

The New World

Chapter 18: The Evolution

From the gaping portal, a twisted, gnarled mass of branches and roots crawled outwards. The monster of bark and wood expanded in my vision, thousands of empty eyes staring at me from its spiny body. At the tree's center, the trunk caved in, creating teeth of wood. It twitched as it squirmed, more like an insect than a beast.

It's size and stature dwarfed me. From the eyes, a hallucinating aura ebbed. Torix spawned something with a much higher level than me. Proceeding with caution, I inspected the creature.

Corrupted Treant | Level 150 – Once a member of sentient plants, this being has fallen from grace. Where it once basked in the sun, it now squirms in the shade. The treant race fought against the dominant species of their planet and won. They enslaved the humanoid race, ruling over them for hundreds of years.

The treants' opinions split, one side for the continued enslavement and the other against it. Much like wars throughout your species' history, a civil war erupted between the two opinions. This particular treant was a nameless soldier, a member of the treant force siding for enslavement.

With hundreds of roots and branches, this treant pummels targets with innumerable blows from above and below. It strengthens in darkness and grows weaker in sunlight, designed as an assassin for other treants.

Be careful of its onslaught of attacks, or else you will be overwhelmed.

I rolled my shoulder, ready to test my new found agility. The monster whipped a wooden branch towards me, the air hissing as it gained speed. I shot towards the attack, dodging by a hair underneath it. That hair's breadth extended far beyond what it once was. The distance no longer unnerved me, saving me time and energy with my movements.

All this, I gathered from the wind of its attack. Seven more strikes lashed out towards me, but I slipped past them, moving just enough to dodge. I wasted no movement, no lapses in my balance holding me back. Weaving around the onslaught of strikes, Torix gave me a begrudging nod,

"It always amazed me, watching a warrior fight with all three attributes unlocked. Any one I watched who did so, couldn't maintain it for long. With how subtle and slight your movements are, you might be able to extend your stamina further than most."

A reluctant grin traced my lips as I closed the distance between the treant and I. Knees bent, I kept my arms close to my sides. My jaw clenched square while my chin tucked down. A tentacle of wood lashed towards me, but I tilted my body. It swished past my face before I shifted around three more strikes.

The speed of the encounter left my mind reeling and unable to catch up. Despite the disorientation, my body reacted in time. Instinct and reflexes controlled me, letting me evade several strikes each second. Whipping towards the wood, I landed my first punch. Chips of wood splintered as force traveled down my wrist, into my shoulders, and back into my heels.

The connection point locked in without any wasted energy. As with all strikes, the impact blew back into my arm, and I almost fell backwards from it. The timing of the swing, the angle of the blow, even the way I braced myself, it came together like cogs in an oiled machine. The impact timed so cleanly that my heels left tiny cracks in the stone beneath me. The echo of the blow was like shattering a bottle full of thunder.

But this monster survived with ease. As the next vine snapped towards me, I sank a fist into the beast's lower bark. My fist's rebound blew back into my shoulders. It pushed my back like I wielded bombs in each hand.

The snapping vine sank into the rock in front of me. The blowback dodged the attack for me. Lucky me, as I lost my focus for a second, staring at my hands. I marveled at them and the destructive potential therein.

The density of my armor stopped my bones from crushing, even as I slid back from my hits. My skills came together by then, and the wood smashed to ruin at my touch. I gazed up at the treant, shifting wood and toothy bark raging. I grinned as it sliced four of those tendrils at me.

I whipped out four rapid strikes in quick succession. Each attack cleaved off branches with momentous impacts. Spilling sap and sawdust poured out in each direction, splattering onto my face. Splinters inched into my hands, but the monster reeled back, surprised by my retaliation.

It reassessed its position, trying to come up with a plan. I came at the creature, dashing towards it before it could. I snapped out my punches like a volley of sonic bursts, tearing through its tentacles. I overwhelmed it for a moment, chopping wooden vines with my fists. After rupturing a few more branches, the tree's sap came to life.

The beast's eyes locked in on me, and the tan ooze coursed over me. It created a solidifying gunk, congealing into a mass of amber. I solidified before it reared its branches back. A hailstorm of spears, the branches came at me. They tore through my armor, sinking in several inches before roots expanded out.

However, they left cracks in the stony amber. I shattered my confines, grabbing several clusters of roots. The maw of my armor opened, and it bit through the barky mass. Jerking the roots from my chest, the roots writhed in my hands before I squished them.

I grunted out from my nose, blood spitting out onto the ground beneath me. The twenty foot tall behemoth ripped out several more vines, but I mastered my countering already. I pressed it back before it reached the colosseum's wall. Torix protected it with a shield of mana, keeping the runes intact.

Not needing to hold back, I pressed the tree into that barrier. It opened its toothy trunk and squealed out. It snapped those jaws at me, but I bit back with my hands. I crushed its teeth. I snapped vines to stop. I burst eye after eye of the horrid beast, approaching it like a guillotine racing towards an exposed neck.

Each root that came within my grasp, I eviscerated. Every vine that squirmed near me, I sheared. Every branch that attacked, I retaliated with an unwieldy force. The monster pushed itself up the wall, scrambling for further distance. It found none.

It fell sideways and timbered down. It pierced the ground, creating a barrier I couldn't leave. I glared at it on the ground, "Come on. Who's trapped in here with who?"

I pulverized the tree with gauntleted fists. As the tree monster died, chunks of wood and splinters littered the ground. Torix nodded his head in approval, "It's rather interesting how well your blows connect. It creates a kinetic blowback that's intense. Perhaps you could use it for evasion and such?"

I clanked my fists together, and they bounced back, "That's a good idea, just like this training. I mean, if I'm honest, I can't believe I'm having fun with this." I spread out my hands, "But I am."

Torix nodded before snapping his fingers. In an instant, the blood dissipated. The splinters dried, the wetness on my feet no longer pressing. Torix sneered, "Let's get that filth out of the way. It was beginning to congeal. Grotesque."

I gawked at the visual transition, "You...Wow, that happened faster than I could blink." My armor bent out to consume the tree. Laying beside the treant, I raised a brow, "So, what kind of magic was that?"

"It was a basic cleaning magic, one that works off of known Schema algorithms. It combines silent casting, the perk for thirty intelligence, and some complex computations offloaded to my status. Interestingly, that kind of spatial warping is highly advanced, and I'm not particularly capable of it."

Torix raised a finger, "Schema is, so I lean on him to ease that somewhat. That being said, it only works for cleaning debris. It's an efficient spell for saving time, something Schema has many tools to assist with, should you use them."

I listened, opening my status, “How would I get something like that?”

Torix’s eyes flared green, “Credits.”

“So money?”

“Something you likely have very little of. Worry not, as you’ll obtain these utility spells without needing to hunt them out directly. For now, your primary concerns should be building up your own offenses and creating multi-layered defenses. For instance, your mental resistance should be heightened as much as possible.”

Sitting cross legged, I put my hands on my knees and leaned forward, “Any reason why?”

“Mind magic. It’s difficult to learn, but it’s highly effective on anything that can be reasoned against. One day, you may come to rely on it.”

“Well, it’s good my armor helps me out there.”

Torix tilted his head, “Wait...The armor affects other resistances besides physical ones? How is that even possible?”

I shrugged, “No idea, but it definitely does. It raises the resistance cap and everything.”

Torix grinned, his teeth yellow as parchment, “Then understanding these ruins has become my new priority.”

He snapped his fingers and a chair formed beneath him, more a writhing shadow than a seat. It held him up as he leaned close to the runes. After a few moments, he shook his head in distaste,

“Every time I glance at this, my understanding of it lessens. Questions are answered with even more questions. Gah, I never held much talent in this particular field, and now it’s a point of contention for me.”

Torix leaned back into his chair, “This will take...time. A long time.”

Before replying, I placed three points into intelligence. Unlike before, it no longer affected my mind. Instead, the intelligence pulled my flesh together. The density of the arcane bonds in my blood and bones thickened. It acted like a magical pressure, a center of gravity holding me together.

I raised my hands, a subtle red aura spilling out. My air conditioner hands pulled at the arcane bonds within me, disintegrating sinews and tissues alike. Using magic tore apart the basic bonds that the mana created within me. In essence, I sacrificed my body for the magic I casted, and it didn’t fatigue my mind as much.

Instead, I converted my body into magic. At that point, I pulled at those mana chains holding me together. A painful surge ushered out from my hand, the red aura spilling out. Like leaving my hand on a stove, I jerked it back and winced, more out of surprise than pain. I clamped my fist, killing the cast quickly. A notification echoed out.

Breakthrough achieved! Apprentice level unlocked for Arcane Blood Manipulation

(lvl 1) —> (lvl 26)

I tilted my head, “Torix, have you ever heard of breakthroughs?”

He waved me off as he stared at a jagged character on the wall, “Of course. They aren’t that uncommon.”

“Alright, cool. Can you spawn another monster?”

“Sure, sure.”

The cycle continued like this for a while. Torix spawned abomination after abomination, and with my improved dexterity, I ripped them apart. He kept them around the same level as the treant, slowing my level gain, but we achieved the level we aimed for. Popping up in my status, our real goal’s completion cropped up.

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

My hand lingered over the notification. Memories of the armor and how it terrified other people rushed into my mind. The horror of the feelers of my armor filled my chest, making me itch for a moment. I even envisioned Michael and Kelsey disgusted with me. My hand hovered over the no option for a while.

Before I pressed down, other thoughts ran into my mind. I remembered the plasma knife coming at my throat and my armor saving me. My armor helped me at pivotal times, making a huge difference for me. More than anything, my fears guided me.

My eyes widened as nightmarish imagery flooded into my head. Kelsey and Michael gurgling on their own blood. My body swelled and split as monsters infested under my skin. I covered my mouth, overwhelmed by those possibilities. After I collected myself, I put my hand over the notification once more.

I selected the yes icon.

There would be no more heading back any longer. I trembled as my armor clasped deeper into my body. I grabbed the sides of my head, stumbling backwards as Torix turned to me, “What’s going on? Is something in your eye?”

I writhed as thousands of needles from my armor stabbed deeper until they reached my bones. I scream out, the sheer torment unbearable. It flashed in my vision, a wave of torment. All became pain once more. I could do nothing but convulse on the ground.

Torix paced over, recognizing something was off, "Daniel, what's happening? I'm about to sedate you if you don't calm down."

I thrashed on the ground, grabbing the sides of my skull. Every inch of me burned like I dove into a pit of magma. A pit of acid. Of fire. Of pure pain. My flesh eviscerated as the armor squirmed deeper, tearing into bones. In a panic, Torix created a green ring above me, lined with incantations. He generated a spell with his giant tome.

"I'm taking you to a healing center. You'll be responsible for the payments thereafter."

I raised a hand, gasping, "Evolution."

His eyes flared bright, "Oh...That's what this is. Then, I suppose you simply must bear through it. I shall stay here until it is over."

The pain lessened, and it allowed me to think again. My armor kept eating my flesh for an undetermined amount of time. When it finally stopped, I laid in a pool of my own blood and sweat. I stared at the ceiling, not knowing what happened. I turned towards Torix.

He sat on the ground, reading a dusty, ancient book. I glanced back at the ceiling. Lamps made of mana kept the room lit, along with Torix's shambling zombies. I rolled onto my front. As I did so, I noticed my gauntlets. They were smoother, more like skin. An intense, red light reflected off the stone floor from my helmet's slit.

Despite its radiance, the red glow left my eyesight unaltered. Laying there, Torix turned to me. He closed his book, "Ah, you're awake. Finally."

I pushed myself upright, wobbling onto my knees. Torix grabbed one of my arms, steadying me. He mouthed, "Come now. You've just undergone some sort of agonizing transition. Surely standing so soon benefits you little."

I shook my head, nothing hurting. If anything, my mind cleared and my body strengthened. I took a deep breath, trying to breathe out that experience. My expression numbed, "Ah...That was awful."

"I appeared like something atrocious, most certainly. It appeared as though your armor blended the body beneath it. To what end? I've no idea."

I got my bearings, and Torix let me stand on my own. I opened my status screen, inspecting the results of that spine chilling experience.

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

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

0/4,000,000 Mana left till next evolution.

Effects:

A Harbinger's Might – Increases Damage reduction cap by 1.5% | Current Max: 96.5%

Shell of Eldritch – Additional 10% increase to total health | Current Total Health: 110%

The Walking Calamity – Gives unique ability Oppression | Current Damage: (6000 + 20% of your health/min) within a 120ft radius

Abhorred – Decreases Charisma by 10% | Current Total Charisma: 90%

– From a different world I rise. We usher forth creation through ruin. Our might is our union, our hunger a weapon. All crumbles in our wake.

These bonuses accentuated my bulk and longevity, but having an attribute lowered, well, it sucked. In the grand scheme of things, it wouldn't matter much. I planned on increasing my charisma to over thirty, get the leveling perk, then not worry about further investment. So, despite the hit to charisma, the battle bonuses more than compensated.

The last lines of the armor gave me chills, however. It spoke as if two people existed, me and my armor. The metal reacted to its environment, even showing emotions with its wicked grinning. Evolutions might strengthen that personality, but whether that rang true in the future, only time would tell.

Centering back in the moment, I turned towards Torix, "Alright, let's continue the training."

Torix raised a hand to me, "You've risen to a suitable level of strength now. There's really no need to be fearful any longer, as you've filled out your combat perks for the most part. You should go find a nearby dungeon. The cores are simply obtained, and can be exchanged for powerful artifacts. You'd be gaining resources rather than depleting mine as well."

I put my hands on my hips, "Huh. When you're right, you're right. Any pointers for where dungeons could be?"

Torix gestured around, "Look for any nearby physical features of interest, as there will likely be a dungeon of some sort there. The more extraordinary the feature, the more likely a dungeon exists of a high level. Considering the brevity of your world's systemization, the monsters will be easily dealt with."

"You make it sound like they'll get stronger."

"They will. Much, much stronger, in time. This dynamic creates a power curve. Should you fall behind it, you will be at the monster's mercy. If you stay ahead of it, you will gather immense resources. This has and always will create a feast and famine way of life for anyone in Schema-owned space."

He turned towards me, "You lie well ahead of this curve because of your unique circumstances."

I flexed my arms, "Hell yeah."

Torix's fire eyes rolled in his head, "Do keep the bragging contained to those that will be impressed. Now, as unlikely as they may be, do be aware of scavengers or scouts from various guilds. They will target you as an unknown. Your death is mere experience to them. Also, that aura, you may wish to use it only when necessary. It sterilizes your surroundings, leaving notable traces of your presence."

I gave him a nod, "Alright, sure thing. Anything else?"

He placed his hands behind himself, "You wish for more advice?"

"Absolutely. You know what you're talking about."

His eyes flared red for a second, and the lich coughed into a hand, "I-I do pride myself in my knowledge. It's good you can see the value in it. For now, there's nothing else you need to know. Good luck with your dungeon delving."

I left out of the BloodHollow, pacing past the undead and the Sentinel. Once in the sun, I stretched out my arms. The smell of rich earth, fresh wind, and sun baked trees refreshed me. The sunshine warmed my armor while the soft grass cushioned my feet. Man, I loved and love nature.

Speaking of nature, I opened my minimap to remind myself of my surroundings. A few places like Pier's Creek or Red Hill came to mind, but they loomed in the shadow of the Evergreen Ravine. The fifty mile trench cut a path through the hills and caves, hosting pine trees on both its sides.

I mentioned trees because they didn't grow outside of the ditch. The water level raised as you went deeper in the ravine, some spots even holding a few natural springs. They

stayed in tiny grottos spread throughout, but that let the larger plantlife thrive. Michael and I visited there several times.

Michael helped me out each time because he lived in the woods with a camper's family. They went towards all kinds of landmarks, and that's why Michael and I went caving in the first place. I frowned, wondering where the guy was. Peering down at my armor for a second, I regretted evolving it.

That passed as I imagined the monsters I'd fight in the future. Going into that future, I sprinted towards the Evergreen Ravine. My feet tore clumps out of the earth as I ran. The wind pressed against my armor with a comforting cool. Birds sang songs in trees while I passed by wildflowers of all kinds.

Baneberries, bee balms, and bloodroots littered the forest floor. Mushrooms marked rotting logs, and Pier's creek shined towards the sky like beaten silver. Keeping my pace high, I traversed twenty miles of the forest. As I did, less wild game roamed the area. Deers stayed on edge, guarded and afraid. The squirrels darted away long before neared them, and even birds flew off.

Wondering what was up, I spotted species I didn't recognize in the woods. I wasn't exactly a pro or anything, but anything unusual caught my eye. Some of the plant life near caverns carried the bioluminescence I came to expect from dungeons. If anything, the rifts leaked out with new wilderness.

Those batches of oddness kept me entertained until I found the beginning of the Evergreen Ravine. As I closed in, the trees and forest gave way to a hill. I paced up the slanted plain before reaching an overlook. Even a cursory glance confirmed my guess. Schema transformed the pine forest into a thriving jungle, wild and shaded like an emerald in sunlight.

Flowers of all kinds bloomed in that vibrant green, bright and beautiful. Batches of glowing orange and yellow lined the tops of trees. These shining fruits lit the forest as I jumped down into the expanse. Sliding down the stiff cliffs, I got my first good look at the forest floor.

Glowing wildlife created pockets of light in the shadowed darkness. I paced around before a hulking lizard walked out. Lean, muscular, and powerful, its muscles rippled under its scaled skin as it walked. Orange stripes lined its sanguine sides. Black drool leaked from its mouth like motor oil.

It locked eyes with me. We stood as predator and prey for a moment, not knowing who was who. Making a decision, it roared at me, four rows of teeth lining the bottom and top of its mouth. Its legs lifted out from its body, hobbling sideways as it charged me.

Nearing me, I slammed my fist into its face. It blew back while the ground gave way beneath me. Armored, orange plates cracked around its head, and the eyes of the

creature opened wide. Those eyes pulsed as veins bulged in the iris's of its eyes. The bull sized lizard charged me once more, its tail swinging back and forth.

I tucked in, keeping my arms close. I walked towards the beast with patience. It snapped forwards, the disgusting maw gaping open. I lifted my foot onto its bottom jaw as I grabbed the creature's tusks with both hands. With a quick stomp, I ripped off its jaw before shoving it aside.

The bloody jaw crushed under my foot, and the creature stumbled into the ground. Gurgling while its tongue flopped in all directions, I lifted my right hand and struck the creature's head. Bone cracked, flesh tore, and skin split. With a few mauling strikes, the creature fell limp. Curious about it, I rubbed my left hand against the creature's plates, marveling at it.

It was a bonafide dinosaur, and according to my calculations, dinosaurs were awesome.

I culled a few more of the lizards after that. They stood no chance, my level too high for them to really take me down. I got into a rhythm that way, and in that sort of haze, a whistling entered my ears. The squealing sound gave way to a wet gush, pain roaring up my chest.

I spit out a bit of blood, a metal harpoon slicing straight through my chest. It lodged me into the ground, my vision jerking down. I peered around before another spear sliced straight into my hand like nailings through wood.

The deafening crack registered in my ears this time, and I turned to the sound. In the distance, a thin, lithe figure wore a suit of metallic armor. Nestled between glowing fauna, the armored person aimed a massive gun at me, a clip of harpoons resting above the barrel. Clear cases full of red goop pumped the crimson liquid into the individual.

It pulled a trigger along the side of the gun, a spear chinking into place. As it did, tubes siphoned the red fluid straight into the figure's arms, shoulders, and chest. The armor's mechanized hydraulics glided smooth as snakeskin when she aimed at me.

Crack.

Fast as a lightning bolt, a lance plunged into my other hand, pinning me down. The recoil of the rifle lobbed straight into a momentum sink in the back of the gun. It hissed steam, and the individual pulled another spear, aiming it at my face. I glared at her, and Schema gave me her inspection.

Althea Tolstoy | Level 123 | Status: Unknown – Althea is a scout working for a dark, powerful force. She's receiving training in a newly formed world where someone is attempting to turn her into a powerful fighter. Her unknown status makes the resulting bounties irrelevant, as she's already rewarding to kill.

My eyes widened as I gritted my teeth. She used me for training, huh? I clenched my hands onto the spears pinning me down. Jerking them from the ground, I stood up with the third lance sliding out of my chest. Sliding the spears out of my hand, I reared an arm back, harpoon in hand.

Throwing the lance with a burst of effort, the scout rolled sideways. The rod stuck into the ground as I reared my other arm back, the other spear above my head,

“Where do you want it? Through your chest or through your face?”

Chapter 19: Althea

She ran into some bushes before I tossed the spike where she hid. The metal left my hand, and I blistered towards her with clumps of grass flying off the back of my feet. I crashed into the greenery, but the scout disappeared. Resounding through the bushes, another destructive detonation of sound boomed in the distance.

A tree beside me splintered as another harpoon disappeared into the soil below. I gawked at the impaled dirt, grimacing at the damage done. Hustling toward the source of the sound, I broke branches, the bark bouncing off my face. The plants obscured my vision while vines whipped my chest. Losing track of her, the forest silenced.

Another lance pierced through the woods, sinking beside my foot. Racing towards the source of the sound, I pounded my heels into the forest floor, briars and bushes slowing me even further. The terrain fought me harder than she did. Popping into my vision, Althea's cannon ejected the heavy, kinetic bouncer in the back.

The steel sank into the dirt as she pulled out a smaller tactical rifle from the cannon's insides. The barrel flashed as shots zipped my way. The bright, red flashes dug straight into my chest. Pain exploded out like a hornet's nest. Skin seared as my flesh cooked. Ignoring the discomfort, I wove back and forth, moving my head in a chaotic flow. She remained calm, standing her ground and firing burst after burst at me.

I quit moving my head and shifted my body instead. Getting turned into swiss cheese while closing the distance, I changed tactics. I hid behind a boulder, waiting for my wounds to regenerate. I inspected the holes in my chest, finding no rounds left in me. Based on the red flashing, her rifle fired some type of energy munition.

It hurt like wildfire, but it inflicted little damage. Even when we met, her first few shots immobilized me, but they missed my vitals. Given her accuracy now, she chose debilitation over bloodshed. She aimed at taking me back towards her employers or something worse.

Interrupting my thoughts, whizzing rounds stabbed into my boulder barricade. Powdered rock floated in the wind as she walked around the stone towards me. Staying in place, I pulled my arm forward. I clapped my elbow into the rock, chunks of it falling out. Grabbing an armful, I waited for her to change her angle of attack.

She maintained a wide girth while closing the distance. I waited until she got near my side of the rock barrier before running out the other side. Right before stepping into her view, I tossed a rock in the direction where she expected me to come out. Her reflexes snapped into action, and she tore through the boulder piece I tossed up.

It disintegrated before I barreled towards her. She aimed at me right as I chucked another rock at her. The sharp piece snapped into her helmet, breaking several tubes leading towards her neck. She pulled back while I dashed closer, but the jungle impeded her as it had impeded me. She aimed once more, and I threw a stone again.

It snapped into another tube, more red gunk spilling into the jungle. She scrambled for escape after a few aiming attempts. No longer walking into a firing range, I closed in on my dashing distance. As the crimson fluid leaked from her armor, her hands shook. She pulled out a syringe from her side and stabbed herself. It stabilized her, making her sprint and run faster.

She aimed back and fired quick bursts, tagging me. I ripped the underbrush apart on my way over, my health dwindling to half. One option showed itself, so I leaned below a burst of fire before pushing off my heels. I shot towards her, wind rushing past my helm. Her knees wobbled as she unloaded a full clip into my incoming chest. It burned and raged like fire, but I kept upright, reaching her. Grabbing the end of the rifle, I jerked the weapon from her grasp.

She let it go, punching at my head. Her fist smacked into my helmet, denting it and whipping my head back. I grimaced at the sheer power she held in her tiny frame. Stunned for a second, I stumbled back while getting my bearings. Worried of her rushing in, I kept my arms high. Instead of capitalizing on my vulnerability, she let me go. Peering at her, I discovered why.

The arm that struck me mangled into a broken mess of blood and steel. A series of spiral fractures eliminated her usage of the limb, and the metal crumbled with it. My armor outdid hers, so despite Althea's physical power, her bones shattered before mine did.

Taking the moment offered to me, I shook off my dizziness. I came in once more with a short jab. Althea reacted like lightning, tilted her head sideways. My fist brushed past her face as she countered my strike with her unbroken hand. She smashed a fist into my face, and my head bounced back as if running into a wall. My vision blurring, I buckled back, my knees wobbling.

I got my bearings, gawking at her in surprise. Her power and speed roared out like fury and fire. She aimed for strength and dexterity, her reaction times and power both first class. Taking another second, I let my health return to normal. My vision cleared, spots dissipating in my peripherals.

The armor over Althea hampered her regeneration, unlike mine. The twisted metal prevented her arms from reassembling. She heaved for breath from under her armor, both her arms resting on her sides and shattered beyond repair. Red fluid leaked from both of the broken tubes, no longer giving her an artificial rush of adrenaline. The goo pumped out of the suit, and once I healed up, I closed in.

I ducked under her desperate punch before snapping a quick hook into her side. She keeled over, her armor denting. Chaining my strikes as a combination, I lobbed a heavy uppercut as she slumped down, her head whiplashing up. Glass cracked, and she stumbled away from me.

I lunged forward. She pulled out knives of red energy. She sliced at my throat, but I weaved between her slow slashes. Her broken arms refused to listen to her commands, all agility having left her. She compensated midfight, holding the blade backwards. Whipping the knives, she slashed right at my vitals. Deadly but predictable, I kept myself calm and stayed close.

Althea struggled on, her willpower keeping her conscious. I pressured her back, keeping my attacks light. In time, her strikes turned desperate and wild. She trembled and shivered. When she stumbled back, I charged towards her for the killing blow. Midway through my strike, she changed directions.

She bounced off her heels, and a loud clamp echoed in my ears. Debilitating misery thundered up my leg as something clamped onto my foot like a viper's fangs. I howled out as she bolted towards me. Lunging at my neck, her blade slid forward with a smooth agility.

The fumbling chaos of before formed into a ruthless rigidity in an instant.

She played me, and I fell right into the trap. This entire time, she baited me around, pretending like she worked off desperation alone. Even in the moment, I admired the plan. It required guts, effort, and tenacity. However, it lacked an awareness of my abilities.

Her knife sliced at my neck, but I cranked my face towards her arm. Like a monster from hell, my helmet split open and chomped onto her crumpled limb. Metal pierced soft flesh, a torrent of blood flowing into my helmet as her armor crumpled. Holding her like a pitbull, I jerked her back and forth before pulling her down.

She lost her balance, her body lighter than mine. The red knife of energy fell from her hand as a high-pitched voice screamed through her voice intercom. On the ground, I

tore a chunk off her armor and forearm. She howled out before kicking at my injured leg. I ignored the pain, snapping her head back with a fist.

Her head bounced off the dirt, and she stopped moving as much. I peered down, finding my leg bit into by a bear trap. The metal teeth carried a laser-lined edge, the red glow intermingling with my blood. I closed my eyes, jerking the trap off my leg. The trap tore out chunks of flesh, cooking and cauterizing the wounds.

I winced at the medley of blood and metal my leg turned into. The crumbled, umbral steel kept my weight up like a spiral peg leg. My regeneration came into its own once the trap fell down. Unlike Althea's armor, mine reconstituted with my own health. Returning to normal, I grimaced before lifting the leg. No pain shouted back, so I turned back towards Althea.

I stomped down, bones in her legs cracking. She screamed, and I winced at the sound of it. Standing over her, I lifted my hand high. She pulled her arms up, "Stop! You don't want to do this."

Pausing for a second, I agreed with her. The two scavengers treaded farther from being human, but this woman sounded like a person. Like anyone I'd find on the street. That undue mercy of mine leaked into my words as I simmered,

"Why not? You tried killing me."

"I could've killed you with the first shot. I didn't."

I narrowed my eyes, keeping my fist high, "Start talking then."

"I-I'm here to scout. I was trying to take you back with me."

"Where?"

"I can't say."

I frowned, "That's convenient."

She wrenched under me, her body convulsing. She winced, "Get away from me."

Chips of glass fell from her helmet. A pair of deep, purple irises looked at me, fear stricken and panicked. My hand lowered to my side as I peered at her. I grimaced, "You're going to need to give me some answers."

Two thin veins grew over her irises. An eerie feeling raced up my spine. Her voice deformed, "Get. Away. Now."

Fear laced her voice, not towards herself but for me. The vibrant red mixture she pumped herself with mixed with my blood beneath us. I dipped my hand into it, rubbing it into my finger tips. It numbed wherever my skin touched. Slinging it off, I raised a brow down at her.

The goo anesthetized instead of invigorated.

I stood myself up before her body splintered under her helmet. A black tentacle shot out of her face mask and grabbed my neck. Like a tendril of steel, the limb lifted me upward. Other vines of black extended from her metal shell, rooting into the ground. As I rose up, her mechanized armor bulged outwards, the metal squealing as it bent.

With a sharp pop, the metal ripped open, revealing horror. Eyes opened in sporadic places, glancing around in a frenzy. Her stomach opened, intestines writhing outwards. Her flesh reformed into arms and feet and teeth. The abomination kept growing from the power armor towards me.

I bit through the tentacle holding me with my helmet. As I landed on the ground, I rolled away before standing up. The mound kept expanding in all directions as I lowered my hands,

“What the hell’s going on here?”

A ball of shadow radiated outwards before Torix walked from it. The lich gave the grotesque mass a knowing glance,

“What the hell indeed.”

Torix reached out a hand, freezing the creature in place. His palm shook as he squeezed a fist. The mound of meat retracted back into the torn armor. It stabilized, revealing a woman underneath the once writhing mass. She laid there, sleeping in tattered clothing. The sight of her struck me – she contrasted the deformity like night from day.

Her eyes and hair shared the same shade of lavender. Her skin shone silver in shade, though it only glistened from sweat. She laid out in the sunshine like an amethyst in a silver ring. As I gawked, Torix scoffed,

“I suppose you are rather young. Perhaps you’ve never seen a woman’s form before?”

I flushed under my helmet, “Of course I have, but come on man-“ I pointed at her, “Having *that* come out of that hideous blob, it’s, well, it’s insane.”

“Perhaps, but staring a little less would serve your dignity well.”

Ignoring the jabs, I mouthed, “I wonder who she is?”

“We will discover that once she’s been stabilized. Now-” Torix created a portal and shoved her into it, “Even a superficial glance exposes wells worth of eldritch energy oozing out of her. I’ve never seen anyone this contaminated with the eldritch yet still remain a system dweller.”

Torix turned and faced me, “She is still an unknown, however. This reformation process explains the reasoning behind that well enough.”

My eyebrows raised, “Why do you think she changed into that glob?”

Torix rubbed his hands together, “That is precisely why I am here. Uncovering life’s mysteries, why, that is my most consistent source of enjoyment by far.”

Realizing Torix dived in from nowhere, I leaned back, “Speaking of mysteries, how and why are you here?”

Torix stared forward, “I sent several of my summons to monitor you after you left. They diverted portions of their consciousness towards me, giving me a view of you. I ensured you didn’t run off after I gave you so many resources.”

I put my hands on my hips, “You kind of found me from off this planet. I don’t think there’s a chance I can hide from you now that you’re on it.”

Torix’s eyes flared red, “I thought the same of my son, and look where that has left me.”

I frowned, his words piercing himself more than me. We watched the jungle of the Evergreen Ravine, taking a second for silence. Torix interlocked his hands behind himself,

“My emotions for that matter have been settled, but the lessons learned still shout in my mind. I knew Alfred was likely to have passed before I found him. I spread the grief of his demise out over decades, though the confirmation of his passing was still a blow.”

Torix grabbed his hands behind himself, “Alfred taught me caution and foresight, and now, they are my greatest strengths. Should I wield them, they shall guard me. Those lessons guard you now as well, and by Schema’s grace, you need it.”

Torix peered in every direction, “The energy signature from your stunt with Baldag-Ruhl is attracting other presences from across the stars. This scout is likely one of those interested parties, so I’m going to see what she knows. Perhaps some experimenting shall take place, should she prove that she isn’t useful in other ways.”

I winced at the thought. My eyes set where she was, “I know it’s not my place to say this, but she did try warning me about her transformation. I don’t think she deserves torture.”

Torix rolled his fiery eyes, “Hah, she forfeited her life the moment she tried taking yours.”

“She didn’t try to. She could’ve killed me if she wanted too.”

Torix shook his head, “That undue mercy of yours is far more grotesque than even this woman’s body.”

My eyes widened, “Would you say the same about me and my armor?”

Torix turned a palm to me, “Of course. If you allowed that eldritchian skin to overcome you thusly, then yes; I would say the same about you and your situation. You’ve contained it, however. She has not, and that makes all the difference.”

I flinched, “You-you think I could end up like that?”

Torix lifted his chin, “Likely not, though I can never be too certain. In all honesty, your armor’s stability is remarkable. Baldag-Ruhl’s work exemplified a relentless pursuit of perfection. Whoever tampered with that scout acts as a potent opposite; they demonstrate amateurish chauvinism.”

Torix sighed and peered down at me, “Regardless, I’m returning to BloodHollow. Do finish this dungeon and return forthrightly. I may have unlocked Miss Tolstoy’s secrets by the time you arrive...Preferrably without torture.”

Torix took off on his dark cloud of mana. I stared as he darted off with Althea. Lowering her chances of being tortured was about the best I could do for her. That repaid her for earlier.

Taking a breath, I shook off the jitters from the monster situation. Settling myself down, I slid down towards the bottom of the ravine again. Taking my mind off that dire situation, I met a few more komodo tigers. They offered little in the way of anything useful, including a good fight. They only gave me ambient mana, and by no means an enormous amount.

By comparison, the jungle itself was a wonder to behold. I picked a few of the stranger looking flowers and plants, hoping for maybe an alchemy or harvesting skill. Nothing happened, so I tried eating one of the glowing flowers. It burst out with a rancid mucus as I did. I spit it out, nearly throwing up. Vowing to never tell anyone about that, I marched onward.

I stumbled across a small cliff at the ravine’s center. There, a giant red eagle lounged with orange wings scorching out fire. Its chest puffed out with pride at its own form, an innate majesty oozing from it. The breathtaking beast spent a bit too much time looking dominant instead of being dominant, however.

I got one of the spears I tossed at Althea earlier before chucking the bolt at the eagle. It snapped one of its wings into the ground, and I charged it right after. I shattered the pinned wing. Flopping with its talons and pecking with its beak, it left a scrape or two on me before I crushed it to bits.

With the dungeon core ready, I handled more of my business.

[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 comprehensive bonuses.]

After selecting Discerning, I finalized my choice. For the moment, nothing popped into place. I'd select the Beginner perk soon for the experience if no other perks showed themselves. It made me think about my quests. Not needing to complete them in one go, I ran back towards BloodHollow to cash in Schema's rewards.

While running back, I checked out my tree menu. I'd stockpiled 233 points, so I put them into the Obliterator tree. Amazingly, I got nothing from it. Even with just shy of 250 points in it, I gained nothing. That being said, all of the other trees distributed rewards at set intervals. If this tree worked like the others, it could reward something at the quarter mark of the tree's total, meaning 250.

Leveling towards that quarter mark took priority as I ran back towards BloodHollow. Noting the skill's utility against Althea, I trained my Throwing during my journey back. To level the simple skill, I ripped off branches and tossed them at pinecones or the middle of trees. I missed less often than I expected, my finesse a far cry from my pre-status self.

By the time I reached BloodHollow, I gained three points in Throwing and one point in Physical Fitness. While sitting outside BloodHollow's sheening doors, I placed my points into Obliterator. The satisfying ding of a notification rang in my ears along with the resulting rush.

An obliterator destroys, but all destruction ushers forth growth. The reason for that primordial principle is simple; for change to occur, the present must be wiped clean. An obliterator is the living omen of change for that reason. You bring that omen with you as well.

+1 attribute point per 5 levels. Effect is retroactive for all levels before 100.

The tree baffled any expectations I had prior. It gave me extra attributes permanently, and attributes always mounted to exceptional gains overtime. Ogling the bonuses for a moment, I took a moment to appreciate what this skill tree meant. If all four of the tiers acted like the first, I'd nearly double my attribute gain.

Combine that with my other trees, and my raw stat total exceeded others by leaps and bounds. Other people might get this same tree, however. In fact, there could be more people out there than me getting more trees at a lower level. If anything, families born into the system could pass down knowledge about what trees to unlock and when.

That knowledge might result in dynasties of individuals standing far over others. While ahead of normal people, I may not own an advantage over many of the elite out there in the stars. I smiled at the thought, the ceiling over me vast and infinite. Schema's universe seemed that way, and Torix acted as the reason I pondered these ideas in the first place.

The old lich opened my perspective to the world beyond my own. I'd repay him for that one day.

Snapping back into the real world, the attribute screen popped up. After rereading Obliterator's bonuses, I rubbed my temples in confusion. It worked for levels up until one hundred, meaning level ups from here on out wasted attribute gains from the tree. Of course, that assumed Obliterator kept giving the same style of reward for ascending ranks. All other trees acted like that, however, so I worked off that hunch.

Shifting my focus from leveling to skill gaining would grant me higher attributes in the long run. Considering the power of trees, focusing on leveling skills empowered me either way. Gaining attributes helped as well because of Obliterator's bonuses. Staring at those bonuses, twenty attribute points waiting for allocation.

I put a whopping seventeen points into intelligence, and three into perception. I gained the requirements for intelligence and perception's perks that way. Unlocking perks and perk points were different matters altogether, however. These attributes came from Obliterator, so I couldn't unlock these boons yet.

Getting those perks required dungeon delving for cores. After handling Torix's request, getting cores while training took priority. Arriving at BloodHollow, the sentinel and I exchanged some snappy words. I sprinted back towards the colosseum, trying to train different skills. Unsuccessful but still working on it, I arrived with Torix leaned over the scout's body.

Althea rested on a runic table. Innumerable devices of metal laid at Torix's side as he carved a small slit into her skin. I grimaced while walking up,

"I thought you said you'd avoid torture?"

He spoke between measured slices, "Always take heed of context clues, little one...Do you hear screaming, perhaps writhing or sweating?"

Peering at Althea, I shook my head. Torix used a bit of mana to clean some blood, "Therefore, the elements of torture aren't present. This is surgery, and I'm carving a stabilizing rune into her skin. Do you recall the armor she wore before?"

Those crumbled plates laid in a corner of the colosseum, the metal shattered beyond recognition. I squinted at the pile, "Yeah, I remember. I thought it pumped some kind of stimulant or something. It numbed my fingers on contact, and she pumped a lot of it in her all the time. I'm guessing that gunk kept her from turning into an abomination."

Torix's fire eyes narrowed, "Wait...How did you guess all that?"

I tapped the side of my head, giving Torix a smile, "I took heed of the context clues therein." I interlocked my hands behind myself, pretending to be Torix, "You see, hm, the glass tubes busted behind her, hm, while I punched her, most indubitably. She started transforming rapidly, thereafter. Therein and therefore, I thus connected the two dots."

I dropped the facade, "Eh, it made sense, yuh know?"

Torix reached out his hand, giving me a telekinetic flick between my eyes. I rubbed the spot as Torix scoffed, "You deserve that for the taunting." He leaned back over, "Though it wasn't the worst impression I've heard of myself, so there's that."

I touched where the invisible flick made contact, "Hah. Thanks." Pacing over, I watched him work. He carved out tiny marks into her skin. He dabbed his instruments into pools of liquids, each colored a different shade. They carried varying consistencies, herbal and chemical smells wafting off each bowl.

The shining blue one reminded me of BloodHollow's cyan pools. The others differed in texture, smell, and appearance to the other pools in this cave. These liquids covered a variety of needles and other warped pieces of a silver metal. With all these colored pigments, Torix created the lines for a tattoo of runes. Torix reached out a hand,

"Would you mind being a part of an experiment of mine? The risks are rather low, and they should enable us to speak with this individual."

I crossed my arms, "Uh, sure. As long as it isn't anything crazy."

"Good. Give me your hand. I need your blood."

Hesitation ran through me before I reached out my hand. An aura of orange suffused Torix's hand, and he brought my palm over the shining blue bowl. Slitting my palm, he

eased blood into the bowl, and I winced, more out of habit than actual pain. Drops dabbled into the basin, changing the color of the mana to purple.

The bowl's contents reminded me of Althea's hair and irises, just brighter in shade. Torix leaned back from the saucer, "That is quite interesting. I imagined that her biology resulted from experiments with the eldritch. Her mind remains utterly uncorrupted by their influence, however."

Torix grabbed his chin with a hand, "It produced eldritch energy mixed with something else, and this production continues even when her mana is full. That oversaturation causes the energy to deform her." Torix tapped his chin as he said, "She's unconscious, and so her mana has ceased production. Once awake, she will need a conduit for stabilizing her."

Torix turned towards me as he said with a dark smile, "Do I have any volunteers?"

Chapter 20: Dungeon Delver

I pointed at myself, "You mean me?"

Torix spread his arms, "Who else is here?"

"Ok, first off, what's a conduit?"

"A way of channeling energy. In your case, you will act as a reservoir of her excess energy."

I raised my hands, "You want me to take in the energy that turns her into that deformed, disgusting, and horrific abomination from earlier?"

Torix raised a finger, "Yes, but allow me to explain. I wouldn't imagine doing this to you if not for your fight earlier. You were covered in her blood numerous times, and you even swallowed a portion of her forearm using that armor of yours."

I flinched while remembering that. Torix waved his hands, "You'll find no judgment from me for your fighting methods. My main point is that you've already dealt with quite a bit of the energy that deformed her, yet it took no toll on you whatsoever."

I frowned, "What? I have?"

"Yes."

"But that's her body, not her mana."

“She has blood magic just as you do.”

I furrowed my brow, “I thought blood magic was rare?”

“It is, but it’s by no means nonexistent. Regardless, she’s here with that quality. I tested her blood on a minion of mine, and it had to be destroyed. That underling devolved into a monster and with far less of her energy than your own exposure.”

I lifted my hands, my palms facing me, “So...So this armor just ate the energy.”

“Indeed. From what I’ve seen of it, it absorbs any kind of energy it’s exposed to. Remember those evolutions you mentioned? This conduit will allow you to evolve faster and stabilize her condition at the same time. We may keep tabs on her via that conduit as well.”

I narrowed my eyes at Torix, “Can you actually stop this, um, conduit if it begins going awry?”

Torix nodded, “I may, thought at a cost. I did so to Althea earlier, as you saw. I could do the same feat for you as well, though I’d never allow the energy to go haywire for that length of time. I’d step in the moment anything amiss occurred.”

I leaned back, “That’s going to be a lot of risk you’re asking me to take on.”

Torix shrugged, “It’s part of the process for understanding your armor. Remember, you offered your services as an exchange for finding your friends. This is a part of that. I understand it’s rather distasteful, but so is peering out at random in search of those close to you.”

I rolled my shoulders, “Yeah, you’re right. We’ll...We’ll do it.” I raised a hand at Torix, “But you’d better stop it if anything starts going haywire.”

Torix steepled his fingers, “Remember who you’re talking to. I treat my experiments like I treat my plans; they are always under my control.”

Equal parts unnerving and reassuring, I spread out my hands, “So, what do I need to for this conduit thing?”

Torix picked up the bowl, swirling it some, “You’ve handled all of the necessities already. This is the most vital aspect of your assistance. I merely wished for your verbal agreement before treading onward. This will take days in order to finalize, after all.”

I grinned, “So I’m free to go for a while?”

He dabbed an instrument into the bowl of bright purple, “Absolutely. Do stay alive, as other scavengers might be out and about at this point. You’re quite unfortunate to have

met so many already, but I'll continue safeguarding you while you search out your dungeon cores."

Torix stabbed Althea with tiny pricks of a needle, coloring her skin. He continued, "Be careful, and I'll send you a message when you need to return henceforth."

I squeezed my hands to fists, "Alright, cool. I'll be off then. Cya Torix."

"You as well."

I ran past zombies, knights, skeletons, and a variety of undead before finding the large loop of BloodHollow. Nearing the doors out, I strolled up to the sentinel. I raised up a hand, "Can I complete two of the quests sent by Schema?"

The sentinel peered down at me, "Ah, yes. I'll connect you with one of his AI's. They should be able to handle your trite little quest."

I blinked, "Uh, yeah, I know what you mean. A quest personally given by Schema himself. Psh, how trite and *little*."

The Sentinel froze in place. He simmered, "Just get your rewards and leave me."

A robotic voice sounded in my ears, "Two quests completed. Rewards will be received via notification. Thank you for your continued assistance. Goodbye."

The servant AI for Schema spoke in absolute monotone. The voice justified Stacy and David's assumptions about who and what Schema was. I knew better now, after having spoken with a fragment of its mind. Either way, I scrolled through my menu, finding the notifications.

Gorge on Horrors | Unknown Tier Quest – You are a monster. Become the eater of monsters.

0/4,000,000 ambient mana eaten | Timeline(2 months)

He Who Slays the Eater of Worlds | Legendary Unique tier quest – Most never enter a dungeon in their lifetime. You have been commanded to destroy many. Good luck.

0/6 Dungeons cores obtained | Timeline(2 years left)

The quests changed their names, sounding much larger in scope. Inspecting each update, my brow crinkled. I spoke out, "All I got was a notification to complete the next tier of the quest. What the hell is this?"

The Sentinel stated, "That is your reward. The opportunity to further serve your savior."

I rolled my eyes before walking out of the dungeon. After grumbling for a few minutes, I opened my minimap. Finding dungeons of any quality and caliber proved simple and easy. I passed several of them on my way to the Evergreen Ravine. Taking a few laps of the nearby forest, I found a dozen just chilling in the middle of nowhere. On the one hand, a part of me heartened at how easy they were to find.

Another part of me dreaded the idea of dungeons dotting the countryside everywhere. If the monsters within escaped, the consequences made my skin crawl. I pushed the thought aside since I struggled to find two friends let alone save everyone. Keeping my head down and focusing on myself, I inspected my minimap, finding a dungeon about three miles away.

I passed it on my way towards the Evergreen Ravine where dinosaurs and phoenixes roamed. A few minutes later, I traveled towards the nearest landmark, Pier's Creek. Stepping up to it, a few new fauna darted around the countryside nearby. The creek's surface rippled with smooth, dark stones littering its bed.

Hopping into the stream, the water plopped from around me. No water seeped into my shoes, the armor airtight in all respects. Traversing the crevice, different mushrooms, algae, and crawfish darted around. These tiny mushrooms hopped every few seconds, jumping onto nearby algae.

The algae kept near the water's edge for that reason, staying in the wet shelter of the stream. This shimmering, bluegreen muck swallowed any nearby crawfish, melting the shell and devouring the meat under the chitin. To my surprise, the crawfish indulged on any mushrooms falling into the water. This consuming cycle kept each piece of life at bay.

Following these strange lifeforms, I followed Pier's Creek before finding a waterfall. About half my height, the series of rapids stuck out like a sore thumb. I followed this stream for miles in both directions, and without a doubt, this stream lacked anything resembling a waterfall. Getting near it, I listened. Flowing water hummed in my ears like the engine of a car.

Beyond the gush, a slight clicking echoed from beyond the water wall. I passed through the waterfall, finding myself drenched and facing a tiny cavern. Bingo. I crawled into the tunnel, claustrophobia pressing in from all sides. That fear surged from the idea of a creature finding me, not the walls themselves.

No cretin found me helpless, so I passed beyond the tunnel and into an opening. The water below carved a middle to this place, two walls of rock wrapping around it. Glowing seaweed lit up from the stream, offering light into the entire hollow. Massive crabs walked around the currents, snapping for fish and nibbling on the glowing seaweed.

Offering more light, crystals lined the wall, glowing azure as an untainted sky. Pacing up towards these crystals, my armor squirmed in place. A shining mist flowed off the

glowing gems and flooded my armor. The once shining crystal dampened its glow. Finding more ways of fueling my armor, I turned to the crabs.

Baby Deep Dweller | lvl 14 – This is essentially the larval state of the deep dweller. They feed on algae and various fish until creating a cocoon and transforming into their adult state. They can then feed on much larger prey before growing once more. This molting process continues until they reach behemothic sizes, able to tear down skyscrapers in a single hit.

This is a new colony without any adult deep dwellers. Fully grown deep dwellers can snap their claws with such speed and power that they create sonic booms with resulting explosions. Other variants can snap out their claws with an intensity few creatures can match. They are heavily armored and muscled creatures in this state, with a variety of violent, effective attacks.

These little guys, however, can't do any of that. They are just the inklings of a much grander species. Face this inkling, you will never face their true horrors.

The deep dwellers followed an evolutionary path, one requiring time to incarnate. Robbing the creature of said time, I crushed the closest crab under a heavy heel. One stomp led to another, and I chained a series of hops together. By the time I left, the cavern carried more seafood than a fish market. The perks and stats coordinated together, making my leaps land with devastating efficiency.

Further benefits mounted.

Skill Unlocked! Stomp | Level 1 – The lifting of one's heel and driving it downward: that is a stomp. This simple, unrefined attack defies its simple origins, becoming an attack worthy of fear. Levels add additional stomp speed and force.

Making the most of my time, I tossed rocks as I stomped from crab to crab. Balancing while aiming stones took some practice. I wobbled on the monsters, the caving of crab shells and throwing of small stones exhausting me. I gained a grip on it after a while, timing the tosses with the landing of my feet.

I levied the contrasting forces so they evened out more, and after several hours, the tiring turned into tedium. Willpower and the resulting perks from it kept me sharp and focused during this time. A bit of skill leveling later, and I reached the boss. As expected, an older, adolescent deep dweller stood at the end of the subterranean stream.

Less a normal crab and more a shelled spider, its twitching eye stalks zoned in on me. Streaks of blue trailed down the orange top of the creature, zigzagging its surface. It raised clawed hands, one far bulkier than the other. It snapped the larger limb, a snapping sound rippling out. Water nearby cascaded away, the flow of water reversed for a moment.

I picked up a rock, snapping the stone against the crab. It blocked with the thickened shell of its arms. Snapping off my feet, I closed the distance and tackled the monster. It dragged back on its feet, portions of its body cracking. I whipped down, avoiding a snapping claw, and I picked up a rock at the same time.

I lobbed the rock into one of its eyes, the eye stalk breaking. The crab covered the wound while I rocked a heavy hook into its exposed gut. The belly of the beast crushed, my hand dashing through the flesh and chitin. I gurgled on its orange ooze while I reached in and up its chest. Grabbing a mass of organs, I pulled its insides out.

It squirmed as one eyestalk submerged into the shell, a pit of steaming entrails lying at my feet. The creature died seconds after. Staring around, my armor ingested the nearby creature, and the dungeon core popped up in my inventory. I smiled at my notifications.

[Brilliant(Intelligence of 20 or more) – Your intelligence is amazing. 1/10th of intelligence added to luck. Mental skills are gained twice as quickly.]

[Genius(Intelligence of 25 or more) – Your intelligence is incredible. Another 1/10th of intelligence added to luck. Doubles effect of mental skills. Level of mana(Health due to Blood Magic) no longer affects mental acuity.]

[Omniscient(Intelligence of 30 or more) – You are all knowing. +5 mana per point of intelligence. +2 mana per level. Increased critical thinking and memory per level. Emotional tolerance doubled. Spells may be cast silently. Doubles mana costs.]

[Piercing(Perception of 20 or more) – Your perception is amazing. Levels can no longer be blanked out, unless the target is unknown. Extra data on enemies is categorized into your personal archive. Minimap data improved to include terrain, obstacles, and enemies.]

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

Hoping the mana turned into health, I selected the Omniscient. Hitting finalize, my anatomy shifted. A primal change rushed in like a tempest, my thoughts clearing up a bit. Blood Magic altered the perk's impacts, turning the mental into the physical.

Arcane bonds spread throughout my skin, bones, and even blood. I increased my entire body's density from these matrices of magic. When I clenched my fist, they bended with me. When I breathed in, these magic circuits coursed through my veins. Like another layer of protection, they held me together, solid as any substance.

That arrived with a subtle shift in my clarity and togetherness. Wielding the refreshing mental change, I analyzed my character screen.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Character Screen

Health – 2,456/2,456 | Health Regen – 357.2/min | Stamina – 1,040/1,040 | Stamina Regeneration – 31/sec | Damage Resistance – 96.5% | Mental Resistance – 96.5% | Physical Power – (+)350% | Damage Increase – 5%

Aura – Oppression | Current Damage: (6,000 + 20% of your health)/minute within a 120ft radius.

My health augmented from the mana bonuses of the intelligence perks. Combined with my armor's health and resistance bonuses, and my generic bulk rose well beyond a normal system dweller. Thinking of Althea's spears, I frowned. Metal or not, they shouldn't have pierced me with that kind of ease.

I clanked my fists together, my blood thick and my flesh thicker. Normal spears would've rebounded off my armor, but the scout's could kill me. More mysteries mounted around her and her origins, but I held my curiosity at bay. Dungeons required clearing, and so far, no dungeon since BloodHollow even touched me.

My situation stemmed from being overleveled, mostly from spawning in a dungeon but also from Torix's help. Unlike my circumstances, Michael and Kelsey might not be ahead of the leveling curve. Setting them up with controlled or weakened enemies might work, but how I'd do that, I had no clue. Getting Torix's insights and methods could help me out there.

But maybe with a bit less blood and guts involved.

Those thoughts drifted through my mind while I traveled towards the next nearest dungeon. For now, getting myself up to speed took priority.

Roots peeled from the ground, wrapping around my neck. They flooded towards my mouth, my ears, and my eyes. Rushing into my helm, I stayed calm as the center of a storm. The teeth of my helm snapped shut, and I pulled out the creature below. A cluster of plants darted in and out of a mole's back, some kind of virus having overwhelmed the creature.

Now subservient, this mole corpse snapped its teeth at me. I tore out its bottom jaw, rotten sinews and joints pulling apart with ease. I hooked the jawbone into its eye socket, and the controlled body died. With no control center, the root cluster crawled from the mole's back. It raced up my arms towards my face before I popped a sweet smelling core at its center.

The cluster fell apart, ropey tendrils collapsing around me. My armor consumed the wooden remains, turning the chaos in my wake into energy for its evolution. Stomping

out with another core in tow, I dove out of a mammoth tree on Red Hill. Splinters rained down from my descent, my feet lodging into the dirt below.

My armor swallowed the dungeon core in my palm before a ding echoed in my status. It wasn't from the core.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 – I've finished the procedures necessary for the conduit's completion. You may come back and we'll commence with the procedure.

I frowned at the message, unnerved but still motivated. I fought over the last few days, getting all of the missing points required for my perks. I gained Brilliant, Genius, Piercing, and Flexible. The perception perk, Piercing, let me find other dungeons, and the extra luck from the intelligence perks may have helped me out already.

It was hard to say.

Those same intelligence perks showed few changes for me. I expected a pretty significant alteration for my mind, yet no true change exposed itself. Even thinking of the increasingly complex system formulas left me overwhelmed. Taking the sting off those unmet expectations, the cores themselves took little time and effort to collect.

The reason for that came from how fresh the dungeons were; most of the dungeons and rifts held babies or larvae from different species. Just reading the statuses, each species carried immense potential given time. I could imagine myself falling behind their growth rates if I stood still system wise, but that wouldn't be a problem. Ever since the system started, I hustled.

Something about the change motivated me.

Apparently, no one else shared my sentiment. I found no one else running around and clearing dungeons. David and Stacy proved to be exceptions to the norm as most people searched for the missing and dead. It left me thinking about humanity's future as a whole. If we, as a species, took our sweet time organizing against these dungeons, they'd snowball out of control.

Of course, I didn't fault anyone for searching people out. I did the same. During my dungeon hunting, I set up a route to cross by Michael's house. Searching his country cottage up and down, I uncovered an abandoned home. Unlike Kelsey's residence, no creature's invaded to force Michael's family away.

In fact, no sign of Michael's family materialized at all. No piece of furniture or hunting prize moved at all. I found their kitchen untampered with, their hunting supplies unmoved. I considered taking one of their bows, but I lacked any training for it. If they came back, they'd find more use from the weapon than I would.

But that assumed they ever came back. With multiple weeks passing since the system arrived, I doubted that possibility. I dreaded the other explanations for why Michael and his family disappeared. I considered Torix abducting them as a leverage point, but that didn't add up. The almighty necromancer could just run his experiments on me by force at anypoint. Going through the trouble of hiding my friends required more effort than simply overpowering me.

As for other outcomes, they haunted me. Michael and his loved ones could've died during the tutorial like plenty of other people. That fear stuck out in my mind like a festering wound on someone's face – an ugly yet undeniable reality. I held that apprehension back like holding a fiery coal in my hand. Barely tolerated, the dread would overwhelm me if I didn't resolve my fears soon.

That's why I tore through the forest floor as I raced towards BloodHollow. Roots snapped under my stomping heels and branches cracked on my swinging arms. Thirteen dungeon cores rattled somewhere within the depths of my armor, stored in an unseen place. I used up four of them, leaving me plenty for getting the perks related to luck, perception, and some from charisma.

Progress amassed elsewhere as well. I trained various skills while handling the dungeons, from throwing to stomping to jumping. I collected about 500,000 ambient mana during the process along with eighty seven skill levels. I put them in Obliterator as I strode into BloodHollow. The Sentinel and I exchanged the usual banter, and I reached Torix an hour later.

In the center of the dungeon, Althea hovered over the ground. Torix dressed her in a pair of fitted robes, like something he'd give an acolyte. A new tattoo covered up towards the back of her neck, disappearing into her flush hair. Peering at the markings, they imitated the runes on the wall, though Torix's lacked the same complexity.

I walked up, "So what's the plan for Althea?"

Torix pulled out a clear crystal from his bag, "The conduit's creation has been finalized for her, and the last steps lay with you. We'll set the energy to fill into this empty mana gem. The crystal shall then fill up in time. You simply must attempt to absorb the energy within the crystal. If anything goes askew, simply cease the mana absorption. I shall pull the energy's impact from you thereafter."

I leaned over the clear, glassy stone, "Damn. That actually doesn't sound as crazy as I first thought. This sounds about as safe as absorbing mutating energy can be."

Torix shrugged, "You mentioned apprehension at the idea, and I had the time to set a test parameter first." Torix tossed the gem at me, and I caught it. Torix paced up to Althea, "Ready yourself for her awakening, as the mana shall then begin its production. Speak up if you feel odd."

Torix raised his hands, his umbral, dark mana oozing from his fingertips. It leaked into the table, charging the runes and incantations. Torix talked as he channeled energy, "Likely the person with a vested interest will send others to come collect Althea. They won't let her go without at least some resistance, surely. Be prepared for the impending force, though given her level, I doubt anyone worthy of repute shall show."

Althea twitched before her eyes slid open. She pressed her hand against the cave floor before glancing up. Her eyes glazed over, the comatizing magic ambling out of her. Pulling herself up, she glanced around before her eyes set to mine. Her expression of wonder took me back for a second, but the curiosity crumbled into abject horror.

Her eyes widened, "Wait...What's going on?"

Torix gestured around himself, "You're in my lair. I've captured you to uncover what you know-"

She raised her hand, "I-I need my armor. I need the medicine. Give me my medicine."

Torix waved a finger at her, "There will be no need for that, and just as well, don't interrupt me as well when I'm speaking." Torix's eyes flared bright, "Or I shall remove your ability to do so."

Althea's chest heaved as she held back the urge to vomit. Glaring down at her hands, she trembled, "Leave. I'm going to change. I-I don't want to rush under your skin."

The tattoo along her back sheened purple. A violet fire, it dimmed the room as if absorbing the light around it. Althea panicked, grabbing around herself,

"Did...Did you not hear me? Run." She pulled herself into a ball, her whole body convulsing in fear, "Away. Any second now and...I'm going to turn."

After a few seconds of trembling, nothing happened. The conduit worked, and her mana pooled into the small gemstone in my hand. Before I could even connect with it, my armor swallowed the crystal. I took a step back, and Torix spread out his arms, "What have you done?"

I put a hand to my chest, "Me? I didn't do anything." I hit my armor, "This did it."

Althea winced, "Wait, what happened? Why isn't it coming out? I should already have changed."

Torix and I met each other's eyes, a silent conversation taking place in a moment. Torix interlocked his arms behind himself, and I stood tall. The lich stated, "Why, my plan has all worked out precisely as I intended it to."

I nodded, "Oh most definitely."

Torix raised a hand, "This conduit has created a permanent connection between you two, siphoning excess mana from you to his armor."

I spread my hands, "Yeah, so you don't need to pump yourself with that gunk anymore."

Torix took a step closer to Althea, hovering over her with an aura of dread, "And therefore, you will tell us what you know of both your employers and reasons for being here."

Althea blinked, tears tracing down her cheeks. Torix stepped back as Althea heaved deep breaths and coughed. Ignoring us, she raised trembling hands, "I...I'm not turning. I'm here. I'm me."

Torix and I glanced at each other again, and we gave her some space. We'd get our answers, but we let her have a second to herself. I watched as waves of emotion coursed through Althea, the scout overwhelmed by new sensations. She raised her hands,

"I can't believe it. I-I can feel the air and the stone. Hah. Hah." She smiled, touching her robe, "This is incredible. This, wow. I can't believe it. I'm not turning."

With light steps like someone in ballet, she hopped across the stone. The robe flowed around her while she spun in circles, spreading her arms and staring up. She rolled over the ground, meandering her form in different ways. A light hop followed a heavy stomp, and she shifted around with a childish glee.

Her wonder proved infectious, and I found myself having a small grin on my own lips. Torix leaned to me, "It would appear she's never tasted freedom before, hm?"

I put my hands on my hips, "Yeah, it would seem so."

Torix stepped up to Althea after letting her run wild for a while. He stood a head taller than Althea, Torix's form imposing and noble. Torix glared down with his fiery eyes,

"Enough fun here. Answer my questions."

Recognizing our presence for the first time, Althea stared at us like a deer in headlights. She made herself smaller,

"Uh, who are you guys?"

Torix placed a palm to his chest, "I'm Torix. This is Daniel. Now, why are you here, and who sent you here as well?"

Althea squinted, searching her memories, "I'm here for training. I'm supposed to become someone's follower, in time."

Torix's eyes flared bright, "Follower? So it's a guild leader then?"

Althea blinked, confusion spreading over her face, "I-I think so. Maybe?"

Torix sighed before turning a palm to her, "You may play out your ignorance as you'd like. I shall not believe this charade of bewilderment."

Her eyes narrowed, "I'm not lying. I don't know."

Torix tilted his head, "What of your employer?"

Althea peered down, "He's a plant. Alm? Awm? Something like that."

Torix remained motionless before seething, "If you think I'm a fool, simply say so aloud. I shall prove you wrong thereafter should I be required to do so."

Althea took a step back in fear, "I'm telling you what I know. Why would I want to lie for him? He lied to me about what and who I am. They told me I needed the armor and my medicine or else I'd turn."

She stared down, her hands trembling, "They lied to me, so I'm not about to lie for them."

Like a spreading infection, the shaking of her hands travelled up her arms. It hit her chest, and she gasped. One of her hands swelled before her back shifted under her robe. Torix stepped away from her,

"It would seem even a conduit isn't enough for you to fully control yourself. Your mastery of your mind and body is rather lacking, isn't it?"

She snapped, a claw rupturing from one of her fingertips. She growled out, "Leave. I still can't control it."

I walked up, turning a hand to her, "You can. You wouldn't have stayed stable at all if you couldn't."

She snarled at me, her voice deforming again, "Well I can't anymore, so run. It's taking me over."

I raised my hands, "You sure you're not just letting it? Have you ever tried controlling it before?"

"Of course I have. I can't do it. It runs over and spills out. I spill out."

In the back of my mind, I found a flow of mana coming in from her mana crystal. It channeled her excess mana into my armor without any issues. Armed with that knowledge, I crossed my arms,

“There’s nothing spilling out. My armor’s handling it.”

Torix pressed the sides of his temples, “Althea, you’re telling me that your control of your own mana is so poor that just a normal amount overwhelms you? I’ve heard of mana devolution but never with someone owning Blood Magic. Have you never lived without sedation before?”

Althea’s eyes shifted in color, her voice a grating drone, “Not since my change.”

Torix dragged a hand down his face, “I suppose I shall contain it for you then. I do wish I could spend my time studying the runes instead, but, alas, you’ll devolve if I don’t contain you any longer.”

Knowing that added time to finding Michael and Kelsey, I stepped up, “Wait a minute. Let me handle it. I’ll keep her detained until she gets a grip. You just study the runes.”

Torix gave me the look of a skeptical librarian, “That’s quite the undertaking you’ve decided to take upon yourself. Aren’t you supposed to be leveling?”

Obliterator’s constraints changed my priorities, giving me some free time. Althea shivered as her arm finished deforming into a tendril of meat and sinews. I walked up with my fists clasp, “I have enough dungeon cores for what I need. I’m not trying to level up right now either. Just think of this like it’s training my combat skills.”

Torix eyed me up and down before giving me a slow nod, “If...If you are willing, I shall not refuse your good will. Do as you wish.”

He stepped over towards the runes, creating another mana chair. After erecting a barrier of energy around himself, he shouted, “Do let me know if she overwhelms you?”

“I will.”

Althea’s other arm trembled into a rack of spikes and bones. Skin split and blood gushed as it did, and she howled out in agony. She spread her arms, her mana overwhelming her. Althea roared before charging at me, pulling herself forward with engorged arms. I raised my hands, “You’ll get your senses back.”

I grimaced, “Whether I have to beat them into you or not.”

