

The New World

#Chapter 21: Rise –

Read The New World Chapter 21: Rise

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I shifted sideways, my feet dragging on the ground. Where I stood, Althea clashed her upper limbs into the ground. Cracks ebbed from the dirt, her arms broken. I snapped a few potshots into her side before she swung an arm at me. I braced for the impact, and it slammed into my blocking arm.

A ringing, skin ripping impact raced through me. My vision flipped while I spiralled through the air. I flopped sideways, rolling on the ground. Pushing myself up, I spit out some blood from my mouth. The transmogrified Althea whipped her arms, straightening the bones out. She gurgled out in pain as her bones healed,

“I hate. Hate. Hate. Hate.”

I shook my head, “Ok, well it’s obvious you’re not all there just yet.”

Black veins crawled up the sides of her face, “This is no game.”

Her head twitched, and she charged again. She slammed another hand at me from overhead. I leaned sideways, her arm scraping my shoulder spikes. Blood dripped down my shoulder as I hit her stomach. The flesh caved in, but she slung her other arm into my exposed side. I dragged on my feet, ribs breaking out like a chorus of screaming in my chest.

Blood spilled out from between my teeth. I grimaced as she came at me again. Instead of waiting, I charged at her. My fist clashed against her face, snapping bones and hurling her sideways. She growled out while trying to hit me again. I dipped under her attack, snapping two quick hooks into her side.

Blood sprayed over me, raining from her monstrous form. She howled out, “It hurts. Hurts. Pain.”

I glared up, “Good. Snap the hell out of it.”

She took a step back, her form rippling like waves in an ocean. I gave her some breathing room before her jaw opened wide. It kept sliding open, her neck exposing veins and shifting lungs. My eyes twitched as fear raced up my spine. My knees

wobbled as she spread her arms towards me, viens springing to life in her exposed chest.

I activated Oppression, Torix well out of the aura's range. Althea bellowed out in torment, her eyes bleeding, her form quivering. She slurred her speech, "So much pain. So much."

I walked up, "You can stop it. Pull yourself together."

Her jaw reattached to her head, so I stopped Oppression. Her open chest healed. She held up her arms before her eyes widened. She whipped her gargantuan limbs at me. Well out of range, the air whirled around her arms. Shaking my head, I put my hands on my hips. The animalistic, instinctual attack didn't even account for range.

Tearing my nonchalance apart, a vibrant pain ripped through my chest. Several small spines slid through my armor. I took a step back, finding lances of bone having torn through my armored skin. I grabbed each lance, jerking them out before seething, "So you're still in there, unless your monstrous half is where you get your good ideas."

Althea heaved, "I...It's over me."

I narrowed my eyes, "For now."

I got close, Oppression coming back on. She winced, exposing herself. I snapped a hook into her side then head, her body tearing at each hit. She stumbled back before I dashed forward. I slung my fist at her head, ripping and gouging out chunks of bone and skin. My next few strikes, she dodged by weaving her head.

A realization popped in my head at that. So far, each time she experienced pain, her sentient side avoided it. While I didn't enjoy tearing her down like this, no other alternative presented itself. I kept the pressure high, bolting forward and hitting her anytime she exposed herself. As I hoped, she reacted and learned how to handle my basic punches.

The gorefest turned into a more tactical combat as I forced her to adapt. Each adaptation resulted in her mind coming back, piece by piece. In time, minutes of fighting turned to many minutes and then eventually hours. We created a meta of combat, each of us gaining different rotations for varying styles of strikes.

By the time she got her body back in order, I gave her a begrudging grin, "You like fighting, huh?"

She sweat while dipping under one of my jabs, "I-I guess so."

I parried one of her punches before giving her chest a kick. She followed the inertia of the attack, sliding back. She stared down at herself, her form reconstituted, "Hah...I did it. I can't believe it."

I stood back up, letting my hands fall to my sides, "See? You got this."

She rubbed the sides of her face, "You know, I never had this happen before. The scientists told me I'd never have a chance at controlling myself without the sedatives." She frowned at me, "Though the medicine was never this painful."

I shrugged, "If I had a different way of doing this, I would, alright?"

She narrowed her eyes, "Hm...If you say so."

I pinched the bridge of my nose, "Look, here's the thing, I need to get answers from you. I want to find some of my friends, and to make that happen, I have to satisfy that lich's curiosity about this ritual and my armor."

I turned a palm to her, "So start talking. Where did you come from?"

She leaned back, "I don't know. I've always been in a lab until something happened to me. After that, I was, uhm, experimented on...I think." She shivered, "So it's like I was living a haze, a dream of some kind. This is one of the first times I've been fully awake since before the change."

I rolled my hands, "You keep mentioning a change of some kind. Any idea what it was?"

Her eyes went distant, "I don't know what it was, but I know that after it happened, things changed. After that, I started...turning. I had no problems before, but now...I can't control myself."

She peered off, grabbing her elbow. I raised my hand, "No, you're wrong. You *couldn't* control yourself. Look. You're talking to me just fine right now."

She looked up, blinking in surprise. I raised a fist, "Don't sell yourself short. People will do that for you already."

Her brow furrowed, "Huh. I guess you're right. I, hm...If I keep myself together like this all the time, there's all kinds of stuff I could go and do." She smiled, staring at her hands, "I wouldn't have to go back."

I raised an eyebrow, "Wait a minute...You don't want to go back?"

She took a step back, her body shivering again. She lifted her neck, and she rumbled, "I...It's happening again." She fought the energies in her head, the palpating, pulsing

mana coursing through her, deforming her, muting her. She gawked into the distance, her eyes glazing over. Terror leaked into those eyes, tears welling in them.

She growled, "Do you think I can control this?"

Wanting her sane so I could find Michael and Kelsey, I stated with a voice like stone, "I know you can. You will." I clanked my gauntlets together as she let out a low rumble. I growled back, "Alright then. Round two."

She charged at me, her body swelling in size once more. I met her in the middle, and we collided like two bullets. As I pushed her shoulders, I forced her back. Though larger, she weighed less than me. I tried smothering her into the ground, but she strained while pushing me back, my feet dragging on the stone. She gripped on my shoulders so hard that my armor bent.

The metal squealed, and a deformed voice lurched, "Is this all the strength you have, weakling?"

I bent down while pulling her up, forcing her off her feet. I grunted while grabbing her shoulders. I slammed her into the ground, and the echo exploded outwards across the cavern. Before she could recover, I picked her up once more and slammed her into the other side of the ground. When I lifted her again, she pushed her feet against me.

Her heels pressed against my neck, prying her from my grip. She shot off me before rolling back onto her feet. I stepped towards her, my feet firm like pillars. Her eyes narrowed before she sprinted away towards a back wall. I smiled at that. She regained some control faster this time.

She ran into the wall but bounced off a barrier of mana. Torix waved a finger at her while staring at the runes, "You won't break what remains of my son's work. Stay in your playground, child."

Althea's monster half screamed at Torix, scrounging at him. I clomped my foot into the ground, throwing a chip of stone at her. It snapped into her face, grabbing her attention again. She peered at my feet, then a low clicking ebbed from her chest. She pounded a fist into the ground, grabbing rock chips and tossing them towards me.

When the rocks smashed into me, they crushed into powder, like bombs of dust. Unlike her bone spears, these left no mark on me, aside from a thick, brown cloud. Smothering me, the dense fog blinded me before she darted forward, fast as a speeding car.

She tackled me. My feet left the ground, and my vision blurred. Her flesh tore as she shapeshifted, and she got over me. Pinning me down, she clawed at my armor with long talons. Flashes of light brimmed from the cloud of dust as the claws scraped across my skin. Like fighting in a thunder soaked cloud, sparks rained from her gouging at my chest with sweeping strikes.

Desperation and panic flooded me. My helm ripped open with jagged teeth of armor. They clamped onto her thigh before I stabbed my hand into the stone. The tips of my gauntlets bent, but they dug several inches into the rock. With my fingernails peeled back in pain, I pulled myself sideways while jerking with my neck. I turned her off of me before scrambling on top of her once more.

I reared back my fist before hammering her face with my fist. Panic gushing in me, I clapped Althea's head against the stone floor with savage, brutal blows. Her legs bent backwards, the tendons within them snapping. Like a human made of gelatin, her lower limbs coiled around my head before she pulled me down.

My head whiplashed against the ground, a hunk of her thigh within my helmet's teeth. Her spine broke backwards as she contorted, eerie and disgusting. Her eyes flashed black now as she grinned with long, sharp canines. She slithered her arms into the slit of my helmet as a deformed voice laughed.

Her arms squeezed into my helmet before covering my face. All of a sudden, I couldn't breathe. The panic doubled as the flow of flesh reached my nose. I squirmed and writhed, pulling her off me, but she kept forcing more and more of her arms into my helmet. Pressure built on my nose and mouth. My lungs screamed for air as my struggling turned to a frenzy.

The slit of my armor chomped onto her limbs. She fell backwards, her arms severed. Needles formed inside my armor, mincing the goopy arm she forced into my helmet and nose. My armor indulged itself on the blood, soaking it in. Air rushed into my lungs as I breathed with blood smothering my face. My jaw slackened, and I gazed at the roof.

That terrified me.

Swallowing that fear, I turned towards Althea. She laid with her head against the stone floor, her arms gone. She hissed and gasped as blood retracted back into her wounds, regenerating her with a pace even I couldn't match. Within thirty seconds, her arms returned and she stood once more. She lay there heaving for a few minutes, her monstrous form retracting. She murmured,

"I'm sorry."

My face turned cold, my helmet covering the stony expression. Not trusting her anymore, I stayed silent. She turned herself over, and a frigid silence passed over us. She raised a shaking hand,

"Uhm...What is that armor of yours?"

I stood, pushing my fear and pain down. I spoke with nonchalance,

"It eats monsters. That's probably why it eats you."

She recoiled at my words, each of them landing like the strike of a whip. She frowned, "I wouldn't have done, uhm, whatever that was if I could help it."

I glared at her, "You tried to strangle me with your arms."

She pointed a finger at me, "And you bit them off."

I closed my eyes, remembering the goal of this entire process. Taking a breath, I raised a hand, "Alright, I'll let it go. Back to questioning. Where are you from?"

She stood herself up, "You tell me first."

I raised my brow, "Huh...I'm from this planet."

Althea peered around, "Is this a cave on the planet?"

"No. It's a dungeon. I killed the monsters and boss here."

She blinked at the runes on the walls, "It looks like it was busy."

"Yeah, a little. Now answer my question."

Althea met my eye, "This looks like an old dungeon. I thought this planet was a newly systemized world. It shouldn't have had time for something like this to develop."

I put my hands on my hips, "Every other dungeon wasn't like this. They're like what you're describing. This, well, it's a unique rift. I spawned here."

She raised an eyebrow, her own curiosity peaked, "Oh, really? That must have been hard."

Flashes of Baldag-Ruhl's insects smothering me stormed in my mind. I shut them out while crossing my arms, "Yeah, a little. What about you?"

"I can't remember anything before the lab, like I told you. I've never been to a world this young and green. Normally, even the most tame of forests hold creatures that move like walking mountains. Without a guild behind you, most cities are swallowed whole by those colossi."

My eyes widened, "So you're telling me the monsters...They just keep growing?"

"I think so. The culling is hard, yeah, but being born in an aged world is like being born in a war zone. Education, training, all of that is necessary to even be independent."

"I'm guessing you came from one of these guilds, right?"

Althea's face shook. She nodded, "...Yeah. I think so. I don't know what else could support...A lab-" A large canine expanded out of the side of her face. She retched out before I closed my eyes. This again. I opened them, and Althea grabbed the sides of her head. She squeezed while straining her face. She murmured,

"Ah...Stop. Not again."

She wrestled with the demons under her skin, the internal struggle like a war waging. A few minutes passed, and the monsters within overwhelmed her. As they did, she growled out,

"Sorry."

I cracked my neck, steeling myself, "No problem. It's good if I let out some steam anyway."

We fought for several hours before our minds were so exhausted that we just ran into each other. Althea needed rest at some point, and she collapsed midway through one of our bouts. I carried her over towards Torix's table, setting her down there. With nothing else to do, I walked over towards Torix.

The lich turned to me, crossing a robed leg over another, "Ah, I see you've finally exhausted her. I'll assume you're looking for somewhere to rest, perhaps? Such are the limits of a blood and flesh body, after all."

I shook my head, "I want to read some books about mana. I want something basic, if you have it."

Torix leaned back in his mana chair, his eyes flaring green. Shifting back to blue, he gave me a slow nod, "You know, you're not normal."

I furrowed my brow, "What? You're telling me other people aren't interested in magic?"

"Certainly they are, but I'm more specifically referring to the pace you set yourself at. You move from one activity to the next, on and on and on. Admirable, yes, but also destructive. It's almost as if you're running to escape something, perhaps time to think? It could be more productive than you'd first imagine."

I put my fingertips against my temples, "Look, do you have the books or not?"

"Testy, aren't you? That's the lack of rest I'll assume. I have many books on hand, including several classics on the matter. I'll give you several for safekeeping, though do keep them undamaged. I'll take any deterioration on the books as a personal slight." Torix leaned closer, "And I'm certain you understand what that entails, correct?"

His glare piercing, I leaned back, "I do."

"Good." Torix whipped some books from his portal, "Here's a few choice selections you may peruse from. I'd recommend brushing up on your fundamentals before attempting more advanced magic. Many magicians believe they may skip the elementary basics via practicing advanced methods."

Torix scoffed, "It's like trying to sprint before you can stand."

I took a book, the runic glyphs in a different language. Melting in my eyes, the language molded into a visual of English. I pushed the book back, gaping at it, "What the hell? It changed shape?"

"Ah, your first book in a different language then? Schema has quite an advanced language algorithm at its disposal. Rely on it, and it shall save you more than a mere inkling of time."

I turned to Torix, glad he kept giving me advice, "Thanks for the tips. And sorry for being snappy earlier. I'm just a bit on edge after the fights with Althea. Do you have any other tidbits on how to follow magic?"

"Certainly. Be prepared for advanced incantations and grafted series of thoughts. Coordinating those attempts will be the primary driver for converting your mind's power into actual sorcery. That, and *reading*."

He waved me off. A bit confused yet excited nonetheless, I waved goodbye while stepping away. Peering at the ancient tome, its title read *The Makings of Mastery*. I opened the pages, beginning my journey into magical wonder. Turns out, magical reading was *dry*. Like, *real dry*. Within a few minutes of peering at its contents, my eyes glazed over.

The exciting pieces of magic stayed dormant, lying under a grim, expository surface. Taking the forefront, the canonical knowledge and philosophical preamble rambled on for over a hundred pages. Torix scribbled dozens of notes and thoughts on the margins too, the wizard having parsed the contents of this book long ago.

Finding no end to his notes, the lich's mind relished in details where mine did not. Still, I kept my head down and trudged through. The book mentioned bits about mana and its nature. The primary focus dwelled on the conversion of mental energy into the physical. I took time here or there to exercise what the book explained, but the contents never worked out.

I met a wall when trying the book's methods on myself. Esoteric and enigmatic, the book's explanation of magic reminded me of using rocket science on a slingshot. Sure, you could calculate and analyze the trajectory of it all, but what was the point?

Summoning a stream of red from my palm, it burned my hand. Closing my eyes, I felt out how mana flowed.

It was a sacrifice for me, one where I did the opposite of what the book described. It mentioned thoughts converting into mana, but I converted my actual body and blood into energy. Blood Magic explained all that. Torix lacked any books for Blood Magic, so I was on my own there. Despite the impracticalities, the book nested interesting tidbits in its haze of drudgery.

It examined the eldritchian mana, for instance. Ambient mana infected and contorted the will of the user, more like a hungry parasite than a fuel source. It carried an amalgamation of different minds, a primordial thought soup. This thought soup held chaotic properties, ones that few could master.

Peering at Althea sleeping on the table, that explained her lack of control. She struggled with dozens of different voices and motivations pulling her mind apart all the time. Her transformations stemmed from the eldritch energies' untempered effects as well. They gave cause for her reformations.

Even with several hours of reading, the text never gave a source for Althea's piercing, however. It was a mystery for another day, and the book detailed several historical mages that advanced the field of eldritch magic. They faced heretical accusations from Schema, and each one of them ended up isolated and alone.

And in time, none of them survived the effects of the magic.

They all died horrific deaths at the hands of their own experiments, oftentimes fates worse than death. A few even evolved into advanced level bosses. As I read these books and applied the knowledge to my own stream spell, I collected a few other skills. Mana Theory, Reading Comprehension, and Blood Magic Manipulation.

Finishing my reading, I found Althea stirring from her rest. She pulled herself up, and once cognizant, she panicked about her lack of armor once more. Memories of yesterday surfaced before she peered forward. Her head twitched, but she kept herself together. A claw expanded from one of her hands, but she willed it back under her skin.

Her face turned like steel, and she resolved herself. In that mindset, she stayed in control for ten full minutes, a new record. She succumbed once more, and I handled the situation by literally beating sense into her. The fights still dragged on, and I got used to her monstrous form and abilities.

At this point, I considered the bouts as spars, and I practiced against her. My fighting style honed down as minutes of fighting dragged on into hours. Althea's focus unfolded, and she turned into a motivated machine. She wanted her monstrous half tamed, and she kept hammering away at it each time she regained control. It made our fights less terrifying as a whole.

Althea and I repeated this cycle of battle several times until she fell asleep against a mana barrier. Placing her back on the runic table, I stopped myself from staring at her before walking up to Torix. I turned a hand to him,

“Mind talking for a minute? I’m sure a break from staring at the wall would help.”

Torix stared up at the ceiling, “Schema forbid it, I can only hope that is the case. What is it you wish to discuss?”

“Uhm, I just wanted to know more about the system and Schema. So like, why are dungeon cores so valuable? I mean, there’s only so many perks that you can get. I don’t understand why they’re so heavily sought after.”

Torix spread his arms, “It’s all a matter of circumstance and context. You’ve likely not hit this point already, but there are perks for every time you hit level one hundred with an attribute. Obviously, by the time most people reach that cusp of power, they’ve filled out their leveling perks. They won’t need the core’s perk points because of that.”

Torix put his fingertips together, “This is where the second utility of dungeon hearts comes into play. You see, perk points can be exchanged for attribute points. Dungeon cores grant perk points, and that gives attribute points when you have no more perks to allocate. Now, there are limits to this conversion. You may only absorb 1/4th your total level regarding core points.”

I raised a palm to Torix, “Ok...So let me just, uhm...Can I get an example?”

Torix created a visual example with magic, tiny streaks of dark mana serving as guides, “After you’ve unlocked all your perks, every ten levels will give you twelve attribute points. 20% more, in other words. Dungeon cores give another flat 25% more core points, for a total of 45% more total attribute points.”

I stared up, doing some mental math. I waved my hands, “So, if I wanted to know someone’s total attributes, I just take one and a half of their level total?”

Torix shrugged, “That is a suitable estimate. Remember that trees influence one’s attributes immensely. Regardless, this conversion makes dungeon cores hold innate value. This is further inflated due to the presence of fringe worlds.”

A haunting suspicion leaked into my mind. I remembered Althea mentioning how the eldritch never stopped growing. Torix’s fire eyes narrowed while saying,

“Fringe worlds are planets at the very cusp of being overwhelmed by the eldritch. These worlds are often kept afloat by battle hungry heathens in need of a challenge. The natives of planets like this have no way of killing the creatures on their planets. They are born into a world with a hopelessly low level. So low, in fact, that they can’t even leave the planet. They face extinction.”

Torix whirled a hand around, "Anyone offering lower level creatures are a high value commodity in those places. Of course, you've seen that it takes well over level one hundred to fill out your perks. Even necromancers such as I cannot maintain summons of that level on a consistent basis. The cost benefit analysis simply doesn't add up."

Torix gestured a hand to me, "And as you've seen, being level one hundred doesn't make you strong by any galactic metric. Leaving your new planet is an easy way of getting yourself slaughtered by roaming eldritch or criminals."

I grimaced, "Yeah. It sounds like a lose-lose situation."

Torix nodded, "Aptly put. Now, imagine a normal person who's below the leveling curve. They'd be even worse off than you. They'll see a stockpile of perks, but they lack the perk points to obtain them. Cores come into play for those individuals."

I nodded, "The orbs are pretty much 5 levels for people on those worlds. That's harsh."

"Precisely. As you've no doubt noticed, Schema's way of doing things can be unforgiving. Speaking of unforgiving, how much energy have you gained from your conduit with Althea?"

I glanced at my menu screen, finding around a hundred thousand ambient mana absorbed. Notable, but by no means a ridiculous amount. I showed Torix that particular menu. After reading it, the ancient lich turned towards the wall once more,

"It shall take a few weeks before your armor transforms once more. That is an attainable goal as I parse through these runes."

"I'll get it done." Staring down, I remembered my friends and the chaos outside this cavern. I reached out a hand, "Torix, do you have any idea when you'll be satisfied with this ritual? I need to find my people, and it doesn't look like you're going to be finished anytime soon."

Torix turned in his dark chair, steepling his fingers, "Hm, that's something that's rather trying. I've gained no ground on the runes, and the actual ritual itself, from what you've described, is immensely dangerous. A split in dimensions? I've no means of controlling the releasing energies. It will destroy this dungeon and everything within it."

Torix's eyes flared, "It's rather unfortunate, but I don't know any method of controlling those volatile forces."

I leaned down, biting my lip. At this rate, it'd be months before I found Michael or Kelsey, and with every passing moment, their chance of dying increased. Staying BloodHollow that long while the world devolved didn't exactly suit me either. I dragged my hands down my face,

“Dammit.”

Torix stood upright, interlocking his hands behind himself, “I’m sorry, child, but I’m doing what I can. There are limits to even my magic. I can’t control that energy.”

Remembering my armor and how it absorbed Althea’s mana, I stood upright. I pointed at my chest, “But, maybe I can.”

Torix’s eyes flared a bright white, “You? Seriously?”

I frowned, “I mean, it’s just energy, right?”

“Well, that is certainly the crux of the issue, but I’ve no idea how you’d manage it.”

I gestured at myself, “I’ll just let my armor handle it.”

Torix leaned over me, “You...Containing interdimensional forces? Hah, what grounds do you have for that ability? A hunch, perhaps?”

Pointing behind me, I gestured a thumb back, “Althea and my armor eating the eldritch. If you think about it, my armor has taken in any energy we’ve thrown at it. I don’t see why this energy will be any different. Besides that, this armor is made of that same energy. It’s what Baldag-Ruhl used in the ritual.”

Torix tilted his head, considering my idea. He weighed some pros and cons before shaking his head, “It isn’t a particularly absurd proposition. Your demise shall be guaranteed, but I will simply die before being placed back into my phylactery...Gather more proof of your armor’s absorption abilities, and we shall see about this idea of yours.”

I grinned, “Thanks. I’ll go see what I can do.”

Torix sighed, “Bagh, perhaps I’ve gone senile over the years. It’s an insane proposition.” He sat back down on a forming blot of mana. He whirled back towards the wall, “Good luck with gathering your proof, should it even be possible.”

After leaving him to his study, I sat down and considered my armor for a while. It saved me a few times, being a reliable backup for sticky situations. It moved and shifted without my thought, but it even generated needles for mincing when I struggled breathing. Overall, it held many mysteries and abilities I couldn’t control.

Yet.

With that idea in mind, I attempted reforming my armor. I sat on the edge of a staggered step of the colosseum, taking a few breaths. After calming myself, I reached out towards my skin, the edge of the metal shell surrounding me. In a liquid moment, my armor

smiled back at me, eerie yet inviting. I stilled a tiny wave of anxiety and fear, reaching out for more control.

My armor relinquished even more. Wielding it, I evoked one of its haunting smiles, a crimson aura leaking from the maw of my helm. Other forms of morphing proved impossible. Creating spikes on my knuckles, swords from the metal, or even just changing my shoulder spines took unfathomable amounts of willpower and attention.

The armor snapped right back onto me the moment I diverted my attention from it. I kept at it, however. I watched Althea struggle with her own mana and body, so I followed in those footsteps. From what I could tell, my armor couldn't be removed. It was a part of me now, and like any other piece of myself, I wanted mastery over it.

Willing myself into a trance of effort and exhaustion, I pursued that goal in a relentless fashion. A few hours of this resulted in a skill.

Skill Unlocked! Dominion of the Mind | Level 1 – By conquering your mind, you better enact your will onto the world. This is the first step to mastery of magic, a path you'll tread without fear. Dominion over thoughts increased by 1%.

I peered at the skill with confusion spread over my face. How molding my armor gave me mastery of my mind, well, it made no sense. Dwelling on that fact, I connected a few disparate points in my head. These connections gave me an explanation. They also explained why I felt magic rather than thought it.

Blood Magic. The simple perk meant that fully mastering my body extended my magical skill as well. In this case, my armor correlated well with my mana, so this served dual purposes: I gained armor abilities and magical ones too. After a few more hours of determined practice, cold sweat and an iron cloak of exhaustion weighed on me.

The armor manipulation spread me thin, the only easy part being peeling back my helmet off my face. Everything else proved arduous, but I kept tackling it. It made morphing my armor easier. I still couldn't manipulate the armor in combat, but this was the first step to making it really mine. In the end, manipulating my armor could and would evolve my fighting style from fierce to overwhelming.

Taking chewable bits at a time, I molded a bit of the armor on my back while I read. I combined that with keeping my helmet off my head. This well over doubled the required effort for either reading or morphing the armor, but I adjusted. Strengthening myself required moments like this, each second a slow crawl. I found motivation in those times, as they allowed me to prove myself.

I reminded myself of a simple fact – anyone could be strong when the going was easy; only a champion persevered when the going was hard. And it was hard. It fatigued me more than fighting. I practiced boxing before, but studying remained untrodden ground. I found a way to step onto that path, one step at a time.

The motivation and difficulty resulted in faster skill gains. With my focus fine tuned, time flowed like syrup as I studied. Seconds turned to minutes then eventually to hours. I took a break here or there to stretch or walk around, even down the rations Torix gave me. The vast majority of my time burned up in front of Torix's books, however.

I marveled at the trance I found myself in. Focus, as a skill, leveled. My willpower gave me a reservoir to pull from. My desire for finding my friends helped me too. There even existed a piece of me wanting strength and standing over my situation. I abused every facet of those factors as I fell into the task with a fiery intent.

Giving me that valuable time, Althea needed sleep far more than I did. Controlling her body required everything she had, and she lacked my perk that halved sleep requirements. Not needing as much sleep, I worked throughout the night with Torix by my side. He never slept, being a lich and all.

When Althea awakened, I finished my first book on magic. Of course, I only comprehended some of the text's contents. It gave me a few ideas for my next training session with Althea. She woke up, her eyes sharper than before. Lucidity stormed into her gaze, her control of her body becoming better.

Furthering that goal, I turned towards Torix, "Yo, Torix."

He kept jotting notes down in an old journal as he said, "Yes?"

"Can you give Althea her weapons back?"

The necromancer shook his head and scoffed, "Why in Schema's name would you want that?"

Althea pointed at me, "I get it. You want me to remember myself better?"

I gave her a thumbs up, "Bingo."

She frowned, "What's bingo?"

I peered back and forth, "Uh, a game of chance. When you win, you shout bingo."

Her eyes lit up a little, "It sounds fun. Can I play it?"

I waved a hand, "Uh...Yeah, sure. I'll play a round or two with you sometime, but only after you get a grip on your situation. The thing is, we've been fighting with our bare hands. You trained to fight with your weaponry. I think using it will help you keep yourself more 'there' during our fights."

Torix raised his hand without glancing towards us. A portal appeared and dropped the harpoon gun and several traps at Althea's feet. Torix shrugged, "Do avoid killing him if you're able."

Althea lifted the harpoon cannon, the kinetic bouncer heavy and hard. She frowned at it, "Uhm...I'll try, sir."

Torix cackled before peering at us, "Eh...He'd make a good corpse anyway."

I rolled my eyes, "Oh wow, thanks. It's good to know I'm useful."

Torix turned back to the runes, "That's why you're here."

Althea picked up her harpoon cannon, optimizing the setup. I did the same, but by smashing some rocks under my foot. She grimaced at me, "The rocks. Blegh."

I tossed one up, catching it with the swing of my hand, "Eh, if it works it works."

She aimed the cannon at the ground, refamiliarizing herself with the process. This time she lacked an ambush for landing free shots. Of course, she wouldn't be aiming to immobilize me either. While polymorphed, she'd probably try to punch a hole through my forehead. Standing there, it was only a matter of time before she used those weapons against me.

Before we even fought, my plan showed gains. Twenty minutes passed while Althea toiled against her worse half. It got a hold of her arms first, but she fell onto the ground, rolling around in circles. Writhing there, she poured sweat and groaned while claws pierced out of her face and hands. In one way, it disgusted me. In another, it was inspiring.

In time, she turned, and so, our sparring began again. I moved with the jittery, shaking movements that threw her aim off. At the same time, I tossed rocks at her between my sliding steps. This left her frustrated and missing her shots. That combined with her transformed mind having a bit worse aim anyways.

She pinned harpoons into the wall a few times before howling out, "Stop moving and die."

I shot out another rock, the brittle stone breaking against the side of her cannon. The powder masked my approach as I shouted, "How about you actually aim?"

She narrowed her eyes along with the others across her skin. She fired another harpoon, ebbing another thunderous boom. The harpoon blasted into the ground in front of me, spraying rocks against my helm. I closed my eyes off reflex before another harpoon slammed straight through my throat.

The weight of the spear slung me backwards, knocking me onto the ground. Before another spear flew through my skull, I crossed my arms over my face. A spear lodged through my blocking arms and pinned them down beside me. Before I pulled the spears out, Althea threw the gun down and sprinted towards me.

I pulled my arms from the ground, the steel scraping against stone as I uprooted it. Sitting up, I pulled the spear from my arms with my feet. The flesh in my arms sloshed as I ripped the spear from me. Glancing up, Althea dashed towards me like a lion leaping towards her prey. Before she reached me, I stood up and pulled the spear from my neck.

I sidestepped her charge, sliding towards her right side. She lashed out her right arm, her fingers jutting long, white claws. I ducked under the limb while pushing the spear towards her chin. The metal slid straight through the bottom of her jaw. I angled it to prevent it from goring her head.

Losing control, Althea's feet flew off the ground. Mine crushed into the floor. She flew backwards before flopping on the ground. I lifted my foot over her head, and she glared up with her engorged eyes. I stomped down, and she closed them. The spear on her chin tore deep into the ground, pinning her there.

I flopped backwards, sitting cross legged while peering at her. She stared at me, even her monster half stunned by the mercy. It soothed her enough that she arrested control of her body before pulling her chin out of the spear. She wiped blood off her mouth while murmuring,

"Uh...Thanks."

I gave her a single nod, "No harm done."

Althea peered around, "That, uhm, was a good fight. Sorry about the spears."

I leaned back, supporting myself on my stiff arms, "It's better than dealing with your body's weaponry." I shivered, "That's the stuff of nightmares."

She peered away, her face burning with embarrassment and shame. I lifted a brow, "Yo. What's wrong?"

She swallowed, "It's...It's nothing. I just hate this, er, body I guess. It's disgusting."

I stared at the armored skin over my legs, "Hah, tell me about it. I'm not the biggest fan of this armor either, but I can't pull it off."

She frowned, "Really? It's not exactly stylish or anything, but it's, you know...Practical."

"Just say it." I raised my hands, pretending I was menacing, "It's oh so *scary*."

She smiled, "It's got nothing on me."

I sighed, "Yeah, you got me there. The thing is, you've got all kinds of stuff you can do with that ability of yours. I mean, if you could control it, you may be able to transform into whatever you want. Wouldn't that be cool?"

Her brow furrowed, "Yeah. So far, this control thing has involved a lot of pain and hardship. I don't think I'll ever fully master-" She gestured to herself, "*This*."

I stood myself up, "Eh, you never know."

She frowned, "Where are you going?"

I waved a hand, "To go study. Let me know when you need me to knock some sense back into you."

Her face gnarled up, "Uh...Let's hope never."

Jumping up the colosseum's staggered steps, I pulled out one of Torix's books while resting in a side cavern. I laid there, trying to understand more about sorcery as Torix's grumbling petered in. After a few minutes, Althea walked up to the ancient Lich. I listened to her echoes.

"Uhm, you're Torix, right?"

"Indeed I am. You're our captured scout whom Daniel is supposed to be interrogating, yet now you've taken the initiative to speak with me." Torix spoke with an edge in his words, "Now why, exactly, would you do that?"

I peered out from my side cavern, finding her trying to be as small as possible, "I, uhm, just wanted to say hi. You know, make sure you're doing alright."

Torix deadpanned, "You're bored, aren't you?"

She blinked, "You could tell?"

Torix sighed before turning to her, "I'm immortal. I have dealt with boredom so often that even the smallest trace of it cannot escape my grasp. That's partly why I'm here; it's an interesting case study. Now, as for solving boredom, is there anything you'd like to do? Perhaps form a goal around?"

She frowned, "I guess I could beat Daniel?"

Torix turned a hand to her, "A worthy goal. You waited until he left, I'm assuming?"

"Not really. He went off to read or something."

“Hm, well then, let’s assess your starting position. Tell me, what kind of formal training have you had for battle, and what is your experience?”

She messed with her hands, “I went through simulations using someone’s obelisk a lot. That helped. I was sent here to get experience, so I don’t really have any, I guess.”

“What did you do during those simulations? Gunning, I’d assume?”

“Yes.”

“Use more of your marksman skills instead of your physical ones then. After all, no one may best all of their enemies in any manner. You must devise situations where your strengths may shine. For example, I would never fight that brute with my fists. Instead, I’d wield my magic, and Daniel would evaporate before he could so much as touch me.”

I shivered for a second at the thought of fighting Torix, but I kept listening. Whether for me or not, Torix’s advice rang true. Althea shrugged, “I’d like too, but I run out of ammo before I can kill him. He’s too tough.”

Torix raised a hand, “Ah, but that is where you work around your limitations. If I find myself fighting a berserker, I use my summons to buy me time for my rituals. It is a solution to one of my weaknesses as a mage. You must find a way of using ammo without having to use only metal rods.”

Torix spoke with zeal, “It is this process of eliminating one’s weaknesses that you may become a balanced fighter or even a balanced person in general. This isn’t to say you should neglect sharpening your strengths; it’s the opposite. Our strengths act as reflections of your weaknesses, so by balancing one, we may improve the other.”

Althea kept her gaze on the lich, “Thank you for letting me know.”

Torix waved his hands, “Well, you are most certainly welcome. I for one enjoy expressing my knowledge to those that will listen to it. All of this being said, I do believe that my attention has diverted from the runes long enough. I’m on a timed schedule, you see.”

Althea smiled at the lich, “Yeah. I get it.” She turned around, taking a few steps towards the center of the cavern. She sat down and stayed motionless for a while. Before I went back to reading, she reached up her hands. She grimaced as the skin in the middle of her palms swelled up. An ivory spike gouged out of her palms, each of them a ruthless and effective tool for murder.

I grinned at the sight, this being the first time she controlled her reformations. Going back towards my own studies, I scrolled through a list of skills gained while fighting Althea. Prediction and Wrestling stuck out. If we kept fighting, I could obtain another

unique skill. If I fused several low level skills into a single ability, then free tree points would rush in for Obliterator. Breakthroughs helped that process along too.

With that in mind, I stood and headed over towards Torix. I interrupted his studying, "Are there any common breakthroughs I could use for gaining my skills faster?"

Torix turned to me, his demeanor conveying gratitude at the interruption along with a measure of annoyance. Torix grappled with those contrasting emotions before siding with the former rather than the latter. He crossed his robed arms,

"Hmmm. I suppose there are a few I know of. Is there any subject you're interested in?"

Taking a second, I looked through my skill list before mouthing, "I'm thinking...Dominion of the Mind."

Torix's fire eyes narrowed, "Dominion of the Mind? Are you sure about that?"

I flipped the skill's screen to him. Torix scoffed, "I can't believe it. And here I have taken you for a talking brick. Who'd have guessed you were more cerebral than I first anticipated."

I crossed my arms, "Wow, thanks a lot."

Torix waved a hand, "My point is that this learning speed is much faster than I imagined. I thought you'd need to work your way through the texts I lent you then practice for weeks before you could gain this skill. I suppose your armor allows for an intrinsic learning of sorts."

I pointed at my chest, "I think it's Blood Magic, but that could be it too."

Torix waved his hands, "Regardless of the cause, Dominion of the Mind is the first step for learning your mana type."

"Mana type?"

"Yes, there are three basic types of mana. Augmentation, dominion, and origin. Those types correspond to different personalities and skill sets. In your situation, I believe you'll have a natural affinity for augmentation. Unfortunately, you'll never become a lich if that is the case. It's a shame, truly."

"Eh, for now I'd rather keep myself human."

Torix tilted his head, "If you could call yourself such."

I bit my tongue, narrowing my eyes at Torix. The necromancer leaned onto one of his hands, "I suppose you'd rather keep your humanity then? I mean no offense when I refer to you as something other or different. I myself am not tethered to a body of my own race, yet I consider myself a shining example of my kind."

Torix pressed two fingertips together, "In that manner, it is the actions you take that decide your worth, not the flesh sack that covers your soul."

Not knowing whether to be peeved or appreciative, my words came out in a neutral tone, "My point is, I don't want to be a lich...Personally speaking."

Torix grabbed the air in front of him, his hand forming a fist, "Ah, but once you've tasted immortality, you can never return to something as fleeting as a body that dies."

I shrugged, "Eh, I mean half of what makes a meteor shower beautiful is how it lasts only a few minutes. I think life's the same way. It passes by fast, so each moment counts. In eternity, life no longer matters."

Torix stared at me for a moment, "Hmm. Perhaps...Those topics aside, your continued progression shall require the use of mana, and much of it."

"Ah man, that sounds painful."

With a sadistic flare, Torix cackled before steeping his fingers,

"Oh, it will be."

Chapter 22: The Old Ones

A chill ran up my back, "Ok, so maybe you could make that sound a little less menacing next time?"

Torix stood, "I'll think about it. Now, I learned to become a lich by pulling my soul from my body. I then grafted it onto the body of something else. Organic matter contains souls better than inorganic compounds. Regardless, this lich process disconnects me from the needs and benefits of a physical body. I maintain sight and other senses via magic. I mention this all because, in essence, your situation is the precise, opposite state of my own."

I kept my gaze steady, "Because of Blood Magic, right?"

"Indeed. Instead of being disconnected with your body, you have molded your mana and mind to your flesh, bones, and blood. Your armor is the same. It is a physical extension, and that physical extension means the armor extends your mind as well. If my theory is correct, then your gaining of magical knowledge correlates to your control of your armor because of this."

He hit the nail on the head with that one. Torix raised a hand, "That being said, neither of us understands just what kind of physical extension your armor *is*. I pray its influence is more or less positive."

I shivered at that thought. Torix turned a palm to me, "I mention all of this in regards to understanding the ritual itself. Its nature and your situation are becoming clear as I parse the pieces together. Why, I do believe I am on the cusp of gaining a holistic understanding."

I crossed my arms, "I hope so. It's good you're not just staring at the runes and drawing a blank."

"Oh no, quite the contrary; those runes are incomprehensible gibberish."

A bout of laughter burst out of me. Torix remained unperturbed while saying, "I've garnered this all via context clues, not the actual runes themselves. To be precise, Althea is the source of most of this new knowledge. Her mind is influenced by the chaotic energy her body produces. This creates physical changes because of her Blood Magic. You're in the same circumstance, but reversed – your physical body is influencing your mind."

All of that might explain my sudden work ethic. Either that or the effects would reveal themselves in time. I raised my brows, "Good to know, but what does this have to do with my magic, exactly?"

Torix pulled a clear gemstone from one of his warps, this one starry like pictures of space. Torix pulled his own mana into the crystal, and it shifted a jet black. Torix held it close for my viewing,

"This is an untampered mana gem that has had its mana drained. I am funneling my own mana into it without altering my thoughts. This dark mana is the byproduct of that, being dominion based. Take this-

He tossed the clear stone at me, and I caught it. Torix gave me a curt nod, "Will your mana into it."

Holding the stone in both hands, I leaned over it while making my tiny mana streams. An orange, bright mana flared into the stone. The leeching energy burned my hands in the process. Torix reached out a hand,

"It is as I suspected. Your natural affinity is towards augmentation mana."

I pursed my lips, "Uh, what does that mean?"

“Simply put, your mana is oriented towards your own self improvement. My mana is dominion based, so it is oriented around manipulating external forces. Origin mana is centered on creating and generating forces.”

I waved a hand, “Is there a mana based on destroying things?”

Torix scoffed, “What? No. Of course not. Now-”

Interrupting Torix, Althea walked up and sat beside me and in front of him. She balled up, her arms around her legs as she rested her chin on her knees. One of Torix’s eyes narrowed and the other widened. It was like he was raising a brow in confusion.

“Uhm...Why are you here?”

She pursed her lips, “I overheard you guys talking, and I, er, I got curious. Am I interrupting?”

Torix considered before coughing into a hand, “I...I suppose not.”

Althea and I looked at each other before I spread my hands, “Torix, you don’t have to breathe, do you?”

Torix said, “I don’t.”

I blinked, “So why did you cough just now?”

Torix pushed up imaginary glasses, “It’s a force of habit.”

Althea laughed while I held my own down. Torix eyed Althea before tilting his head at her, “Give her the crystal. I’m curious about her mana type as well.”

I threw it and she snatched it out of the air with the wind whistling around her arm. She radiated orange mana in her crystal as well, though it shined far less compared to my own. If anything, a constricting darkness dampened it. Torix flicked his finger, the crystal telekinetically knocking out of her hand. It flung right into an opening portal as Torix turned to me,

“She has a far more dual affinity than you do. This means she could master either augmentation or dominion mana. Perhaps a higher mana type could even be achieved, should she show talent.” Torix’s gaze shifted to her, “Though, that combination is quite an unusual mana type, given your apparent personality.”

Althea frowned, “It could be what’s changed me has changed my mana.”

Torix’s tone heightened, “Let’s hope that isn’t the case. An experiment of that magnitude implies Old Ones are involved.” Torix composed himself, a shiver racing up his back,

“We could be wrapped up in something far greater than I first imagined, should that be the case.”

Althea grimaced, “An Old One?”

Torix leaned back, “You don’t know what the Old Ones are?”

I spread my hands, “Well, I definitely don’t.”

Torix rubbed his hands together in excitement, “Alright...Perhaps a lesson is in order then?”

I sat down with Althea, and Torix entered his patented lecture mode. After a minute or two of organizing notes and books, Torix cast a spell against a nearby colosseum wall. A layer of the stone fell from the wall, around an inch thick. Beneath it, a layer of polished marble lay underneath. Torix stared at the wall, “Where to begin...Hm.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I made sure Althea wasn’t transforming. Her eyes stayed glued on Torix and his impromptu lesson. Eagerness over her face along with an underpinning of hunger for knowledge. Sitting cross legged, I leaned back,

“So...What’s got you so curious?”

Her eyes planted forward, “It’s not everyday you get to learn from a centuries old master. I don’t want to waste this opportunity.”

Torix stood taller, and his chin rose upon hearing that. I stared forward, knowing Althea was right. Torix gave us all this free teaching despite having no real reason for doing so. Even if the lich owned all the time in the world, he still enjoyed many methods for spending the eternity he had left. He chose to spend that time helping us.

Quirks or not, the guy did right by us. So far.

Continuing that streak, he formed a blue fire over his finger tip. With a deft hand, he carved out notes as he spoke. The words lingered on, streaks of dark fire brightening the marble beneath them. The necromancer spoke as he wrote,

“The Old Ones are mysterious beings that existed before Schema began assimilating our universe. Very little is known about them. These old gods are chaotic embodiments of entropy. Beings older than the universe. They are undefinable things with the ability to warp this entire universe with nothing but a whim. They shift through time. They mold through space. You get the idea.”

Torix’s finger moved like a fast-forwarded video as he spoke, “Even Schema treats these beings with a wary touch. If these entities pose problems for that AI, then that

alone speaks volumes for how overwhelming these beings are to us. I believe this doctor or scientist has used an Old One to create Althea's changes."

Althea's lip trembled before she mouthed, "That's bad, isn't it?"

He tapped the marble, sending a ripple of green energy through it, "Hm, so far, I'd say yes. That being said, a situation's outcome is dictated in part by the circumstances themselves, but also by how we respond to them. What I will say with certainty is that this doctor of yours wasn't a person who respected his life or common sense."

Althea's eyes narrowed, "Yeah. He didn't...Whoever it was."

Torix peered off, "I've a penchant to agree. It's a shame, really, as this experimentation reminds me of the remnants and their toying with genetic splicing."

I leaned towards Torix, "The remnants?"

The necromancer sighed before rolling a wrist, "They are the sentient race that created Schema. Many are still alive to this day, though each of them suffers an unknown status. This is due to the genetic modifications I mentioned earlier; those practices are deemed forbidden by Schema."

I spread out my hands, "Wait, what? Why?"

Torix shook his head, "I'll be honest with you both, I believe Schema holds a grudge against its creators. Remnants no longer splice their genes, having lost the technology long ago...Outside of a few disparate patches of them. Considering the advantages against the eldritch, genetic splicing should be enforced by Schema. Alas, we may never know the true answer for it."

I tapped my chest plate, "And this armor, it's forbidden just like gene splicing?"

Torix gawked at the runes, "Yes, it is. In order to better understand all of this, I've actually called in a favor from a remnant I know. She's rather...I'll say eccentric as a kindness to her. She will understand more about these runes than I do. The remnants, as a whole, have unmatched runic knowledge based on what we know of them."

Althea frowned, "When will she arrive?"

"Hmmm...About four or five days. She was supposed to arrive several days ago, but knowing her, I simply double her arrival date's distance. Then I add several days to that estimate as well. Usually, that is within a working distance overall."

Althea looked back, "So, uhm...Are you sure that she's the right person for this?"

Torix jeered, "What? Absolutely...Not. Not one bit at all. She's rather unreliable, as all remnants tend to be. That's despite her showing interest in the runes, which I contacted her for the moment I discovered them. She did say she'd show, and that she would help us...Probably."

I stood, "Alright then. She'll get us on the right track to getting this ritual down."

Torix underlined the word ritual, "She shall. She may even be able to assist us in producing enough mana to fire this ritual once more, along with the specific mana flows for its operation."

I tilted my head, "Does she know how dangerous this would be?"

Torix placed his hands behind himself, "Likely, better than I."

Althea rocked back and forth, "I thought you weren't going to fire the ritual off?"

Torix weighed his hands back and forth, "For now, I've no intention too. We shall see in time." Torix leaned towards Althea, "And you still lack answers for us? Do remember I own many methods of prying those answers from you whenever I'd like."

Althea rubbed her temples while squinting her eyes, "Blugh, I can't remember anything in detail. I remember tons of scientists, lots of experiments, and too many training simulations. Oh, and they mentioned the name Etorhma sometimes."

Torix spoke with a hard voice, "Etorhma...Are you sure of that particular name?"

"Uhm, I think so."

Torix took an imaginary, deep breath before pacing off, "I need time to think. Excuse me."

Torix swung his arm, the sliced stone rising back into its proper place. He stepped away, brooding in the distance before Althea and I stood up. I gestured to a corridor, "Are you going to go wild anytime soon?"

Her eye twitched along with her left arm. She grabbed it, and she gritted her teeth. She closed her eyes, letting out a low growl. After shaking for a moment, she mouthed,

"No...I think I can handle it."

I raised a brow, but she kept herself contained. I frowned, "Huh...Alright, if you say so."

With some time to myself, I stepped into the corridor, the familiar pull of sleep tugging at my eyelids. Huddled on the floor, I slept on my side with my arm as a pillow. The rest passed by before I dreamed for the first time since the system started up.

I walked through a wooden hallway, scratches lining the ancient planks. The corridor exposed no doors, and the tunnel stretched on forever into a white abyss. As I walked further into its depths, the walls warped and the wood contorted. The lumber slabs darkened, growing eerie and ominous. The air grew stale and old, older than Torix or dirt or maybe even time.

I walked for an eternal moment, the infinity flashing before me. At its end, I reached a stone wall with carvings on it. I placed my hands onto the stone before they lit a dark purple. A voice, deep as the ocean and powerful as time, pierced into the depths of my mind,

“Embrace me, my child.”

I woke up pouring sweat from under my armor. I heaved for air while glancing around. The same low-lit tunnel walls surrounded me. After a minute of composing myself, I stood up and walked over towards the colosseum. Althea trembled in the middle of the stadium. She dripped sweat, her lip bitten until bleeding.

Her face twitched. Her hands gripped into her sides. She winced, holding in the urge to scream. Her back trembled, claws darting from under her skin. Blood dripped out her back, but her robe remained untoned. She kept her gaze forward, steady and resolved. For a few minutes, she contained herself.

Her harpoon cannon laid beside her. She shook off her exhaustion, keeping herself awake. As I stepped out of my tunnel, her eyes locked on mine. Like an animal, she growled out, all of her reservation splintering at the sight of me. She howled, “You’re finally awake.”

I spread out my hands, not exactly well rested, “Did you miss me?”

She reached down towards her harpoon cannon, numerous long and thick spikes protruding from the limb. She wailed, “I’m ready.”

I hopped down the staggered steps before landing with a crashing thump. I stood while cracking my knuckles, “Good. Let’s go.”

She grabbed one of the spikes with her teeth before putting it into the harpoon gun’s ammo slot. My eyes widened as she aimed it towards me and fired. I dived toward the ground before the spike bounced off a mana barrier from Torix. The spike of ivory flipped in the air before slipping into the stone.

I took a step back from the bone, the spear having slid deep into solid rock. It left no vibration nor sounds, the earth shattering echoes of before giving way to silent whispers. Unlike the previous metal, these organic lances punctured rock without effort. From that display alone, the lance would punch holes in my armor.

Althea took another spear out, groaning as bone ruptured her skin. She put it back into her cannon, and my eyes widened. She used her transformation to bypass the ammo limitation. Smart. Another spear whizzed past my head, tumbling off a mana barrier. Before I could grab it, Althea pulled spears composed out of her arm, firing them one after the other.

My dodging grew desperate before a spear impaled straight through the bicep of my right arm. The spear ignored my arm, jamming right through it. Like magic, it left a gaping hole. I roared in pain before she shot another spike at me. It stabbed straight through my right palm. Even with my sky-high pain tolerance, the pain turned visceral.

I gasped as entire portions of bone disintegrated, the spears passing through me like piano wires through butter. Althea listened to Torix, and with more of her psyche remaining, her monstrous half learned too. She fixed her weaknesses and turned them into strengths.

Before more thoughts surfaced, another spear shot right by me, ripping at my side. I sprinted away from her, towards the back wall. I sidestepped at random as I did, several spears thunking into barriers of mana. One of those spears missed, ricocheting off the floor and landing on its side. I got close to it before turning towards Althea.

Her monstrous half laughed, "Run. Pitiful." She gasped while pulling a bone from her shoulder, "Pain."

I bolted sideways, dodging another spear while rolling towards the grounded one. I picked up the ivory lance, turning in a circle before launching the white harpoon her way. The projectile bolted through the room, the air squealing before it smashed through Althea's cannon. The metal roared as it bent and broke. I winced as pieces of the machine fell.

She hadn't gotten rid of every weakness.

She turned towards her cannon, three eyes on her left cheek watering. Stunned into disbelief, she froze in place while I sprinted toward her. She pulled the barrel close, hugging the apparatus. Having just been shot at about ten times, I barreled at her like a boulder down a mountain.

My feet clapped against the stone floor as she tried placing another spear into the reloading socket. The machine refused to fire. She bit into her lip until blood poured out of her mouth. I neared her before she threw the gun onto the ground. When I reached her, she sidestepped me just like I sidestepped her charge yesterday.

With a whip of her hand and wrist, she pulled out a spear and thrust it towards my throat. I tilted my head, the spear scraping the skin of my neck. I shoved her, pushing her on her feet until her back collided with the colosseum wall. Using the mana barrier's

rebound, I followed the repulsing force, lifting Althea off the ground. She flailed in the air before clopping into the stone below.

Bang. The sound roared across the arena, and Althea coughed up some blood. She narrowed her eyes at me before kicking my chest. I flung me through the air, thunking onto the mana barrier. Spinning out of control, my vision spiraled. Losing track of where I was, a clawed fist slammed into my stomach, tossing me aside.

I tumbled, stone chipping on my shoulder spines. I winced, ribs broken. Pushing myself up, Althea reinforced her arm with several of the bone spears. I jeered,

“For someone controlled by a monstrous half, you sure have some great ideas, huh?”

The deformed creature smiled at me, stepping up. She got close while I backed away. Changing momentum, I pressed my heel into the stone beneath me. I fired off a rapid right hand that slipped right past her arms. Her jaw and head snapped back, her legs losing their strength. Collapsing, she flopped into a pile beneath me.

Landing a lucky shot, I reared back a foot and kicked her. She tumbled back straight into the stone wall. I charged and tried another kick. She rolled back, and a catastrophic outbreak of noise rippled through the cavern as my foot collided with the forcefield. The bones in my leg creaked at the impact.

She pushed off the ground. She snatched me up with a swollen arm before slamming me down. The concussive force shattered the stone beneath me like a panel of glass. Standing over me, she lifted a foot, slapping it into my chest. Bones shattered. Chips of rock bounced off the ground. A cloud of dust expanded from the strike.

Once the dust cleared, many of my ribs broke. She pulled her foot from chest. She lifted her arms before I kicked her foot. She fell sideways, losing her balance. Despite my mangled body, I threw myself up, building momentum in a punch. My fist sliced through the air before thunking straight into her chest.

She punctured into the rocky floor. Broken and turning to normal, Althea grumbled in pain. Her limbs returned to normal, and I lifted my head up, taking a deep breath. After shaking bits of stone from me, I let my leg regenerate. I pulled her out of the floor before setting her down. She closed her eyes, drifting into sleep.

I sat down, thinking about my situation. Althea still lacked real control of herself, but she made leaps and bounds compared with before. However, that growing intelligence made the spars much harder, as she used her brain a lot more. Another fight or two, and she might get a full grip. A part of me looked forward to that release of responsibility. Another part panged with sadness. Desperate or not, I learned a lot during the fights.

And a part of me, somewhere deep down, enjoyed them.

Pushing that aside, I studied and pursued some new skills. I found that Pushups were considered a skill. It didn't do anything but make pushups easier. While useless, it gave me skill points. I trained other movements, like Sit-Ups, Pullups, Rock Climbing, and Jumping. I tried keeping the skills at least somewhat useful. Rock climbing and jumping could be used while fighting or traveling for instance.

I paired this new style of training with a captured BloodHollow Bat I borrowed from Torix. I let the flying creature attack me the entire time I trained. Being considered a combat encounter, the harmless bat gave a solid boost to skill gain. I alternated the training with reading, falling into the rhythm of it all.

Interrupting my trance, Althea woke up a few hours later. I walked over, making sure she didn't have another episode. Staying stable, she peered around before her memory struck her. Frustration roared through her limbs as she slammed a fist into the ground. She left a tiny crack in the rock, her eyes like stone. She glared forward, sitting up right with her legs crossed.

Her eyes shifted color, thorns growing out of her neck. I sighed, stepping up to the edge of the arena and sitting down. It was only a matter of time now. Althea gripped her knees until she pierced her own skin. Blood dripped down as she closed her eyes. A war waged in her mind, one side her will and the other her body. The chaotic forces under her skin trembled, and they fought towards the surface.

Those rising tides erupted. Teeth grew out of her neck. Spines expanded out of her shoulders. They reached around her robe, one of many Torix had given her. Despite everything, she remained calm. Althea stayed in her position for the next few minutes, her skin shivering but her resolve perpetual.

Further changes incarnated. Blood oozed from the wounds of her transformation. A portion of her cheek sunk in, claws expanding outwards from the exposed flesh. Her hair matted onto a bleeding scalp, and her legs writhed as if the bones came to life. Portions of her skin split and ruptured and tore, fleshy masses expanding outwards in all directions. I cringed at the sight.

Yet Althea's gaze remained planted forward. She whispered with the fury of a storm and the hardness of stone,

"I said no."

The monstrous half of her trembled, shaking in fury and fear. Her entire body trembled, agony and anger and rage coursing through her like lightning through a dark sky. Like shadows creeping out from under a bed. Wracking pains and deformities splintered over Althea, but she never lost her intention. Althea was done dealing with this shadow of herself.

And as that shadow writhed, it too, understood that newfound reality.

The monsters under her skin cracked and crumbled. In a rush, her wounds healed. The spines darted back under her skin. The blood flowed back into her body, and Althea became whole. She became herself. This was the first of many, but she conquered an episode on her own and with a will like steel.

She closed her eyes, letting out a deep breath. Sweat dripped from her forehead. Her eyes watered as well, and she blinked out rolling tears. She smiled and reached out with a clenched hand. Grabbing that arm, she squeezed her wrist. In that moment, she held a silent celebration. Watching her, I grinned.

I celebrated a little as well.

Knowing she'd be fine, I walked off, getting the feeling we wouldn't be sparring for the rest of the day. Even after a few hours, Althea stayed stable. Her form rippled at times, and she let out gasps of discomfort too. Despite those hiccups, she remained in command of herself. With her newfound independence, she took some time, carving out a cubby hole in the side of a wall.

She used claws grown from her skin, and she lopped the stone off with casual air even Torix couldn't match. Her hand moved through any material as if it were air. Her spears mirrored that ability. The more I knew about her the less I understood, and that curiosity peaked with time. For now, I chose to pursue other avenues.

She did as well. Althea kept her newly carved space as a private room. She got some rations from Torix, and she set up shop there. During the rare times I glanced over at her, she tinkered with her broken gun, inspecting the parts and mechanisms that composed it. Having helped her in a twisted sort of way, I took pride in seeing her just relax.

As for me, my biggest weakness involved being at a distance. Throwing rocks worked so far, but it required time and stone nearby. Instead of fighting at a range, I brainstormed a way of closing the distance. Coming up with a brilliantly stupid idea, I found a side cavern somewhat isolated from the others. Ready myself for discomfort, I dashed straight into a stone wall.

My collarbone threatened breaking, and my shoulder howled out in pain for me to stop. I didn't. I pulled myself back again, and I darted right into that rocky expanse. Over time, my collision zone turned into a hole then a breach then a small cavern. I gained two skills from this act of unbelievable idiocy.

Skill Unlocked! Blitz | Level 1 – In more situations than not, hesitation is a greater enemy than the unknown. By charging beyond your limits, you put your fate in your own hands. Let others dwell in that unknown. You've monsters to kill. +1% to blitzing speed and power.

Skill Gain! Burrow | Level 1 – Solid materials move like air in your wake. +1% to burrowing speed.

After another few hours of giving myself brain damage, I leveled those two skills to usable levels. Taking it as a two for one, I hammered away at that wall as if my life depended on it. The tedium reduced my leveling speed over time, so I shifted gears by studying for the next hour or so. I alternated between these two tasks every now and then thereafter.

Situating myself in that pattern, something about it all fulfilled me. The sensation was difficult to describe in words. I mean, thoughts, ideas, even sudden desires just pop into a person's head all the time. They act as distractions that keep people in this sort of haze. When I focused on studying or fighting or training, that haze died down and everything became crystal clear.

I understood my intention. I eliminated my doubt.

Deep in my bones, I found satisfaction in the strain and difficulty. There was no wasted time or effort on questions or distrust. It stopped me from worrying about situations I couldn't control, like what happened to Kelsey or Michael. Further still, losing my father and my waning humanity, I could ignore them through focus.

Worst of all, even if I found my friends, I was vulnerable. Torix showed that in many ways, but so had Althea. Well, I wouldn't be vulnerable for long if I could help it. I wouldn't be put in someone's mercy again like I'd been with my father. Never again. I took the slight personally, and I burrowed that disgust deep in my chest. It pushed me forward instead of holding me back.

Those thoughts kept me on edge as I went through another book from Torix's texts. Those efforts added to my questions for Torix, the necromancer glad to give me well worded answers. This bled into a constant stream of information. It all told me one immutable fact – Schema's universe was a vast and unknown place.

An internet existed, but Schema monitored it. Even then, many factions and lots of information splintered over time. Factions hoarded knowledge, a few notable guilds rising to the top. This left many pieces of history darkened through the passage of time. The remnant's past served as a perfect example. What Schema did or what happened to them was an enormous question mark.

How did they make Schema? Why did Schema exile them or illegalize genetic modification? I didn't know, and no one else in Torix's books did either. This void of knowledge left me starving for answers. I hoped the remnant Torix called on would give me some closure on those questions.

That's how I spent the next few days, in an alternating stream between training and reading. To my particular interest, I researched the Old Ones Torix mentioned. I learned

that two Old Ones existed: Etorhma, Eater of Worlds, and Baldowah, the Bringer of Ruin. Both were bad news, let me tell yah.

Baldowah proved the lesser of two evils. It gave fighters more reason to, well, fight. On the other hand, Etorhma defied convention, and few understood the entity in any meaningful manner. This gave Etorhma a shadowy, mysterious presence. Baldowah, it spoke enough with people that records existed of its speech. Etorhma lacked that cohesion, its marks and deeds confusing to say the least. This made Etorhma's lines garbled gibberish for the most part.

I mentioned all this because during my research, one of Etorhma's passages stuck out from all the madness. Its repetition chilled my blood and fueled further nightmares. Like a mantra of madness, the scriptures and cults following Etorhma repeated a particular phrase, a beckoning call for their master, as if they wanted all swallowed by this monstrosity.

Unfortunately, it was a familiar phrase.

'Embrace me, my child.'

Chapter 23: Finding the Formula

Now, while I wasn't exactly a genius, I understood when a situation exceeded my pay grade. After rereading some of the sections and double checking myself, I left my cavern towards Torix. By now, the ancient lich jotted down notes while messing around with a few potions. Many bowls rested on his runic table, the various liquids containing the conduit ichor from earlier.

Several of Torix's minions assisted in the process, handing him knickknacks and thingamajigs for his use. He kept those experiments centered on both Althea and my blood. Torix kept his gaze centered on his work while I walked up. I raised a hand to him,

"Do you mind if I ask you something?"

Torix turned towards me, "Tell me, does it matter if I mind? I do believe you'd ask regardless."

I tilted my head, "Oh, I see the runes haven't given an inch, huh? Is that why you're working on potions?"

Torix sighed before placing a vial down, "Hypothetically speaking, let's assume you're correct. There is more than one manner in which to understand my son's handiwork after all. Regardless of my intentions, what precisely have you come to ask about this time?"

A glint of excitement traced his voice, and I held back a smile at the lich's antics. He held questionable moral and ethical standards, but the guy loved teaching, whether he gained from it or not. That might've been why he amassed so much knowledge in the first place. He may have wanted someone to share it with.

And yet, for some reason, Torix kept his guard up regarding his past. Not wanting to pry, I kept my questions centered on topics he enjoyed sharing, like magic and histories outside his own. Either way, my current query required urgency. I frowned,

"It's important, I think. I've been having dreams, almost nightmares, but not quite. They're less horrifying and more...haunting. Eerie. You know, *menacing*."

Torix crossed his arms, "Any content to said dreams worthy of note outside of a general malaise?"

I whirled my hands, fear leaking out of me, "So, I've been hearing a phrase in one of the dreams – Embrace me, my child. I wouldn't have thought anything about it, but I started reading about Etorhma. You know, the Old One. After a few passages on the subject, I thought it was a good idea to tell you about it."

Torix gave me a knowing look, "Ah, a cause for concern to be sure. Are you absolutely certain the voice said those exact words?"

I spoke my words with a frantic edge, "Yeah. When I heard its voice, it was like my entire being was vibrating. Even if I was deaf and blind, I would still hear its voice in my mind. It was that piercing."

Torix spread his hands, "Well of course it is, because that is Etorhma."

My stomach sank as Torix continued, "Etorhma, while not the most active of the Old Ones, does maintain a steady presence. It maintains several cults, each with unknown goals. I've traded with them before, though mainly for experimental material. For this reason, I know that Etorhma contacting mortals isn't all that uncommon. It beckons those most likely to follow it or those it desires."

Torix leaned over me, "Tell me, do you have any desire to become its plaything?"

I raised up my palms in my defence, "Hell no. In no capacity, shape, form, function do I want to be near it."

Torix stood upright, "Good. Now, Etorhma may keep contacting you, due to your unusual origins. Ignore it, but do not openly defy that entity. Etorhma has made even rulers of worlds insane with just an utterance in their dreams."

I grimaced, "Noted. I'll see if I can avoid that."

Torix nodded, "It's wise of you to tell me about this. Like you, Althea dreamed of Etorhma beckoning her as well. I've even dreamed of it after having met with one of its many cults. That should ease your concerns."

I sighed, releasing the tension in my shoulders. Knowing about Althea's involvement helped quite a bit with my nerves. Reading the scriptures nearly gave me a heart attack. As I turned to walk away, Torix raised a hand,

"To reiterate the point of madness, allow me to share a few words that a cultist spoke to me when he and I met. I spoke of the speed at which the guild operated. This person replied, 'They say there's nothing faster than light. They're wrong. No matter where light goes, darkness is already there...And it is waiting.'"

I gulped. "Oof, sounds insane."

Torix's fire eyes narrowed, "He had the clearest eyes of anyone I've ever met. Be careful of Etorhma. It will change you if you allow it to."

I gave Torix a thumbs up, "Heard. Etorhma reminds me of Baldag-Ruhl. Honestly, Etorhma sounds like an overgrown eldritch."

Torix shrugged as he stared back at his alchemical set, "If so, he is the largest and oldest of them all."

I left the lich to his devices. Passing by the colosseum, I found Althea in a sort of meditation. As always, her form trembled and writhed under her robe. She remained tranquil, letting the reformations split her form apart. It hurt, I knew that, but she trained her tolerance for those transformations.

Something snapped, and her serenity shattered. Althea lurched up. She turned towards Torix, hobbling over. I skipped down the colosseum's steps, putting myself between them. At the sight of me, she took heaving breaths. A blood mist sprayed from her deforming face. Charging at me, I lifted my hands for another round of fights.

Instead of her and I colliding, Althea stopped herself mid charge. As if being pulled back by a rope, she jerked herself back. Landing on her back, she rolled around, her inhuman howls grating my ears. A minute passed, and her body restored itself to normal. I put my hands on my hips,

"Well damn, you've come a long way."

Althea's light skin and lavender hair shone a bit under Torix's torch light. She brushed some sweat off her brow, "Yeah...Uhm, you know, thanks to you."

I frowned, "Heh, I don't think so. I'm not the one dealing with all of that. You are."

She peered down in shame, "What? No, I'm barely holding myself back here. This is really hard."

"Yeah, but that's what makes it impressive."

From the corner of her eye, she peered up at me, "You think so?"

I raised a hand, the pointed ends of my finger tips wiggling back and forth, "Of course. If I'm honest, your struggle made me want to get control of my armor." I gazed into the distance,

"You know, it's like we're both dealing with a piece of ourselves that we hate. I mean, I'm not getting rid of this armor. From the look of it, you're stuck with that reformation ability too. Seeing you embrace that part of yourself, despite all the terror that entails...It makes it easier to accept this part of me too."

Althea stood up, and she peered at the back of her hands. She waved them with a bit of disgust, "Ok, so like, embracing this part of myself might be an exaggeration."

I rolled my eyes, "Alright, maybe so. My point is, you're not running anymore. I don't want to run from myself anymore either."

She grabbed her hands behind herself, staring down, "Really?"

"Yeah."

She smiled, "Heh. I didn't think I'd make that kind of difference."

I raised a fist, "Me neither. All I did was beat you up."

She turned to Torix, "Yeah, it hurt and all, but I don't think I would've gotten control of this any other way. These transformations hurt like a heavy hailstorm. They batter me all the time. I was awash in the pain, and it always just took me out. You took the monster I became and beat it."

Althea raised both her hands, bouncing a bit on her toes, "That was, like, a wakeup call or something. It let me know that it could be beat, you know? So I just followed that path. And you believed in me too, so that helped. Now I'm able to take it down and out with a mental beating of my own."

I smiled, "See? I told you so."

She looked away, "Heh, yeah...You did."

A silence passed over us before Althea raised her hands as fists, “Well, uhm, we can have our battle now or whatever. I’m trying to figure out how my cannon works, so that’ll help me stay on even footing. It’s actually pretty interesting, if you want to talk about it.”

I furrowed my brow, “Huh? We aren’t having our battles anymore?”

Althea let her hands drop, and her eyes widened, “W-we aren’t?”

“Of course not. The whole reason we had them was so that we’d get you under control for interrogation. Now you’ve got it under lock and key, so we don’t have to do that anymore. I’m pretty sure you’ve already told Torix and I everything you know anyways.”

She looked to the side, scratching her cheek, “Yeah...I guess I have.”

I spread out my hands, “So if Torix is ok with it, you can just head back if you want. I don’t think you’d throw us under a bus after leaving anyways.”

Althea swayed her weight back and forth, from her heels to her toes, “Huh...I guess I could just leave. I didn’t really think about it.”

I lifted a hand, “Well, I’d definitely give it some thought. Anyways, I’m going to go train some. Cya later, Althea.”

She raised a hand as I turned around. She murmured, “Uhm...Bye. And make sure you show me bingo. Whatever it is.”

I rolled my shoulders, “I will.”

After reaching back into my own side cavern, I created a list of various common skills. Those skills centered on closing the distance between my foes and I. With all my emphasis on melee, gap closing became vital. That list included Blitz, Burrow, and Jump at the top of it. Throwing offered some utility too.

By comparison, my magical options idled far off in the distance. Sorcery, as a concept, tempted me, but it did so far off on an unseen horizon. At that time, I lacked any true understanding of mana and spells. Torix shared his knowledge on magic willingly, but I wanted him finished with his experiments. For that reason, I kept my questions targeted so I didn’t waste his time.

Lacking other avenues of growth, I focused on charging into a wall for Blitz and Burrow. Using my captured bat, I dodged its slow tackles by charging at the wall. Once enough crags of rock built up on the floor, I tossed them at the bat, aiming just over its head. The stones whizzed between its ears like a field goal.

I ended up hitting the bat once or twice, but the creature’s innate tenacity shined through. After several hours of this, I kept my armor off my face while tossing the

stones. I gained quite a few tree points in the meantime. Dominion of the Mind, Throwing, Blitz, Burrow, and Jump all leveled from the training circuit. Torix even created a sound proofing web of magic so my incessant banging leaked into his work area less.

I counted his annoyance as progress.

In time, my actions grew more fluid. Minutes of training turned into hours, and my random, haphazard tasks turned into a synchronized dance. The bat charged. I rolled under or around it before jumping up into the wall. Lodging myself a bit, I pulled myself from the wall, dipping down. I grabbed stones, tossed them over its head, and readied for another dive of the bat.

That rate of exertion exhausted me over time. After seven or so hours of this training, I poured sweat and my limbs burned. As the tension and tiredness mounted, so did my skill gains. When my lungs began burning, my skills leveled faster. As my limbs weighed me down like iron plates, I gained skills even faster.

At some point, I breached a threshold. While aiming my stones, I fumbled my shots. They clapped against the wall as my eyes glazed over. I breathed out before rolling under the bat's dive again. I clasped my fists, banging my head against the wall. The slight pain cleared my mind, reminding me of what the training aimed for – avoiding death and finding my friends.

I furrowed my brow at the emotions racing through my head. Survival spiked more motivation than before, but finding my friends gave me less oomph. Peering down, I gazed at broken stalagmites and stalactites. They bunched up in a powder below, different sized pieces laying at my feet. My motivations were the same.

Some desires swelled while others waned. I lifted my head, closing my eyes. Centering myself, I gave myself a few reminders. Right now, every twelve skill levels equaled one more attribute point, all because of Obliterator. For my perks and my future, that tree and its completion took priority. Knowing the necessity of this tedium, I shook off my fatigue and pressed on.

I practiced long into the night, my stamina depleting as I heaved for breath. While finding myself just within my limits, I smiled. I shouldered my responsibilities, and it felt good. No, great. While feeling a little too good about myself, I slipped during one of my charges. I fell and crushed my training bat beneath me, blood splattering everywhere like a red tube of toothpaste.

I pushed myself up, the steaming pile of entrails beneath me grotesque and uninviting. My armor reached out with a maw, indulging in the pile as I pulled myself to my feet. Whenever I walked up towards Torix, the necromancer leaned back from me,

“Even though I am undead, your hygiene disgusts me. Have you no shame?”

Feeling tired, I raised a hand, "Shame is for the weak and people with low self confidence...That being said, I want to be clean for other reasons, like being able to eat without throwing up at the smell."

Torix flicked his finger, casting a spell. The gunk all over me disappeared in an instant. I gawked at the results, "Is there any way I can learn that spell anytime soon?"

Torix raised a hand, "It requires precise handling of spatial manipulation and a pocket dimension you enchant into a ring. It should only take a few months to master, if you're talented that is."

I nodded, "So I'll take that as a no."

I left Torix before practicing my Pull Ups, Push Ups, Jump, and Rock Climbing skills. With a summoned skeleton from Torix, I sped up the process by avoiding the brittle bones' attacks all the while. During that ordeal, Torix gazed over and chuckled, my entire regime ridiculous to behold.

Ridiculously effective, that is.

Shrugging Torix's scrutiny off via awful puns, I pummeled away for a couple more hours. At that point, I finally gained enough points for another rank in Obliterator.

The change you usher, comes with the cost of sacrifice. As an obliterator, you can afford no mercy. You do not cull your enemy, you erase them completely.

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

| Note – Total increase is +2 attribute points per 5 levels | Example – In ten levels, you will gain fourteen points instead of ten.

Twenty points of sweet justice came sweeping my way. I invested eight of those points into perception, and the other twelve into luck. The perk screen appeared, my dungeon cores ready and waiting for use.

[Clear-Sighted(Perception of 25 or more) – Your perception is incredible. Adds 1/10th of perception to charisma. Capacity for comprehension doubled. Radius of awareness doubled. Traps and enemies are color coded on your minimap.]

[All-Seeing(Perception of 30 or more) – Another 1/10th of perception added towards charisma. Additional comprehension, sensory excellence, and awareness per level. +5 mana per point in perception. Doubles mana cost.]

[Lucky(Luck of 10 or more) – Your luck is good. Doubles money found.]

[Fortunate(Luck of 15 or more) – Your luck is admirable. Doubles chances of rare events.]

[Rigged Dice(Luck of 20 or more) – Your luck is amazing. Doubles the increase of odds being in your favor. You're more likely to meet the right people at the right time.]

Burning through my stash of dungeon cores, I selected them all and finalized my decision. Energy rippled into my frame, ripping and tearing the fabric of my being apart. It recreated me into a different image, a better one. As if my eyes opened for the first time, I stood tall and looked around.

Tiny squawks from bats ebbed into the colosseum. Their cacophony of calls hummed in my ears. The air currents around me pressed onto my skin. Each piece of wind carried a different temperature, spawning from above or below. Those sensations gave me an idea where those fluxes flowed. I waved my arms around, and that awareness faltered in the face of my arms' disturbances.

I grinned. I still had a ways to go. Testing out my other senses, I opened my mouth, and the air carried a few flavors on it. Subtle and changing, these tastes singled out as certain materials. Iron laden clay, wafting dust, and the putrefaction of old blood, those odors and scents sauntered around me.

With that rush of awareness came the strengthening of my arcane bonds. Giddy as the sun on a

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Character Screen

Health – 2,606/2,606 | 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% | Evolution – 360,067/4,000,000

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

Level 103 Attribute Menu

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

Only two leveling perks escaped my grasp now: charisma and luck. After that, I wanted endurance to be my primary attribute. Determinator augmented the attribute, and it cascaded points into willpower then intelligence then luck and finally charisma. This cascading system of points made endurance hyper efficient. With Blood Magic, endurance bolstered my magical output as well since I drew from health instead of mana for sorcery.

All these multiplying benefits dumbfounded me, the system's inputs becoming complex. Taking a step back from it all, endurance and constitution stuck out. They both started chains of attributes. That made them both lucrative, but why Schema designed the system like this left me pondering.

If I guessed right, it was because of the defense both of those attributes offered. Even at my level of bulk, creatures still hurt me. A normal person without the 95% damage resistance and extra health of endurance would shatter like glass. If I considered each leveled up person as an investment, it made sense that Schema incentivized security in those investments.

In that way, having a higher leveled individual die would be a blow to Schema.

My Determinator tree turned the endurance incentivization into outright abuse. A fully unlocked Obliterator tree plus the perk points converting would also result in two attributes gained per level. For me at least. Combine that with my armor and my two extra leveling perks, and I'd be unstoppable, like a walking storm.

But other people could be walking around with all kinds of trees and perks of their own as well. Assuming I had a leg up was short sighted; for all I knew, I could be behind the curve. Wielding my lack of confidence like a sword, I paced up towards Torix,

"Yo, Torix."

He still worked with his potions, "Your eyes are different now. Interesting. What do you need?"

"Can you lend me a death knight? I need one for practicing a couple skills."

Torix leaned back into his mana blot, turning to me, "What is it with you and this incessant training? I couldn't hear myself think with all of the banging you made earlier."

I met his eyes, "I don't want to be helpless. I want to control what happens to me and my situation. Right now, I have a say in what happens to me. After having a taste of that, I'm not going to let it go. Not out of laziness at least."

I frowned, "And why are you always questioning what I do anyways? You give me a lot of pushback for someone who enjoys teaching."

Torix crossed his arms, "Perhaps you misunderstand my meaning. It's not that I don't approve; indeed, it's quite the opposite, in fact." Torix leaned forward, pressing two fingers together,

"Just as you are curious about magic and Schema's system, I am curious about you. After all, you are a mere youth from a backwater, newly systemized world. Most are left

wide eyed and awash in wonder. You are different. There is a lethality to your focus. There is an urgency behind your eyes and actions."

He gave me a slow, begrudging nod, "I, for one, enjoy seeing it. I'm merely left wondering as to the 'why' of it all. Your answer just now satisfied that latent curiosity."

I took a step back, not expecting him to say all this. I flushed, "I, well, thank you."

Torix stood, peering at me with a look of consideration. Variables flashed across his ever shifting eyes, and his presence reminded me of the level gap between us. At that moment, I felt small and tiny and insignificant. He gestured a hand to me,

"Would you like to be my disciple?"

I shook my head in disbelief, "Me? Your disciple?"

Torix closed the offered hand slowly, "Oh...I see." His eyes shrunk, "Ahem, I had thought it pertinent to offer, but obviously, I mistook the situation. Don't fret over your decision. I understand. You shall forge your own path and all of that."

He turned, but I grabbed his arm, "Wait a minute. That's not what I meant. I'd like to be your disciple."

Torix's face didn't meet mine, but even without seeing his eyes, they flared bright as I spoke. He spoke without any tone in his voice, "You're certain of that? I am a mage, and I lack much in the way of physical knowledge."

I spread out my hands, "Psh, that's exactly what I need. I already know how to fight physically. I need tutoring on all of this magic stuff."

Torix turned towards me, his confidence returned and his hands interlocked behind himself, "Then you have chosen the right master. My lessons shall be rigorous. Are you ready for that?"

I tapped the edge of my head, "Hah, I just spent hours banging myself into a wall for the Burrow and Blitz skills. I think I'll manage."

Torix lifted a hand, "Well, I most certainly can approve of your tenacity." Anticipation leaked into Torix's voice, "Ah, but your lessons shall need to be different from most. You do have Blood Magic after all. They will require a more physical inclination. Hm, there are many variables to consider."

I waved my hands, "Actually, that's why I came to talk to you in the first place."

"It is?"

“Yeah.”

Torix tapped the side of his head with two bony fingers, “Ah, yes. I forgot about your need for a death knight.” He clapped his hands, and a portal spawned. From it, one of his legion of death knights walked out. Torix stood over me like a professor handing his student a priceless book,

“The other death knights you killed were disposable. This one is not. If you kill it, I may do the same to you. Remember that for later.”

Giving him a thumbs up, I smiled, “I know, I know. I’ll be careful.”

Torix swiped his hand, and a notification pinged in the corner of my vision.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Disciple Request – Do you accept? Y/N

I clicked yes, and an icon for Torix appeared in my minimap. The lich gave me a knowing nod before stepping towards his place of work. Turning towards Torix’s minion, I eyes the death knight. It stared back with a black slit for eyes. It walked up, its interlocking plates shifting and its sharpened sword gleaming. It made for an intimidating sight. I beamed at it, while rubbing my hands together,

“Over here.”

The knight and I walked over towards the center of the arena. Once there, I turned my hands to it, “Can you understand me? In detail?”

The knight nodded. I put my hands on my hips, “Good. Charge and try slashing me. Do it slowly at first. I need a bit of practice before we ramp things up.”

The knight nodded once more before dashing towards me. Instead of dodging his blow, I angled the back of my fist towards the edge of his sword. The blade slid off my sleek armor. We did this a few dozen times, one of its swings lodging right between two of my finger knuckles. A painful reminder of this insane training, we took a break after pulling the blade out. After the breather, we carried on.

Over the next hour, I kept going at it until I got the hang of everything. The process proved technical and nuanced, as expected. However, the perception perks gave me the ability to see the once blurred blade. My dexterity perks allowed me to line my hands up by fractions of a degree, angling my forearms in line with the sword. Constitution and my armor made my hands dense and hard, so the blade slid on me instead of slicing through.

All the factors culminated with me throttling sword swings with my bare hands. Everything lined up, and I opened my hand wide. Palming the dull edge, I banged the sword away mid swing. With a few more tries, I gained a skill for my efforts.

Skill gained! Deflection | Level 1 – You force what fights you to move, instead of moving from what fights you. +1% to hand speed and reaction times while deflecting strikes.

Considering the absurd requirements, this skill paid out dividends for the risk involved in learning it. Having in my repertoire, I deflected and redirected the knight's blows time and time again. In response, the death knight sped up with me while I gained level after level in Deflection.

We kept at it, and the knight changed the angles of its swings with wilder variances. It aimed for lethal spots, its first of which swung at my neck. I freaked out at first, terrified of the edge. In time, I took comfort near that wicked blade. Using my shoulder spikes, I leaned away from the blow and shrugged. The sword caught on my spikes, slipping up the armor of my arm.

That took a while to adjust to. Once I got the hang of that maneuver, I timed my shrugs, hitting the blade on top of re-angling it. That caused the knight's precise, tight slices to veer over my head. When the blade whirled wide, I swung in quick counters at its gut. Only pretending to hit it, of course.

Hours passed, and I gained further control. Instead of just knocking the blade away, I aimed where the blade zipped off to. If the knight swung at my feet, I palmed the sword towards the ground. The sword would dig deep into the earth, ruining the weapon. If the undead sliced at my stomach, I grabbed its wrist and redirected the momentum of its swing.

I learned these tricks and many more little tidbits for helping my parrying. Each swing gave me greater insight into how a sword sliced. Its strikes never blurred in the air anymore. Every shift in angle or movement flashed in my eyes with clarity. In fact, they became so clear it was as if they moved in slow motion at times. The attacks turned sloppy and untuned.

Having disregarded the poor creature completely, the knight collapsed from exhaustion. Apparently, even the undead suffered from stamina limitations, just like the rest of us. I heaved the knight over my shoulder before carrying it towards Torix. The lich glared at me as I tossed the poor guy into a portal.

I wiped my hands off, "It passed out from exhaustion. It's totally fine. *Totally.*"

"You had better pray that you're right, Daniel."

I scratched the back of my head, my armored hand scraping my helm, "Is it okay if you lend me another knight, this time experienced in archery?"

Torix tapped the table, "Is this another antic of yours? Exhausting poor death knights of mine?"

"I mean, if they tire this easily, that's their weakness, not mine."

Torix gazed off, "Hm, I suppose so. Perhaps I should lighten their armor. Anyways, I can give you another one. Why must it know archery?"

I grabbed a hand out in front of me, "Imma catch the arrows."

Torix's gaze turned curious, "Catching? You intend on catching its arrows?"

"Yes."

"Well then, let me know if it gouges out your eyes. I have several potions planned, and a few of them require the eye of a troll. Perhaps your eyes should suffice."

My face dulled, "Thank you so much for your support."

Torix cackled before turning back to his work, "I do try from time to time. Good luck, disciple."

A portal appeared before another knight wearing the same armor walked out. In its hands, a crossbow glistened with several bolts in it. A loaded quiver hung from its back, and it turned towards me with the same competence as the knight before it.

We walked into the middle arena before I smashed my hand into the ground. The stone cracked under the force of my blow. A few more clashing blows, and edges of the stone bent upwards in sharpened crags. I cupped a few of them in my hands and tossed them toward the knight.

"Throw these at me. I'll be catching them. Toss them harder and harder over time."

It set its crossbow down on its side before tossing the stones at me. The process repeated, just like with the deflection training. I gained the skill Catching before the knight chunked stones like a pitcher in baseball. A few more hours of this passed before we swapped to arrows.

Ok, so, I may have taken a few arrows to the knee before I started catching them. I ensured my safety that way by asking the knight to aim at my legs. The progression for my skills began once more. We hammered away at the task, and the training turned into a routine for several days. As Torix forewarned, the remnant friend took her sweet time arriving.

Torix embittered at that fact, but he kept his words about her tame. *Ish*. In the meantime, the lich kept his eyes on the runes to uncover the ritual's secrets. He took samples of my blood, running different tests on it. Alongside the necromancer's machinations, Althea tinkered with her cannon. She inched closer to recreating it, exploring the machinery's mechanics.

She practiced her meditative restructuring during her downtime, gaining greater control of her forms. Her lapses turned rare then disappeared altogether. She and I talked during breaks, and we discussed the outer world. To my surprise, Torix joined in, and both he and Althea cared a lot about Earth and its customs.

Simple concepts like cars, fast food, and stoves set their eyes aglow with curiosity and bewilderment. To them, I lived in an ancient, undeveloped world, and for that reason, they hungered for humanity's history. We'd all sit together and talk about it while roasting a bear harvested by Torix's minions. Althea and I ate while Torix listened. Those were good times.

I laughed more than I thought I could during those talks.

They proved to be brief respites in my harsh training schedule. Torix kept the pressure high by adding requirements here or there. When a single knight couldn't challenge me anymore, Torix placed two. Then three. Althea joined in on the fun at that point, though she only practiced for a few hours a day. Her progress exceeded my own because I hit a sticking point.

Torix and I both recognized that I plateaued against the minions. All these skills I learned, they came together somehow. I could feel it, but I just hadn't taken the final step for a unique skill's completion. Althea, on the other hand, thrived by using her reformation abilities. She created massive claws and whipping tendrils all while staying sane. It left me intimidated by her at times, but in a good way.

I wanted to know if I could win a fight against her now.

Tumbling through my mind, those thoughts raced during my practice rounds. Althea and I handled a group of knights surrounding us. Torix lectured us in the meantime, the lich having taken a break from studying the runes. He drilled us in tactical combat, ensuring we handled mages well.

Against a caster, I ducked under a bolt of ice before the ghoul in front of me froze in place. It snapped me out of my combat flow, the ghoul's muted, petrified forms unnerving. I turned around, finding all the ghouls frozen along with Torix. I turned to him, "What gives?"

Torix turned to Althea, "It would seem your employers want you back."

Althea's eyes hollowed, "They...They do?"

Torix lifted an arm, an undead BloodHollow bat landing on his arm. It let out its shrill screeching, and Torix nodded, "Indeed. If anything, they're more ravenous for your presence than expected. It's quite a conundrum, in fact. You're anything but highly leveled, and you lack combat experience."

Torix glared at Althea, "Is there anything you wish to tell me?"

Althea took a step back, letting her arms fall to her sides, "Nothing that you haven't already heard. I told you guys, I *literally* know nothing. It's like my life was a haze before coming here. This is the first time I've ever heard real sounds or tasted real food. I've always been in my armor, sedated till I couldn't even think straight."

She blinked, peering around in a panic. As if underwater, she gasped for air, "I-I don't know why they want me back. I don't want to go back. I really don't."

She trembled, but not from her transformations. A deep fear, one carved into her mind by unseen people, it lashed at her. It turned her strength into weakness. Althea's face flushed and her eyes watered. Torix stepped up, placing a hand on her shoulder,

"It's quite simple, my dear. If you wish to return, do so. If you do not, then don't. Why are you acting as if you have no say in what happens to you?"

Althea shook off her panic, Torix's words calming her down. She turned a hand to him, "I can't stop them from taking me back."

Torix spread his hands to us both, "We are here to help you, should you need it. Aren't we, disciple?"

I gave her a thumbs up, "Eh, why not. It gives us something to fight."

Althea rolled her eyes at me, "You battle crazed lunatic."

I pointed at her, "Hey now, you're the one that made all these enemies. I'm just finishing them off."

Torix scoffed, "I'll be doing most of the work here. Now-" Torix opened his hand, creating a sphere of pure white with jagged edges. It spun with great force, until the edges no longer blurred. Torix pulled his hand back, recoloring the sphere with an area outside the cave. Two robed beings inspected the area near where Althea and I fought.

One stood tall as an elephant, massive veins throbbing underneath its robe. The smaller one glowed a reddish aura with a fist-sized, black crystal in his hand. Torix leaned over them, "Ooh, they appear to be holding valuables."

Above their heads were two messages, telling me next to nothing about them outside of their levels. Torix opened his status while murmuring, "They've cast masking magic for their statuses. We'll capture them and interrogate them forthrightly."

Althea raised a brow, "I mean, you guys aren't exactly the best at interrogating."

Torix's eyes flared red, "Oh darling, there is nothing that escapes me...And I mean *nothing*."

My skin crawled at that. Panning my thoughts back, Torix's trust in Althea hadn't added up since the beginning. The lack of security, Torix accepting her answers, even his friendly demeanor, none of it made sense. Torix turned himself into a lich for security's sake. He was a cautious man, and he treated Althea like a book he'd read front to back. It was like he read her mind. Under the lich's piercing gaze, I gulped.

He just might have.

Torix flipped his status to us, "That lack of escape includes their status updates. You both may read mine."

Elthodriss, Berserker of Yawm | Level 672 – Elthodriss is a devotee to Yawm of Flesh. Elthodriss is one of his upper advisors, and a member of a race of giants. Elthodriss specializes in strength and constitution, being a brute for Yawm.

With his overwhelming stature and brutality, Elthodriss can crush most enemies with ease. He's been granted pieces of dark magic forbidden by Schema. Elthodriss connects with unknown methods for excessive flows of energy. He engulfs in madness, becoming insanity incarnate, a being without control or reason or mercy.

Elthodriss fights with Kelto Drainer by his side. Kelto controls Elthodriss during this berserker state.

CHANGED FOR USER: At your current level, one swipe of his fist would splatter you against the wall. Pray that you die, or else you will be taken back to Yawm of Flesh. Far worse fates awaits you there than mere death.

The first status spawned a roaring unease in my chest. I murmured, "So, Torix, these guys are a pretty high level."

At ease, Torix lifted his chin high, "Which is precisely why I'll handle them."

I read on.

Kelto Drainer, Endower of Yawm | Level 459 – Kelto Drainer is a devotee to Yawm of Flesh. Kelto acts as a sort of puppeteer for the brutes within Yawm's ranks. Kelto uses mind magic for controlling them when they are channeling the magic of the Old Ones.

Despite his role, Kelto is more than able when it comes to fighting on his own. He uses mind magic mostly, focusing on bending the user's will to his own. His elemental and dark magic are of particular note as well. Kelto can overcharge a

user with energy and mana as well, making them oversaturate. This makes Kelto dangerous in close combat.

CHANGED FOR USER: Avoid facing it at all costs. You are but fodder for him.

I narrowed my eyes at the mention of mind magic, but I lacked time to explore it further. Torix pushed up a pair of imaginary glasses, turning to us both,

“Hm, it would appear you’ve fallen into the grips of Yawm of Flesh. You mentioned a plant and the name Alm. They were close approximations.”

Althea’s eyes widened, “Exactly. I wasn’t lying.”

Torix peered up, deep in thought, “Hm, this is troubling. I only know of Yawm through rumors and hearsay. There’s not much known or openly recorded on him by Schema, and what I do know of isn’t pretty.” Torix shook his head at me,

“My condolences for your homeworld for having attracted his attention.”

I waved my hands, “Wait a minute...World? You mean the planet?”

Torix stayed silent, a tense moment passing over us. I spread out my hands, “Torix, come on. Answer me.”

Torix sighed, and he placed a hand on my shoulder, “We’ll speak of it later, along with the consequences therein. Know this – this Yawm fellow may have set his eyes on this planet ever since the dimensional rip within BloodHollow.”

My jaw slackened, “You’re serious? I couldn’t have stopped this?”

Torix pulled his hand back, “I don’t believe so. I know this is a lot to take in, but we have very little time as is. Right now, these are soldiers from a far greater force. They may have landed here, unbeknownst to me. These may be mere scouts searching the nearby area.”

I put my hands on my head, “Wait...You’re telling me there’s more of these things?”

Torix peered at the tunnel, “Indeed, and this also verifies my suspicions about Althea. Her energy signatures are unusual, and I believe that the Old Ones are involved, somehow.” Torix eyes Althea, “Isn’t that right?”

Althea frowned, “Uhm...Probably?”

I looked at my hands, the armor wriggling, “What kind of energy is my armor absorbing from her then?”

Torix stepped onto a blot of dark mana,

“I don’t know anymore.”