, and orcs walked on these bridges. I gave myself a few slaps, kind of exasperated at the situation. Inspecting the beasts, I took a breath of relief.

They maxed out at level twenty or so. Along the bottom of the dungeon, swarms of angular, sharp insects crawled on the ground. They carried antenna glowing like dim grapes at the tendril's ends. Colored a deep, menacing purple, these bugs reached up towards level thirty.

I bit my tongue. More bugs. Great. In the distance, a gremlin laid on its knees in front of an armored orc. The orc kicked the gremlin down into the abyss, and when it landed, the insects swarmed it. It died in less than a second. I already could paint a picture of how this place worked.

Orcs ruled over gremlin and goblins. The insects kept them fighting over the limited space the pillars offered. It wasn't the best life. Unfortunately for them, they wouldn't be

existing for much longer. Being far down beneath the ground, I no longer worried about Oppression killing people on the surface.

I activated Oppression and trotted forward. Several goblins and gremlins fell off the bridge leading towards the first pillar. Confusion spread across the populace, many dying in less than a minute of exposure to my aura. Moving onward, the goblins and gremlins died in waves.

Their bodies would disintegrate into blue mana that my armor absorbed before reaching the bottom. The insects below cried out, screeches of indignation escaping their mandibles at missing out on the feast. The entire time, I inched closer to my next evolution while getting some easy experience.

The orcs would charge at me, weathering the aura well. By the time they reached me, I mashed them like dropping an egg on a countertop. They gave miniscule experience. Still, they gave tiny bits of ambient mana. The boss could be different.

He'd give me another dungeon core at least, and then I'd be able to get another perk. I paced on, eradicating the local population over time. About two hours later, I reached the fanciest shack here, with skulls, feathers, and totem poles jutting out from it. An ogre strolled out, a deep green compared with the lighter shade of his minions.

Muscles rippled as he moved with a club of iron. His teeth jutted out from his bottom jaw.

Cracole, Exiled Ogre of the Wild | Level 34 – An ogre that was exiled by his village for his cruel hierarchical methods. He was sentenced to become a bottom dweller, living in the darkness of the caves below the village. He slowly bided his time, trying to amass an army strong enough to overtake his village.

After Schema moved his village, his plans fell apart. Now, he is a bitter, angry chieftain, who unleashes his wrath onto the weaker members of his village.

It was a shame seeing the chieftain. He pushed two of his minions aside, killing them both as they screamed to their deaths. The ogre smothered anyone he deemed lower than himself. In a way, people were the same.

You couldn't judge a person's character by how they treated those above themselves. What mattered was how they treated those below them. This exiled ogre was a great example of that. As I neared the boss, it contorted in rage. It banged its chest, roaring for me to come over, but I didn't. There was no need. Oppression handled the monster for me.

The ogre vomited a stream of blood before the veins under his skin turned black. His fingernails fell out, and his eyes grew bloodshot. I frowned at my aura's influence, but

then something odd happened. Claws expanded from the ogre's fingers. Skin smothered its eyes and nose. Its arms lengthened, turning into poles of elongated bone.

Its underjaw's tusks turned into long, enamel knives while drool leaked from its mouth. Red drool sizzled on the stone beneath it. I kept myself firmly on a pillar while it snarled at nearby goblins. The black beast picked one up, regurgitating acid onto the goblin's face.

The goblin's green skin peeled off, showing bone and blood from below. The goblin jerked and shivered before going limp. The dark abomination bit into the predigested corpse before turning to me. My eyes widened as I locked in on it. It roared out, ebbing forth an alien, eerie sound. Schema's message of the ogre changed.

Shapeless Horror | Unknownlvl 84 – A force unleashed this being's inner potential at the cost of its mind. Be wary.

I stayed back before it darted toward me. Sprinting forward, it stampeded through several goblins on the bridge before meeting me. We clashed like thunder, a booming echo surging from our impact. Stronger than I, it pushed me back. I reached the wooden bridge behind me, and the wood cracked as I pushed against its shoulders.

We shook from struggling, each of us trying to get the upper hand. I gave in, no longer pushing against it. It pushed me back while I leaned down. Coming over me, I used the monster's momentum to slam it against the twine bridge.

It lashed out with claws like steel. They scraped my helm, and I kicked the beast. It flopped sideways before I cracked my neck. I raised my hands and grumbled, "Man, I can't catch a break."

It reached me before I torqued my hips sideways and arced my fist forward. It traveled overhead, and right as the monster reached me, my fist collided with the top of its head. I nearly bounced backwards at the sheer force of the impact. The creature crashed down into the bridge, crushing wood like dry leaves. The echoes boomed seconds later in the gargantuan cavern.

I lifted both fists into the air and crushed the monster into the bridge again. Its tail whipped towards me, piercing into my collarbone. It whirled through the air again, snapping back. I reached out and missed it, the pointed tail piercing my chest.

As the beast pulled the tail back, I grasped it. I put my foot onto its head and another foot over its back. Forced into an arch, the monster gurgled before I pressed with all my might. Its back popped, and the creature's legs went slack.

I let its tail go before lifting my hands. I battered its face. Mauling it from above, the beast's skull cracked open like a wet walnut. A few seconds later, it died. As I started wiping purple blood off me, my armor chomped on the corpse in a grotesque

malformation of metal. The screeching of bending steel finally stopped when it finished eating the corpse.

With the fight handled, I turned around, wondering what caused the change in the ogre. My guess at the time? The necromancer. Peering for the summoner, I darted my head back and forth. No movement rustled on any of the pillars. The only movement showed from the writhing of insects below the bridge.

Beneath my feet, the wood creaked. I glanced down, noticing just how destroyed the bridge was at this point. I pushed off my feet to run off it, but the bridge collapsed as I did so. I fell downwards for a few seconds. My skin pulled on me, and my stomach floated as I fell. A second later, my head whipped as I landed with a monstrous boom.

Stone cracked, and bugs hissed in pain nearby. I lost my breath, my lungs and body beaten bloody. As I pushed myself off my landing spot, the insects swarmed towards me. I leaned down as they came, wanting to give in. The weakness passed, and I pushed through my exhaustion.

Oppression smothered the insects, softening them before they got to me. I smashed the bugs like trying to kill cockroaches. I stomped the guts of one. I pulled another apart. Yet another I shelled like a crab. They popped with a satisfying crunch when I hit them.

But they swarmed with fury. Covering me, they pincerd at me from all angles. I kept them off my head, but they smothered me from all angles. The pile kept amassing over me, swallowing my body whole.

I kept my mouth shut and my eyes closed, feeling for their bodies. In darkness, I lashed out. In the mass, I crushed. In time, the insects crawling on me died from Oppression or my swings. I hid in their bodies, using them as a shield from the other insects. The bodies dissipated as my armor indulged on them.

My vision blurred. Peering at my status, a stacking poison debuff mounted. Willing my armor to stop, it let the pile of dying insects coat me. Like a pile of dead crickets, I stayed still while the others swarmed over me. It took over an hour of killing these damn things before they thinned enough that I could reach a pillar.

As I climbed the column, I checked out my notifications. I gained a level, so I put a point into dexterity before my perk screen appeared again. I'd gotten another core from the chieftain turned abomination.

[Powerful(Strength of 15 or more) – Your strength is admirable. Doubles carrying weight.]

[Smart(Intelligence of 10 or more) – Your intelligence is good. Doubles effective memory.]

[Flexible(Dexterity of 10 or more) – Your dexterity is good. Doubles flexibility bonus.]

[Perceptive(Perception of 10 or more) – Your perception is good. Doubles sensory bonuses.]

I selected Powerful this time just to climb the pillar. My body and armor lightened a tremendous amount, letting me get up this sheer face. My fingers lengthened into points, letting my stab into the rock a bit. Once I got back on the pillar, I sprinted towards the exit. Whatever unleashed that chieftain, I didn't want to fight it. At least not here on unstable bridges.

I reached another stone wall just like the one leading into this dungeon. My armor spit out the dungeon core into my hand. Holding the tiny eclipse in my palm, streams of light flowed into the gate. The glyphs on it glowed blue before the doors slid open. Dust fell from the corners and cracks of the ancient stone as they moved.

The door opened. All I could see was a wall of sickly, purple smoke as they did. This mist condensed into a single point. From it, the dried remains of a body walked out. Wearing ornate robes, the mummy paced out, his arms interlocked behind himself. His body was dry as cracks in mud, and when he moved his hands, his flesh crinkled.

Frail as it seemed, it leaked an aura of energy. The undead's eye sockets were empty, each imbued with glowed plumes of navy-shaded fire. He let his mana ebb outwards. When it crawled over me, I choked on it. This mana was thicker than the sand that the Lord of Worms released.

I couldn't even breath. He didn't even need time to set this up. I gasped,

"Please...Stop."

He lessened his aura, letting me take a breath. He paced back and forth, considering me for a moment. Stepping up to me, it spoke with a gritty, archaic voice,

"Ah, I see neither my minions nor my experiment caught you then, hm? That is more than merely interesting. No one on your planet should be powerful enough for these beasts. Not yet, at least. You seem rather ahead of the curve, I should say."

He raised a hand, "Pleasantries aside, I've a pertinent question to ask you."

I nodded, "Yeah, anything."

The dark blue fire turned a menacing red,

"Would you happen to know of an Alfred Worm? I am his father. Torix Worm, of Darkhill."

Chapter 16: Torix Worm, of Darkhill

I gasped, "Could you let me down?"

He tilted his head, "I shall whenever you cease that annoying aura of yours, whatever it is."

My eyes widened, and I shut Oppression down. He waved a hand, and I fell, collapsing to my knees. Like tiny eyes, the lich squinted his glowing fireballs. He kept his gaze steady, his eyes piercing. I couldn't hold eye contact, but his glare burrowed into the back of my head regardless.

Finally looking away, Torix pulled an ancient tome from his robes and opened it. A quick flash of umbral mana later, and he cast a spell. Two shadows pulled at my arms, holding me up. He waved a hand,

"Enough chatter of comfort. There is a marker of Alfred on you or within you. Now, you may believe that I don't feel its presence or lack proof of its existence. I assure you, I am well armed with the required knowledge. You may choose to unveil what you have, or I will unveil it away from you."

His eyes flashed bright, "Whether that be via interrogation or dissection, you shall decide."

Still reeling, my head rolled before my armor spit out Alfred's diary. One of the shadows caught the journal. It leaned onto one knee and held it out to its master. The lich put his glowing book in his robe before picking up the ragged journal,

"Ah, that was simpler than I imagined it would be. Do stay as I read this ragged tissue's contents. Perhaps I may even thank you for it. Now, let's see what lies therein. Hm, it does appear to be his handwriting...It...This-

He covered his mouth. He took a step back, and his hands shook in place. He peered around as if looking for something before he fumbled with his bony fingers. His eyes dimmed after a few minutes, and he finished the book with a quick snap of the cover. His eyes fizzled out before he hugged the journal to his chest.

A tense silence, thicker than oatmeal, smothered me. I stayed silent, not really knowing what was going through the lich's mind. His eyes flared back to life as he stared off into the distance. He spoke in a small voice,

"My son...My only son. He's gone."

The pain pierced out in waves from the lich. Undead or not, the emotion was real and palpable and genuine. I didn't really know what to say, but I felt like I had to say something.

"I'm...I'm really sorry for your loss."

Tenderly and with care, he moved the journal into his robes before interlocking his hands behind himself once more. His composure reconstructed, and he returned to his previous self. The shadows waned beside me until they disappeared. I stood on wobbling feet.

Torix's tone shot out like ice, "I'll assume you're the one that killed him? And don't attempt to lie to me. It will only dig this pit you lie in further down, and it lies six feet underground already."

I gritted my teeth before nodding.

The lich trembled in place, weighing different options in his head. He turned his glance up before giving himself a slow nod. He centered onto me once more,

"Based...Based on the contents of the journal, his death was a release, given the mad ramblings at the end of this document. Tell me, did you stop this-this hivemind he called Baldag-Ruhl, of Many?"

I nodded once more. Torix sat down on an umbral blot of mana, a living shadow holding him up. He shook his hands as if getting water off them. He steepled his fingers, keeping himself tranquil despite the squall of grief writhing under his surface. Torix offered me a dark mana chair before gesturing to it,

"Tell me everything you know, from beginning to end."

Despite the commanding authority, the icy edge in his voice faded some. This was still no request; it was a command. I complied, sitting down. I spoke for a while, trying to explain who I was and why I was in the cave to begin with.

It took a while, but I told him the story of how Baldag-Ruhl tried turning me into his armor. The riftkeeper ended up giving me my current form. I kept talking about how Alfred stayed committed even after going mad, and how really, Torix's son was the one who actually stopped Baldag-Ruhl, not me.

And to my surprise, the lich listened. He kept listening, in fact. So much so that I found myself gushing. I kept discussing what had happened to me, grateful and desperate for an outlet. Anything or anyone that would give me an ear, I needed it. It just so happened this undead lich I just met happened to be a great listener.

He gave me affirmations as I unloaded all of my problems. My speaking turned to rambling, and I couldn't stop myself. I needed someone to talk with, and this ancient necromancer offered insights and repose. I latched onto that serenity, going on about how demanding BloodHollow had been. I talked about how lonely I'd been since the system's changes.

I kept going until I discussed unformulated issues. For instance, I went on about trying to find Michael and Kelsey and how I didn't see it happening anytime soon. I even chatted about my armor and how it horrified me. Torix didn't rush me or seem perturbed with my situation. He showed no surprise and stayed calm. His only real reactions were when I mentioned the slice in dimensions, or at least that's what I guessed it was.

What mattered was that since the system started, Torix was the first person I felt comfortable with. He didn't make me feel like a freak. The guy just acted like I was normal. Considering how abnormal my situation was, I clung to that without really meaning too. That kept me going until I ran out of steam.

A quick silence passed over us, and Torix deliberated. He turned a palm to me, "It seems as though your journey's been long and hard, young one. I added to that with my minions, so do accept my apologies. You'll find them plague you or your hometown above no longer. I merely wished to search out my son. This journal is his, as it carries his mana and handwriting. I also believe you've told me what you believe is the truth."

As an aside, he chimed, "And those civilians above, they've been treated humanely, so worry not."

I believed him more than I should've. The lich crossed a leg, leaning back and steepling his fingers. He oozed dominance and poise before sighing, "What would you have me do to you? On the one hand, you freed my son from madness, a madness not even I could fix. On the other hand, you've killed him, my only flesh and blood left."

I fumbled my words, "I...I don't know. I-I never had a son. I am someone's son, but he's a jackass, so...Please don't kill me, I guess?"

The lich stared with unchanging eyes before bursting into laughter. He replied, "You've grown rather accustomed to death. To be so casual in the face of it...Even as a lich, I'm impressed. Who are you, really then?"

"What do you mean? I told you. I'm Daniel Hillside."

Torix shook his head, "No, I mean who are you *really*. You can't have already reached level eighty eight in less than a month after Schema arrived. Not for a new species without guidance."

I frowned, "I'm not lying about missing the tutorial."

Torix scoffed, "You expect me to believe that you, a human, killed a *ruhl*? A genuine ruhl."

I threw my hands up, "I thought you said you believed me?"

"I believe you haven't lied to me. Whether you believe the truth or an approximation of it is something else entirely."

"I already told you, your son is the one that really killed him. I'm just the one who followed through with his master plan. The reason I succeeded and he didn't was luck. That's it."

Torix leaned over and tapped one of my shoulder spikes, "And this, this is supposed to be The Harbinger of Cataclysm? Quite the extravagant title for someone who has yet to reach even level one hundred."

I crossed my arms, "I do well for myself. You know, considering."

"Hm...Would you mind verifying all of this for me?"

My eyes widened, "You want me to go back to BloodHollow?"

"Yes."

I shook my hands, "I really, really don't want to go back there. I just spent the first few weeks in the system stuck in that hellhole. I just got out, and I haven't been able to look for my friends at all."

Torix lowered his gaze, "But you're certain there's proof of this all occurring?"

I waved my hands, starting to ramble, "Yeah, for sure."

"Perhaps I shall go and inspect it myself to verify the validity of your claims. Should you be lying, then you understand what will become of you."

I waved my hands about, kind of nervous, "Then it looks like I'll be fine. I mean, if you think about it, this armor is your son's legacy. Killing me is like killing the last piece remaining of Alfred. Wouldn't it be more fitting for your son to be remembered for this feat of, uhm, magic? You know, to be remembered for his sacrifice?"

Torix turned a palm to me, "My son was a prodigy. While not gifted in combat, he showed an intuition for rune making that far exceeds my own. In that area, he was a well of limitless potential. He would have been an even greater sorcerer than I, if his character was better suited for it."

His tone grew wistful, "So dying like this isn't something I wish to glorify. Rather, I'd keep this hidden. For now. In that manner, it is a shame beyond measure to uncover the situation as is. I searched for him for so long. I finally found traces of his mana signature on some backwater, newly systemized world. I come hither, and guess what I uncover?"

"Uh, me?"

Torix raised his hands, "Not at all. Alfred's previous dungeon warped elsewhere as I traveled to it. It disappeared, and a century passed. I couldn't find a trace of him, not until something strange happened here. A surge of energy pulsed out, unlike any I've ever registered, and on this backwater planet. I would have thought nothing of it, just assuming it was another anomaly. But, you see, at it's very center was the slightest, familiar trace of mana."

Torix glared at me, "My son's mana, the will of his mind manifested."

Torix glanced off at the vast cavern, "I hired a blackmarket warping specialist and arrived soon after. From that dungeon, I uncovered two humans. I interrogated them. It wasn't difficult learning what I needed to know."

He found David and Stacy. I grimaced. Torix brushed off my concerns with the wave of his hand,

"I've done nothing permanent to them. They are fine. Now, continuing my story, I followed the trail those two indicated, and I found a peculiar ability used within this forest. There existed a circle of dead fauna and a pair of stomping tracks."

He met my eyes, "Here I thought a scavenger had cleared the dungeon and killed my son. I came down, hunting for the user of the ability. I plotted several traps, such as searching homes and threatening the populace. I wouldn't kill anyone for fear of the resulting bounty of course, but my ploy worked well."

I leaned forward, "Damn. That was bait, huh?"

Torix swiped his hand, "It was a simple and easy plot to enact, so I did so. You killed many of my minions, so I pursued you personally. I found the scavenger's bodies and the dungeon below the sewers. I arrived after you killed the ogre I enchanted here. I watched you kill these monsters below effortlessly."

He pinched his fingers together, leaning to me, "You, an unknown presence at such a low level. I'd never seen anything quite like it. If what you've told me is true, you showcase potential. Perhaps a mountain of it, given time. The issue therein lies in your position. Being an unknown and so young means you *will* be killed soon."

Sweat crawled down my back as Torix gestured at me, "You also have other traits that make you targetable. For instance, that...Blood Magic you have. If one wished, they

could hold you down and take pounds of your flesh, using it for mana. You would become a mana battery, a fate far worse than death.”

Even more cold sweat fell from me as he pointed at my feet, “And that armor of yours...I’ve never seen anything like it. I myself am tempted to run experiments on it, and I’m rather benevolent compared to many. My kindness is why that armor remains grafted to you instead of being peeled off as we speak.”

Remembering the feelers under my armor, I shivered. Torix stood up, “Don’t worry, child. I listened to you, and I do believe you. I will do my due diligence to make sure what you’ve said is true, of course. All that being said, I shall take my leave. I do wish you luck on your journey.”

An idea popped in my head, “Wait one minute.”

The lich tilted his head, “Hmm?”

“I think we can make a deal.”

Torix scoffed, “You? Make a deal with me? Oh, this is going to be entertaining to the utmost.”

I stood up with him, “Ok, so the thing is, you have this undead army, right?”

“Indeed.”

“So you could find my friends just as you found me?”

“*Easily.*”

I turned my palm to him, “How about you help me with my friends, and I’ll help you understand BloodHollow, eh?”

Torix gawked at me, stunned to silence. He let out a slight snicker before it turned into full on cackling. He shook his head, “That was certainly...*something*. What could you offer me in exchange? Undying loyalty? I have quite a few minions that exceed you in more than one domain.”

I raised a hand, “But none of them were made with the ritual.”

Torix withdrew a tad, taken aback, “Hah. That is certainly true. Why should I make a deal with you instead of simply forcing you to obey me? I am more than able to, I assure you.”

I fumbled, “Uhm...I don’t know. Maybe it would be better for your experiments if I was willing?”

Torix deadpanned, "You're insane, you know that?"

I let my hands flop against my sides, "Look man, I'm desperate here. You heard me earlier. I'm going to be by myself for a long time if this doesn't work out."

Torix gave me a nod, "I do require intricate knowledge of the comings and goings of my son's demise. You're the foremost expert of what occurred, so enlisting you may help me...I accept this little arrangement of yours."

I gaped, "You're serious?"

His eyes flashed, "Oh, dead serious."

I raised a hand, "Cause you're an undead, right?"

Torix remained still for a few seconds before pinching the bridge of his nose, "By Schema, who have I partnered with, exactly?"

I stood up, banging my fists together, "Me. I'll take the deal."

The lich interlocked his hands behind himself once more, "Well then, that's a wise decision. Now, explain how your armor works, and all you know of it."

I explained how Baldag-Ruhl's spell worked to the best of my knowledge. I described the walls of runes, miles long and utterly intricate. I described how I could show him the tunnels, and how it would make an excellent evil lair for him. He even chuckled a few times. By now, I was warming up the cold, unfeeling lich. The guy had a panache to him.

When I finished, he gestured to me, "I'll assume you've marked BloodHollow down on your minimap?"

I brought it up, "No, but I can. I've visited the cave before."

"Good. Send me a screenshot of it and the surrounding area. I will download it then go towards this dungeon ahead of you. As for your end of the deal, simply come forthwith to BloodHollow within the next few days." Torix gestured to our surroundings, "You may finish your dungeon delving here and get your dungeon core. I know it's a high value item for you at the moment, and I wouldn't want to impede your progress."

He opened his status, and a request from him appeared.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | level 1,236 | Friend Request | Do you accept? Y/N?

I leaned back from my status, "What in the hell? Y-Your over level one thousand?"

Torix leaned back, "Oh yes, of course. You're just now entering the system, so you lack perspective. I am your first dose of said perspective, and allow me to add to it. My level is somewhat notable, but nothing worthy of reverence. You've simply seen very little of Schema-owned space. Know that you are strong for your level, but realize that there are beings of immeasurable power spread out across the stars. Many are much more powerful than I."

Torix stared down with pity, "You are a desirable treat for them. If they find you, they will violate you in ways you cannot even imagine."

I shivered before gulping. Knowing the necromancer hadn't turned me inside out, I smiled up at Torix, "Then I suppose I should thank you for taking me under your wing. I really appreciate it."

Torix stood taller as I said that. He spoke with a touch of pride in his voice, "I suppose it is enviable to have one willing to learn and listen. It is quite satisfying to enlighten others." Torix waved a hand, generating a portal leading about two hundred feet up to the suburbia above. Torix gave me a nod of acknowledgement,

"Good luck with your dungeon."

I nodded, "You too."

He walked through the portal, and it snapped shut, leaving me alone. Accepting the friend request, I let out a gulpful of air, pleased and peachy about how that all worked out. It seemed too good to be true that he'd help me out like that. I could learn from Torix and get a grip on what was going on with Schema.

Considering the resources at his disposal, finding Michael and Kelsey would be a breeze. And the lich was above level twelve hundred to boot. He could kill me with just a thought. The sheer, staggering potential he carried left me humbled. Having him more on my side was amazing, even if only a little.

In a way, it gave me a goal too. It would take forever before I could stand up against him, and the amount of levelling required defied convention. Thinking once more about how I'd level, I looked at the next stone doorway in this dungeon. It held the same core slot as the previous one, flowing marks making the door stand out.

Placing the ogre's core into the slot, I found the doors open up. As it did, the entire area changed. Giant pistons pumped scalding steam, with bronze metal plated over every surface. Walking onto an industrial factory's catwalk, I explored the next section of this layered dungeon.

Pipelines littered every surface, the steampunk aesthetic drawing my eye. Giant vats of molten metal poured out into molds, making parts for machines. Those machines rested on conveyors, leading towards tunnels of metal. I furrowed my brow as my eyes caught

up with the change in scenery. Even from a cursory glance, the progression made no sense whatsoever.

Based on everything I knew, it seemed like Schema organized the cracks of the dimensions however it had to. That resulted in chaotic mishmashes like this. While confusing at times, I couldn't help but get swept away a bit in the excitement. This kind of variety meant each dungeon carried limitless potential, and that put a weight off my chest. I wasn't going to be sitting in underground caverns each and every time.

Sometimes, I'd get surprises like this. Letting myself get swept up in the moment, I let myself run wild a bit. My feet clunked with each step as I bolted down the catwalk. I passed hissing steam and pumping machines, and I dove deeper into this labyrinth of bronze. Further down, a machine with two sword arms dropped down from a pipeline above. It had three wheels for legs, and no face. A few carvings on it mirrored a greek mural.

I inspected it.

Trolm Guard Bot | Level 31 – A guard bot made for defending trolm factories. Basic and easily dispatched, this sturdy design is a result of the trolms themselves. A race of evolved trolls, trolms are a hardy, powerful race with intricate technical knowledge. With powerful regeneration, tremendous physical stature, and mastery of basic machinery, they are to be feared.

But their guards are not.

Reading a history of the bot reminded me of diving into the lore of some games I played. I couldn't help but smile as the ball of bronze rolled my way. For once, I chose to go into a dungeon. Instead of some harrowing trial, this turned into a fun adventure. Knowing it stood no chance, I charged towards the bot, meeting it head on.

Swiping my arms diagonally, I struck the swords at an angle, breaking them. I raised my knee, and the bot met it. It crushed against me. Tumbling back, it slowed down while I rushed forward. I turned my torso sideways then kicked the robot with a sling of momentum. The robot flew off the catwalk, falling into a machine's grinding gears below. It crumpled like a tin can.

Another bot fell from above, and it slashed its swords. I darted away, evading the slashes. It stuck with a routine pattern, each attack at a set interval. I waited, getting the timing before grabbing an arm midswing. The other blade came down, but I tilted my shoulder up. The edge skidded down my shoulder and into the metal railing.

I pulled its other arm, and it pulled apart, leaving it armless. I lifted a hand up before squashing it like an amber, metal tomato. More guards arrived, and I grinned.

I decimated them. I crushed guard after guard for over an hour. Less like a dungeon and more like a playground, I relished in my improved strength, appreciating it. For the first time since systemization, the future excited me. After a while of destroying bots, I ran into the boss of this factory.

Standing at the center of a circular platform, a spider robot waited for me. It walked on four limbs and held weapons in its other hands. A giant eyeball centered on me, metal folds interlacing as it squinted. The blue iris and pupil turned red, and it raised its armed hands.

Knowing it didn't outlevel me, I stampeded towards it like an angry elephant. I dodged one of its sword limbs before grabbing a leg. I jerked with explosive strength, ripping the leg ripped off. My legs needed a moment to recover, so I used its torn leg to block a rain of swords, hammers, and saws. Dented and falling apart, I tossed the ripped limb at the eye of the creature.

It raised its four weaponized arms to block. As it did, I dashed forwards. The lobbed metal bounced off its weapons, and the beast peered at me as I swung at it. Throwing my fist like a baseball, I shattered the glassy exterior protecting its eye. Cracks radiated up the brittle glass, and its vision deteriorated.

It swung at random afterwards, and I kept my distance, waiting for a time to strike. A few minutes passed and the joints began glowing from building heat. It paused mid attack, steam billowing from its robotic innards. Crawling on top of it, I gripped its arm joints to get on top of it.

I gripped my hands against its bronze body and pulled apart. The metal screamed and crumpled as I strained with effort. Taking a few breaths, I caught my breath as it cooled itself off. Rearing its limbs back, the spider bot swung them down at me. I fell into the opening I just sheared. Tearing wires and pipes apart, I jerked and slammed my fists in every direction.

Oil splurged everywhere as I gouged out its insides. When I forced myself out of the robot's eye, it stopped moving. In a less disturbing manner than eating flesh, my armor gobbled up the robot. The armor over my skin outdid bronze, apparently, so I just waited until the bot's body was devoured. While I waited, I checked out my status screen. There was another perk from where my armor ate another core.

[Smart(Intelligence of 10 or more) – Your intelligence is good. Doubles effective memory.]

[Flexible(Dexterity of 10 or more) – Your dexterity is good. Doubles flexibility bonus.]

[Perceptive(Perception of 10 or more) – Your perception is good. Doubles sensory bonuses.]

I was almost out of perks at this point. I figured I'd be listening to quite a few lessons from Torix, so I selected Smart. It seemed like a, well, smart decision. Terrible jokes aside, I waited for a sudden shift. I didn't really notice anything, but I also wasn't straining my memory yet either.

Wanting to feel Smart's effects, I tried recollecting some childhood events, and they remained as foggy as ever. I hoped the perk helped forming memories more than past ones as I closed my status. Reaching another doorway at the end of the bot's room, I found another slot for a dungeon core.

I couldn't read the glyphs above, but it didn't matter. I already knew the gist of what it was saying. Having a handle on the situation, I put another core into the doorway. When it opened, it acted the same as BloodHollow's gateway. Warping reality, these doors opened to a ladder and manhole. Bewildered by the view, I put my head through the doorway, and gravity shifted.

On the one hand, my body pulled down. On the other hand, my head weighed down in a different direction. Taking the next step, I grabbed the ladder so I wouldn't fall. Gravity finished changing as I climbed through the doorway. I crawled my way out the dungeon, the warp snapping shut behind me. I blinked a few times while holding the ladder in the sewer tunnel.

Man, dungeons weirded me out.

I shook off the surreal feeling before getting out of the sewers. Pulling my head out into some fresh air, the streets remained dead silent. I hopped out before sprinting towards a backyard. Hiding behind fences, I opened my minimap. I was right where I thought I was. Just like Torix, I did some due diligence myself.

I ran towards the place where the skeletons piled people together. I found no bodies or blood lingering around. Still not convinced, I turned to the nearby houses. People closed their doors, but the broken windows still whistled as wind leaked into each house. Freshly broken glass sheened on the porches and yards while I approached.

Peering in, a few people gawked at me in horror with make-shift spears or kitchen knives in hand.

One tried poking me, but I slapped the blade aside. Knowing Torix could've let only one family go, I investigated three other homes, finding familiar faces in each of them. Torix made good on his word, so I would do the same. Knowing where to go next, I sprinted back towards BloodHollow yet again, dreading my quick return to the dim, dank caves.

Keeping my pace rapid, I darted over fallen logs and charged through vined bushes. The faster I handled Torix's demands, the faster I'd find Michael and Kelsey. My minimap's direct route also made my return simple. Those thoughts pressing me onward, I sprinted like a man running from a tsunami. It was mostly for fun.

I could, so I figured, why not?

Twenty minutes later, a sunset signalled the day's end. I reached the caves that trapped me for two weeks. The opening changed some, showing ornate pillars and the otherside of the Sentinel's doorway. A walkway led down to those doors, torches lit along set intervals leading to BloodHollow. Trotting down those steps, I got to the entrance.

The doorway opened, and I winced as recognizable darkness showed itself once more. Bats flashed their fangs at me, and the Sentinel peered down,

"Know that should you enter this place, you will not be permitted to leave until...Wait, you're back? Already?"

I grimaced at my surroundings, "Yeah. Unfortunately for me."

The Sentinel slammed his spear down, the doorway closing behind me, "It's unfortunate for us both. You'll be permitted to leave whenever you wish, preferably sooner rather than later."

Letting his jabs slide, I passed by him towards the marker on my map. I didn't have time for banter. Torix had a little icon for his name and everything now. Taking an hour of running and killing bats, I found signs of the lich's presence everywhere.

Undead raided the cavern from head to toe. Creatures of darkness walked while swollen zombies shambled in all directions. These zombies carried enormous, bulbous sacks of bioluminescent material. They lit the surroundings while undead knights ran their bony hands along the walls.

Nearing Torix himself, shadow monsters created patches of darkness in the zombie's blue glow. Undead Korgah's sat as guardians, decimating the local bat populace, one of the dragon-sized creatures holding a crimson bear in its maw. It chewed the bear to bits in two bites, tossing the entrails and organs into a pile of other corpses.

My armor trembled as I passed the bodies. A few of the undead knights took a dive in a nearby cyan pool, other knights watching the descent. These underlings hunted in every direction, and Torix kept them contained with ease. A bit disgusted, I approached the necromancer in the distance. Torix himself laid at the center of all this carnage. He ran his hands against the walls, looking for the runes I mentioned.

Walking up beside Torix, the lich murmured, "Hm, you work quickly. Excellent. Now, perhaps you may show me where these runes are?"

I nodded and ran towards one of the tunnel entrances. Torix followed behind me, riding on a ball of black he summoned in a second. We approached a tunnel where boulders piled high, interlacing with the wall. No transition exposed where these tunnels began and ended, masking them well. When we reached an entrance, Torix peered at it,

“So this is how that rift holder lived for so long. I must say, masking himself so utterly and by design alone...Impressive.”

I jumped onto a boulder, “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

We entered the tunnel and Torix’s jaw dropped. The necromancer marveled at each intricate and meticulous rune, peering at their depths. Torix stammered, “I...I don’t understand *any* of this. Is this an eldritch language, perhaps? It doesn’t match any linguistic pattern I’ve learned henceforth.”

Finding a marking that radiated curiosity, Torix murmured, “My son was able to read all of this?”

I nodded, “He could, but we’ll need to go deeper into the cave to see it all. This is a drop in the ocean.”

Torix scoffed, “There’s more than what’s present here?”

I smiled, “Oh, a lot more.”

We passed by several miles of the tunnel, Torix’s surprise mounting with each passing moment. It made the entire ritual take a step up in my mind. I knew it was impressive, yeah, but having this knowledgeable and ancient necromancer marvel with me...Well, it put the incantation into perspective.

After a half an hour of sprinting, we eventually reached the colosseum’s center. The bat’s already cleared out the bugs, revealing the majesty of the spell Baldag-Ruhl cast. I gestured at it,

“This is the culmination of your son’s work. He and Baldag-Ruhl created this...Whatever it is.”

Torix rubbed his hand against the wall, in awe at the complexity. He spoke with reverence, “To think my son had such an understanding of these markings. Perhaps you were right about your armor being his legacy. This...This is something I can take pride in. It’s something he would’ve relished doing.”

Torix’s eyes dimmed, “Perhaps...perhaps his life wasn’t as full of suffering as the journal indicated. I can only pray that is the case.”

I sat there waiting for him to finish his remembrances. After many minutes, he walked at his full height, no hunching whatsoever,

“I can gather the formatting of the spell, though I lack the insight to gather its context. Some of this is my son’s handwriting. You can tell by the curves, as they hold more flow to them than Baldag-Ruhl’s carvings...I wonder...Ah, ingenious. Bypassing the

limitation of internal mana by drawing from dimensional space...But how could you control the energy, let alone form it?"

Torix peered around, "They-they used a blueprint of another's soul for grounding the innate chaos of the working mana...I've no idea how. Color me surprised...And this, I can't believe they used a weighting algorithm for displacing the interdimensional pressure, then correlated the flux in time with a quantum stabilizing function."

I stayed quiet, not wanting to expose my immense ignorance. When Torix finished studying the runes, he put his hands on his hips, "This would take a thousand years to carve if you had a thousand people doing it, all without a moment's rest. The hivemind handled the bulk of this project if I assume correctly?"

I pointed at a few of the bugs still lying around, "Yup. Those are his little minions."

Torix pressed on his temples with his fingertips, "This hivemind was a prodigy all his own. It really was a ruhl." Torix turned towards me, "And your armor is the product of all this. I would've assumed it would do more than that."

I shrugged, "It can evolve. I think that's the dealbreaker."

The lich paced back and forth, "Ah yes, that is worthy of note. Precisely how much it evolves is the true question then, isn't it? Tell me, how much mana is left before its next evolution?"

I checked, finding 30,000 from all the rats, bats, and machines I killed. I tapped my chestplate, "Pretty much two million. I have thirty thousand stacked up, but most of that came from the purple insect swarm."

Torix continued, "Then, in order to understand your armor's properties and the ritual's full implications, our first objective is evolving this armor. That shall coincide with leveling you over a hundred. At that point, scavengers and bounty hunters will be less of a concern. Otherwise, I'll need to guard you every second of every day."

He waved a hand, "That will simply not do. During that time, I'll inspect this ritual."

I put my hands on my hips, "Any Ideas on how to gain those levels? Finding a difficult dungeon here is actually harder than the dungeons themselves."

Torix raised a hand, "Not a usual problem, but one that is rectifiable no less. On my own planet, you'd find many dungeons, some harboring creatures over level one thousand."

I raised an eyebrow, "So, what planet are you from?"

"Xanathar. It's a peculiar world, tidally locked so habitable land is sparse. The weather is quite harsh as well. Perhaps you shall see it one day. Now-"

He pulled out his grimoire and used a magical incantation. The lines across the pages glowed a dimming black, one that siphoned light from our surroundings. After a few minutes of channeling, a portal appeared, wide and black and null. More like a void than an opening, Torix pointed at it,

“From this portal, my personal monsters will come. You can gain experience from killing them.”

I clasped my fists, “Alright. I’m always looking for a good fight.”

Torix gave me the look of a stern librarian, “That can be arranged quite easily. For instance, these creatures will be above your level, as that most efficiently grants you experience. You’re fine with the risk that entails?”

A part of me held onto some fear. I lifted my hands, and a part of me just let that fear go. My adrenaline spiked. The same part of me that liked boxing told me I enjoyed fighting like this too. In a way, I relished it. I peered between Torix and the portal,

“Yeah, I am.”

Torix clapped his hands once, “Quite the show of bravery and decisiveness. That is an excellent quality in any aspiring pupil. Now, it is time to test if it was truly bravery, or perhaps simply foolishness.”

From the portal, a howl like screaming children and the sloshing of torn organs echoed. My gaze hardened as a set of claws grasped at the portal. I leaned over while raising my hands. Torix raised a finger, lecturing at me,

“Now, Daniel, there is something to be said for joy in combat. That being said, I am of the opinion that the concept of a good fight doesn’t exist. There exists only slaughter. Hear me child, you can choose to slaughter or become the slaughtered.”

He eyed me, “In that manner, you embrace brutality or become the product of it. Tell me, will you become a monster, or will you be eaten by them?”

An eye the size of a dish plate opened inside the void. Streams of red came together into a blot of blood at its center. An amber iris opened from the red sphere, and a red pupil laid within it. The feral eye locked with mine. I riled myself up, tearing down the fear in me. Getting ahead now meant easy times later.

I banged my fists together like blocks of iron, speaking from a primordial place,

“I will be no monster, for I feast on them.”

Chapter 17: Feasting on Monsters

Torix stepped back, "Let's see if your actions speak as loudly as your words."

The monster squirmed out. A ball of writhing limbs and human teeth, the abomination swelled towards me. From its sides, tentacles shot out, hungry and wanting. They launched like lightning and thunder. I ran forward, making them miss. They stabbed into the stone beneath me, where no runes lingered.

As the eyeball darted above me, a green blob plopped out of the portal. It slapped the floor with a wet thud. Meeting it, I smashed my fist into the monster, busting the sac of blood. From the wound, intestines flew outwards. They latched onto me, crawling over my skin. Tiny needle prods pierced at thinner spots of my armor, searching for my skin.

I shouted, "What the hell is this?"

Torix stood with his hands interlocked behind himself,

"This is a lesson. You may not always be able to fight monsters in hand to hand combat. Innovate to some degree, and you will become better for it."

I pulled the mass off me, ripping the bloody bowels. It scrambled on the ground, lurching out off instinct. The intestines found me before launching out like a dozen spears. I covered my face, waiting for a spray of needles and flesh.

Instead, a mouth opened from my chest plate, the teeth like broken rebar. They crunched into the tentacles, spilling blood like water hoses. Torix's eyes flared, "Oh, now that is *interesting*."

The monster's bowels cut before it scrambled towards me. Taking charge of the situation, I stepped back with controlled, timed steps. I jabbed out at nearby tentacles when they lashed toward me. Keeping my distance, I kept my peripheral vision on the floating eye above us.

Oppression would've simplified the battle, but Torix investigated runes on a nearby wall. Damaging him wasn't an option, and even if jabbing slowed this thing's demise, it would eventually kill it. Doing just that, I executed my makeshift strategy.

Blood gushed in directions, slick and slimy like egg yolks. It drenched our surroundings, and I couldn't believe how much blood this creature had, almost like there was an ocean inside it. That blood loss meant it couldn't fight forever. I could.

So I kited the beast with condensed strikes. Short and sweet, just like I was coached in boxing. I even let out a few kicks here or there. Once the monster slowed down, I packed on more and more heat. I wouldn't waste my chances of inflicting damage. When I committed to a strike, the hovering eyeball shot out a beam at me.

It pierced several inches into one of my shoulders, spines erupting from the wound. A quick jerk and the growing, green mass of spines fell to the ground. It squirmed before I stomped it. I grimaced as the intestine monster got on me again, searching for a way into my body. Slamming it off again, I regained distance.

Paying closer attention to the eyeball above, I kept my diligence and patience high. Over time, the bowel beast stopped writhing with violence. When its movements turned like sludge, I charged into it. The eyeball above caught the opening, but I lifted the viscera monster as a shield.

Blood gushed before I turned my hips. I torqued with my whole body as I slammed the guts into the ground. They splattered, and I lifted my hands. I mauled the goopy aberration into a thin liquid, taking two beams to my back in the process. I crushed and crumbled the viscera first before reaching around my back.

Alive and growing, I dislodged the two parasitic incarnations infesting me. They splattered down before squirming back to me on tiny legs. The eyeball above charged once more, but I dodged its laser by rolling to the parasites.

I grabbed them before chunking them at the floating eye. They tore into its body before I sprinted at it. With a growl, I leaped and stabbed my fingertips into its iris. It fell down, leaving a crack in the rock. In a primal rage, I ripped and roared. I punched and pummeled. I gouged it apart, and by the time I finished, blood soaked between the cracks of my armor.

It dripped off me as I turned to Torix, a wild look in my eye, "Who's next?"

Torix laughed, "Hah hah! You really do feast on monsters. How about something less monstrous then, hm?"

I caught my breath as a knight of shadow walked from Torix's portal. With a sword of night and a cape darker than coal, its red eyes glared out from behind its helm. I shook blood off my hands and legs, frowning at it,

"A Knight, huh?"

It lifted its hands over its head, angling its sword downwards. Taking steps at me, it maintained a steady progression before getting close. As it did, I charged. It stabbed forwards when I got close, slipping its sword inches into my armor. When I tried grabbing the blade, it darted back, pulling its sword with it. As it did, the blade hung in my wounds, the knight having to jerk the edge out.

It littered me with injuries, the reach of the sword difficult to deal with. Not knowing how my build worked, the knight let me trot backward, giving me time to heal and reassess. After the reset, I bolted towards it once more, fienting to slap the blade aside. The knight

stepped back, sweeping its feet in an arc. Its sword swung as it did, building momentum in the weapon.

When the blade got close, I stood there and braced myself, letting it dig into my side. The blade sliced several inches into my chest. Torix scoffed,

“An expert in unarmed combat, are you?”

I lifted my elbow and put a foot forward. Jerking my elbow down, I pulled my knee up against the sword. The clashing forces shattered the blade. The knight stumbled back as I picked pieces of umbral metal from my side. I smiled underneath my helm, and my armor grinned with me. It ebbed out with the sound of shearing metal, relishing the battle.

A piece of me enjoyed it too.

The knight threw the handle of its sword at me, but I ducked under it. I pounded my fists together while walking towards the knight. I growled,

“Come on.”

I got close, and when I punched forwards with my right hand, the knight ducked below. It shot a left hook right for my gut. Years of training kicking in, and I snapped my right hand back and down in an instant. My right elbow blocked its left body blow. The force of its strike dented my armor, but it left the knight vulnerable.

I turned on the balls of my feet, slamming a left hook into its face. The helm of the knight dented as it pulled its arm back and shot another haymaker at my face with its right arm. I tilted my head, his armored hand scraping the top of my helm.

Reaching out my left hand, I countered its heavy haymaker. Crushing into its face, it stumbled backward while I kept close. Getting overwhelmed, the knight covered its face with its arms. I unleashed a slicing hook towards its exposed stomach. The weighted blow clapped against his armor, bending the plates.

Two more body blows later, and the knight sliced a left forward. He caught me, my vision blurring white. My assault stopped, it got its bearings and fired a left hand right at my jaw. Tilting my head again, the blow slid past my face as I clapped him with a left straight.

He swung wild and wide, making even my counters land well. A few cringe inducing blows later, and the knight hobbled on its feet. He lost his legs by now, so I closed in for the kill. Turning like a tornado, I fired off strike after strike, wailing on the guy.

He hit me without any weight in his punches or kicks. The knight was well versed in fighting through a controlled, rigid manner. In order to win, I injected a frenetic pacing

that eliminated his best assets. After a minute of my fists clanging on steel, the knight slowed. After two, the knight let me land blows into its sides.

After three, I ducked and weaved around his blows, smashing him with heavy hooks. I mauled through the metal shell carried as his shield. I smashed through his helm. I grinded his teeth to powder. I broke his ribs to shards. In time, I cracked his face to mush.

When it fell, I stood over him. From above, I whipped my entire body weight into every hit. As it finally died, I fell backward, taking deep breaths while sweat poured from my brow. My helmet flowed off my face while I gasped between breaths,

“Who...Who’s next?”

Torix scoffed, “Let’s wait until you’ve at least caught your breath. There’s plenty of time for this.”

I turned to him, “I can keep going.”

Torix’s fire eyes flared, “But must you?”

I blinked, thinking it over. Did I have to keep going? I didn’t, and rest seemed so pleasant right now. The familiar lich even offered it without any cons, outside of time of course. However, that was the crux of the issue. Thoughts of my friends passed over me, along with my own close calls with death.

I wanted to rest, but I didn’t require it to keep going. I pushed myself upright, a surge of excitement racing up my spine. It surprised me, how exhilarating the battles were and would be. I lifted myself back up, my helmet flowing back over my face. I banged my chest for a second, psyching myself up before raising my hands,

“Yeah, I’m ready. Let’s go.”

Torix gawked at me as if I were crazy, but he let it go as he shook his head, “If...If you wish. Let’s find another beast to demonstrate adaptability in combat. Hm, try your fists against this creature.”

From Torix’s portal, a ghoul slinked out. Spectral and immaterial, I couldn’t even touch him. He unleashed bolts of lightning, streams of ice, and plumes of fire. The elemental clouds raged around me, and I swung at the monster with no mercy. Well, mercy or no mercy, I hit air with each punch.

Lacking a physical form meant fist fighting fell flat on its face. That’s when an idea snapped into my head. Enchantments let people hit ghosts in most games, either that or magic. My magic, weak and elementary as it was, still existed. Wielding those mana plumes, I channeled my blood into my fists.

Bursting forth from my hands, tiny, miniscule breezes oozed out. Red and not exactly menacing, my hands turned into air conditioners as I swung them. Despite the magic's lack of oomph, it still let me hit the ghost. Upon contact, the ghoul splattered like hitting a sack of toothpaste. Torix cackled at me, "And you call *that* magic?"

I smashed the ghoul against the enchanted wall. With a few more quick strikes, the ghoul splat into dead ectoplasm. I spread my hands while gazing at the lich,

"It got the job done, didn't it?"

"I suppose, but there is magic that can make you far more deadly than whatever that is you wield currently."

I shrugged, "You know, it's a work in progress."

The lich scoffed, "Oh, I beg to differ. Your magic, as is, is more representative of a lack of progress."

I frowned, "Well, I haven't had a thousand years of experience, unlike some people."

"That's quite apparent."

I crossed my arms, "It's easy to criticize but hard to help. Can we just have the next beast come out?"

"Ah, certainly. And do take my teasing with a grain of salt. Your lack of knowledge is understandable, given your circumstances. Perhaps I shall give you a bit of a lesson later, should I find the time. Having an ally this...Ignorant, it implores me to fix the issue."

Another horror spilled out of the gateway, and I gave him a begrudging nod, "If you talk, I'll listen." I glared at the monster, "But this first."

The fighting continued, and I fell into a rhythm for it. By the time we finished the undertaking, a growing pool of blood filled the bottom of the colosseum. Disgusting me less than I'd like, I wallowed in it without much worry. The depth of the pool stagnated as my armor devoured many of the corpses, clearing the place out some.

But, blood still flowed like floodwaters. At one point, I even splashed it into one of the creature's eyes. Torix applauded my creativity there. By the time I finished, I gained thirteen levels of experience. I put points after getting all those levels as it allowed me to change the order than I gained perks.

I wanted the per level bonuses right then and there, so I put ten points into dexterity then the rest into perception. That gave me just shy of enough for the level twenty perception perk. I opened the perk menu, checking out the benefits once more.

[Masterful(Dexterity of 30 or more) – Your dexterity is a monument to potential. Adds extra balance, reaction time, and physical control per level. Each point in dexterity adds 5 points of health. Movement of any kind requires half as much thought and focus for their execution. Double's stamina consumption.]

[Effortless(Dexterity of 25 or more) – Your dexterity is incredible. Adds another 1/10th of dexterity to perception. Doubles effects of physical oriented skills. Body weight and armor no longer affect balance.]

[Flexible(Dexterity of 10 or more) – Your dexterity is good. Doubles flexibility bonus.]

[Perceptive(Perception of 10 or more) – Your perception is good. Doubles sensory bonuses.]

[Discerning(Perception of 15 or more) – Your perception is excellent. Double's comprehension bonuses.]

Before I selected my perks, Torix paced up,

“Are you allocating your resources? Don't. Let me see your choices first. Allow me to console you.”

I nodded and showed him the perk screen. His eyes flared, “You've already gained the perks for endurance, constitution, and strength, I presume?”

“Yup.”

“Then don't put your next leveling point into dexterity. You've already quadrupled your stamina consumption. Any veteran will tell you about the setbacks that too many leveling perks will give you.”

I frowned, “I'm not that worried about it. I just fought for a while just now, and I'm fine. I'm pretty sure I can handle it.”

Torix shook his, “At this point, certainly. For most, investing a perk point into a single leveling perk is all they can do. That is, until they unlock the endurance trees. Then some choose another leveling perk, further doubling stamina consumption. Anymore stamina consumption simply isn't feasible.”

I spread my hands, “The thing is, I have a tree called Determinator. It doubles my regeneration and enhances my endurance and willpower dramatically. Stamina consumption isn't an issue because of that.”

Torix's eyes narrowed, “Would you mind showing the tree to me?”

I opened the tree menu along with the skills required for it. Torix crossed his arms after reading it, "I must say, that's quite the interesting tree. It explains a lot of your combat tendencies and why you rely on regeneration so much."

I put my hands on my hips, grinning, "Yeah. I put everything into endurance because I didn't want to die. It gave me a lot of rewards."

Torix leaned towards my status, "It's quite interesting, actually. You know, normally, a person won't invest heavily into endurance. It is an attribute that enables other attributes to shine. By itself, it does very little. With this tree, however-

He pointed at my status screen, "There's a sort of loophole you could take advantage of. Attributes feed one another, and they exist as two chains. One of those chains begins with endurance, the other begins with constitution. If you feed points strictly into endurance, you should be able to hyperinflate your attribute growth."

I listened as Torix grabbed his chin, "The more I read of this tree, the more strange it appears. If you had spawned in the tutorial as all other sentients had, you'd have been forced to take Fledgling and Beginner. That alone makes this Determinator tree impossible to obtain. It's bonuses far exceed a normal tree as well."

I pursed my lips, "Eh, I guess I have Baldag-Ruhl to thank for that. In a twisted sort of way, you could even call me lucky."

"No. You were quite unfortunate. Your luck must be below five."

"It's three."

"That explains why you were chosen instead of your friend then. With that tree though, you'll be able to invest in as many as three leveling perks for both the physical and mental attributes. I invested my leveling perks into willpower, intelligence and charisma. It's an unstandard setup for a mage."

Torix raised a hand, "Most mages prefer perception over charisma. I wanted to lead armies, however. Why fight with one when you may fight with many, after all. Even if they are undead, a high charisma can shake the risen souls from their slumber. The leveling perks for intelligence and charisma both doubled then redoubled my mana costs."

Torix tapped his cheek, "I can't afford doubling my mana costs further. No one has found a way around this. I maxed out dexterity and constitution thereafter. That layout matched my goals of becoming an immortal scholar. It's the generally accepted build for mages."

I leaned back, "Why, exactly?"

“You have the two regeneration stats, willpower and endurance. They gauge and control six of the other attributes, three a piece. For willpower, it controls charisma, perception, and intelligence. For endurance, there’s strength, constitution, and dexterity.”

“What about luck?”

“That is the only attribute that no one truly understands outside of Schema. Many a scholar have tried dissecting how Schema affects such an ephemeral quality. None have succeeded so far.”

Deep in thought, Torix pushed up an imaginary pair of glasses, “You could gain leveling perks in all the attributes. That, in itself, can set you apart from others. It won’t make you into an outright anomaly, but it shall put you far ahead of most. Combine that with this armor of yours, and you carry an enormous potential, child.”

He put a hand on his shoulder, “Do use it wisely.”

I looked down at my hands, “You really think so, huh?”

He walked off, “Yes, I do. It’s quite fascinating, peeking at your build. It was designed as if someone aimed to make it as powerful as possible.”

The cavern echoed as bats died in the distance. I listened and said, “That’s because Baldag-Ruhl’s the one that set it up. I’m guessing he was trying to make himself as strong as possible. In the end, his success became mine.”

“Count your blessings, then.”

My stomach rumbled as hunger spiked in my chest. I sighed, “Thanks for the info and all, but I’m starving. Let me go kill one of the bears real quick.”

Torix opened another portal, reminding me of space. Tiny glints sat in a pool of liquid darkness, and Torix willed out a clear pouch full of milky liquid. He tossed it towards me, “I own many of these rations. Use this to alleviate some hunger before you go on your hunt.”

I caught the milky liquid, peering at it, “How would I eat it?”

“Simply tear the pouch and pour it onto your face. It shall absorb through your skin.”

My skin crawled at the thought, but I tried it before dismissing the gift. I lifted the pouch in front of the eye slit of my helm. When I opened it, the liquid poured onto my face and disappeared into my skin as quickly as it landed. I shook my face as my hunger dissipated. It left a dry, earthy scent lingering behind.

I blinked, wondering if poisons were this quick to absorb. I gawked at the empty package, "What is this?"

"That is an edible container you may eat or toss out. The actual rations were found on a desert planet I passed by while researching water magic. Interesting places, desert worlds. You'd think you'd find the most information on water in worlds dominated by vast seas, but no. Any desert world I've visited, they cherished water, even worshipped it. Alas, that is a story for a different time."

He closed the different warp, "These pouches were quite helpful for keeping me sated during my travels throughout numerous worlds. They are very efficient. No chewing. No swallowing. Just consume and move along your way."

I looked at the packaging before trying a bite. Tasteless and melting in my mouth, it acted as Torix said. Contemplating the uses for this stuff, it saved me a lot of time. Thinking about it, most people spent about three hours a day preparing, eating, and gathering food. If I ate this stuff day in and day out, it would give me those hours for other tasks.

For now, that meant training myself up and handling my business faster. I spread out my arms, "Torix, how much of that stuff do you have, exactly?"

Torix pressed a temple with two fingers, "Hm, much more than I'll ever need. I bought it in bulk when I visited the planet, and I ended up becoming a lich soon thereafter. I still haven't found a use for it after all this time."

I pointed a thumb at my chest, "Do you mind if I take it?"

Torix scoffed, "All of it? For free?"

I swiped a hand, "The thing is, you're having to handle my training right now. If I save time, you save time too."

Torix let out a laugh before shrugging, "Why not?"

He tossed me a few more bags, "I'll keep giving them to you until you're sick of them."

I gave Torix a nod, "Yeah, I'll see how long I can hold out. Thanks."

Torix brushed me aside, "Yes, yes, now handle your status."

I put perk points into Effortless and Masterful. Finalizing them, my body altered once more. In one way, my movements no longer required thought. I moved around for a while, finding my body shifting with fluidity and grace. Even difficult and complex combinations of punches required no effort in my mind.

My body obeyed me, made to be mastered. My nimble hands and fingers shifted like water. My feet and legs skid over the ground with masterful balance. Even my eyes and neck shifted with resounding clarity. I smiled while trying out a few acrobatic stunts. I did a somersault before trying to front flip.

I flopped onto my back, not pulling my legs in properly. I spread out my hands and legs as Torix cackled in the distance. Perks or no perks, skills mandated practice. Pushing myself up, I ran for a bit. All of the physical activities mounted, and a familiar tug pulled on my lungs and legs. They burned from being tired.

In a way, the fatigue refreshed my mind some. Weird as that was, I compared it to space travel. Sure, weightlessness was novel at first, but losing levity lost its charm after a while. I missed being tired in much the same way.

It wasn't an issue yet, as I could punch for a while before facing exhaustion. The Determinator tree helped stop the issues I'd otherwise face. Finding myself finished relishing in the power spike, I glanced at my attribute and character screen. I hit level one hundred.

Level 100 Attribute Menu

Strength [30] | Constitution [36.3] | Endurance [51] | Dexterity [30] | Willpower [30.3] | Intelligence [10] | Charisma [4] | Luck [3] | Perception [19]

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Character Screen

Health – 1,677/1,677 | Health Regen – 352.4/min | Stamina – 1,040/1,040 | Stamina Regeneration – 30/sec | Damage Resistance – 96% | Mental Resistance – 96% | Physical Power – (+)327% | Damage Increase – 5% | Evolution – 1,679,254/2,000,000

Every stat in the character screen increased some, though not by an enormous amount. The main change happened outside the screens and menus from the per level bonuses. My mental resistance capped out though, and my armor closed in on the next evolution. After another few hours of fighting Torix's summons, the armor grafted onto me would change.

I didn't know how to feel about that. I shook off a sense of unease before my eyes set forward,

"Let's continue the training then."

Torix crossed his arms, "You don't have to pretend you're not tired, child. I can feel the mental exhaustion oozing from you. We can wait for you to recover."

I shook my head, "I'm good. I can keep going."

Torix sighed before resting his face in his palm, "What force is compelling you to do this and at this frenetic pace?"

I furrowed my brow, "I don't know."

"So why do it?"

Standing there for a moment, Torix let me collect my thoughts. I raised a fist a few seconds after,

"I mean, I spent my entire life getting dragged around. I had to go to school. I had to wake up at a certain time. I even had to think about a steady job. It's different now. I get to choose what I'm doing right here and right now. Everytime I think about that, it's motivating as hell."

I rolled my fingers into fists, "So yeah, I want to keep going. Why? Because I can. Because I'm choosing to."

Torix leaned back, raising his hands up, "Oh, *well now*, it appears we have someone special on our hands."

I frowned, "Thanks for the sarcasm, but I'm not special. I'm motivated. There's a difference."

His eyes flared for a moment before Torix gestured towards one of the tunnels leading out, "I've amassed a pile of BloodHollow's cretens for you and your armor. Feast on them before returning. It shall save me a few minions."

I narrowed my eyes, surprised that Torix got what he wanted. He worked in a little break for me while wrapping it up in ironclad logic that I couldn't deny. A curt nod later, I passed through the tunnel, sprinting full pace. Finding an army of undead pacing over, they carried the corpses of bats and bears.

My armor went through the rounds of eating them before I returned back an hour later. As I did, Torix peered at me, "Ah, you're back already. Let us presume your training once more."

He opened his horror portal again. Torix looked down at me, his chin raised, "Let's see just how long this *perseverance* of yours lasts then."

The portal rippled, a rumbling sound echoing out. A small part of me wanted to slink back into normalcy where I could relax and let go. A growing part of me, one filled with ambition, desired something more. That fuel gave me an energy I'd never known, and I wielded this growing momentum for all it was worth.

Before Schema, I was no one. Now, I could be somebody. I glared forward, ready to make it happen.

One cracked skull at a time.