

The New World

Chapter 27: The End of an Era

I stood up, my armor stabbing into the ground to help me up. I willed it into spines over my back and chest, and it did so without resistance. Holding them there, they no longer snapped back. I urged a grin from the helmet, and it listened to my command. Retracting my adjustments, I closed my eyes and searched for anything else.

I found something, a presence in the back of my mind. Within and around it, an eerie sensation snarled in the back of my mind, a hunger both liquid and palpable. It seized me, starvation, bloodthirst, all ending consumption roared out. I snapped back to my senses, that primordial being entrenched in my mind. It no longer rested on me. It rested within, an extension of who I was.

And who I would be.

I turned towards Torix, "Yeah, the armor's just, I don't know, stronger?"

Torix widened one eye and narrowed the other, "Is there any differences within your system updates, perhaps?"

I opened my status, and no changes showed themselves. I raised my hands, "Uhm, just step back for a bit."

Kessiah and Torix did, and I activated Oppression. It no longer snapped on like before. It crept out, the aura alive and thriving. I furrowed my brow, able to adjust it some. I looked down at myself, the armor more organic and less plated. This was me now. I thought fear would race up my spine at that or maybe disgust. I stepped away from humanity at that moment.

And I liked it. No, I *loved* it.

The joy sprung from deep in my chest. It overflowed, a smile forming over my face. Torix's fire eyes narrowed, "Are you alright, Daniel?"

I met his gaze, cool and easy, "Absolutely. Better than fine."

The lich leaned back, "If you say so." Torix gestured at the walls, "Then it's time we leave this place. I've seen with my own eyes what my son's work has spawned, and I'm satisfied. I believe we need to destroy what remains."

Kessiah pushed herself up on quivering knees, "You...You did record the runes, right?"

Torix nodded, and Kessiah let out a gasp, "Alright. Let's get rid of this mess."

Torix tilted his head at her, "I thought you were so eager to open the rip in dimensions? What happened to your gunho display of enthusiasm?"

Looking hungover, Kessiah dragged her hands down her face, "Oh shut up already."

Torix cackled, walking towards the edge of the stadium. As he did, he formed a walkway from his mana once more. Once up a step, he turned to me, "Are you coming, disciple?"

I jogged forward, "Of course." I ran up the steps, finding myself gazing down at BloodHollow's center. Stuck in place, I peered at it for the last time.

The runes, ancient and old, carried their archaic power from the ritual, still ebbing with energy. Minions of Torix, most of them denizens of the cave, carried mana thread across the cavern's edge. This place, it left a bad taste in my mouth. Baldag-Ruh's hissing, my first fight with the bat and bears here, even the stomach sinking loneliness, it all piled up in that moment.

But so did the good times.

The victories here. The laughing with Torix and Althea. The moments of absolute peace. They meant something to me. Since Schema's system arrived, I made more friends than I'd ever had, Michael and Kelsey were still alive, and I owned power that I earned. Maybe not all on my own, but for the most part, yeah. And it was mine. It wasn't chained to someone else. It was the first thing I could call my own.

Owning something like that felt good.

This place both stood as my biggest obstacle and greatest ally to this new life of mine. I put a hand on a wall covered in strange etchings. Hitting it with my fist, I gave it a begrudging nod of respect. It was time. Turning to Torix, my eyes watered a bit. Torix spread out his hands,

"What's going on with you?"

I grinned, "Man, hell if I know...Let's get out of this place." I murmured, "It's about damn time I leave for good."

We all three walked out, and as we did, Torix kept the glowing thread of mana connected to his finger. He sent many minions down various corridors. They held dozens of these crystals. While leaving, Torix gestured at the walls,

"This is for destroying evidence. The mana in the crystals is volatile, and they will detonate with a trigger. I used them extensively before this."

With that mystery cleared, we left BloodHollow for the last time. I checked my status screen again. Oddly enough, I gained no levels or ambient mana for my armor. I didn't even gain any skills like I thought I would. Feeling the armor across my skin, it writhed under my instruction, the living metal terrifying yet awe-inspiring at the same time. It was more than enough.

Stepping from the place for one last time, we approached the Sentinel. He stayed a tall, standing figure beside Schema's doorway into this place. Knowing I could, I checked out his status.

Sentinel of Monolith | Lvl 5,000 – A Sentinel sent by Schema to guard a volatile rift for a planet newly assimilated by Schema. They carry dimensional slicers that can cleave apart dimensions, their armor is unbreakable, and their minds are infallible. They are protectors of the most dangerous rifts, and they serve only Schema.

[Fighting one is death]

Giving the guy my regards, I raised a hand, "Good luck, Sentinel. Just so you know, some guy named Yawm's coming here. You may want to bail."

The Sentinel stated, "I may. Goodbye. Please, never come back."

What a heartfelt goodbye, but I never intended on seeing him again. Anyway, we stared at BloodHollow through the magical doorways of Schema's dungeon. Torix raised his hand with the thread. His eyes flared red, and he whispered to himself,

"Goodbye, Alfred."

Torix pulled, and the entire dungeon quaked. A cacophony of detonations roared in, and Torix spawned a forcefield over the Sentinel. The dust plume rose in the distance of the cavern, bats tumbling and howling in the pyroclastic flow. This heated dust cloud slammed into our shielding, roaring past us along with deafening blasts.

When Torix pulled his shielding down, he turned away without a second glance. I stared at the tumbled boulders, stunned by the lich's strength. I followed the necromancer and remnant as they stepped out into the world, the green turf soft and inviting on our feet. Althea walked out from one of the trees framing the view in BloodHollow's exterior.

She smiled at us, a sunset hitting her just right. My heart skipped a beat before I scoffed at myself. She and I? Yeah right. We met up before all of us sat down, having a meal under glowing oranges and flowing purples of a day's closing. Torix and Kessiah gazed at the sight. The necromancer murmured,

"Hm, perhaps this dirtball isn't as bad as I thought."

Kessiah nodded, "Maybe so."

We stared for a while, just enjoying the view. After a few minutes, the silence stretched out into a long, awkward pause. I peered around, wondering why no one else said anything. I snapped my fingers, "Hey, you guys awake?"

No one replied. I turned my head around, finding nothing moving at all. The sun in the distance stood still. I blinked at it, my thoughts racing in my head. I tapped Torix's side, "You alright? Anyone?"

I stood up, grabbing the sides of my head. Time froze in place outside of me, and I couldn't explain it. A surging panic thundered up my chest. I took heaving breaths. I'd be alone again, just like in BloodHollow. The presence in the back of my mind reminded me otherwise.

But so did something else.

A void, spawning from something far beyond the stars, cracked into space. From within the dark portal, a single eye opened. Something from the other side gripped my arms, pulling me inside. As I slid into the depths of darkness, a voice louder than time and stronger than planets quaked into my ears,

"Come, Harbinger."

I ripped through the portal, everything around me blacker than coal. Schema's HUD disappeared, and its presence dampened to nothing. Menu screens ceased opening. My health and stamina bars disappeared. The general structure Schema offered split from me. Amid a maelstrom at sea, I spiraled in confusion.

My only anchors amidst the primal chaos latched onto me as two firm, formless tendrils. They pulled me through this unending ocean. After minutes of being dragged, I swooped through the cloud. Space changed. Ahead of me, a floating eyeball with two limbs floated in space. Literal space. Surrounding me, asteroids hovered in every direction, planets and stars floating in the distance.

They existed in pristine clarity. Countless galaxies floated in the distance, even their tiniest lights visible. No atmosphere stood in my way, and my enhanced eyes took it all in. It left me unable to move or breathe, the vastness both haunting and beautiful. I gawked at it, frozen in that moment for a few seconds or an eternity. In that place, I couldn't tell the difference.

Frozen in place, I stayed inanimate. The voice from before radiated out with a quake through time,

"I understand you are curious, little one. Time does not exist here as it does where you came from. This is to your benefit; this vast void would kill you otherwise. I learned this from other summoned mortals. They did not fare so well without this precaution."

After he spoke, I moved again. Without gravity I only looked around. After a moment, my eyes met the basketball sized eye. The two arms shifted in an awkward, unrealistic way. Their forms carried no tangibility, yet holding me, their strength proved unknowable and unbreakable. Pulling against one, they resisted and yielded at the same time, as if these lingering shades were memories of what they once were.

Describing that place required more than words. The whole place made me feel...Off, unsettled, but most of all, I was insignificant. I tread into a domain that I'd never equal in my life, and whether by luck or misfortune, something pulled me here.

I narrowed my eyes at the basketball-sized eye, "What are you?"

Its voice pulsed through space and time alike, "I am Etorhma."

I trembled at the voice, but the tiny creature lacked impact. I frowned at it, "I thought you'd be bigger."

The voice shook my bones as it spoke, "Glance upward."

I peered where my up currently was, and my whole perspective changed. Up was now forward, and Etorhma lounged in the distance. Larger than a moon, Etorhma floated like a behemoth in space. Imagine a white mountain that took up your entire view. Now imagine it had split into several large chunks, with a reddish glow ebbing from between the crevices. As you looked deeper into the cracks, a fleshy, red skin led towards the unseeable center.

All these cracks converged towards a base below it, shrinking until they converged into a ball with a thousand limbs sticking from it. The reddish flesh slowly changed to a purple hue on these limbs, which were basically dozen jointed fingers. The ends of these things blended into the black space behind them. They shivered in my sight, my brain struggling to comprehend them.

My sanity tread upon that fine line, my ignorance a blessing. I glanced back and forth before saying, "Uhm...It's good to meet you?"

"You as well, Harbinger. I've summoned you. You would like to know why, would you not?"

I blinked, shocked by his normal way of speaking. Etorhma, being an Old One, carried stories of his madness across space, according to Torix's books at least. I believed Etorhma would be abominable, an endless evil that destroyed planets. His name said

as much. What I met here sounded less terrifying than that. If anything, its demeanor acted as an invitation.

That comfort scared me.

I blinked, and I fumbled out, "Uh...Yeah. Y-you read my mind."

"I did not. I respect the privacy of thought that your dimension has. It's an interesting rule to work around. It is time, or a semblance of it, to discuss why I called you here."

The light between the mountain's breaks brightened as Etorhma spoke, "There's something I need you to do. That extension of you, it has changed. It may now devour many permanent, unyielding objects, even concepts and ideas. Despite the impossibility of it, that armor has even eaten parts of myself, though infinitesimally small."

I gulped before murmuring, "You mean...Through Althea?"

"Yes. What a quaint name for what she is. This Althea is close to the center of this mess I'm sending you to clean up. As you may imagine, you are not the first I've called here. You will not be the last. Many of those I've touched roam your universe. One of them you know, Yawm of Flesh."

My eyes widened, Yawm sounding worse by the minute. One of the multi-jointed limbs jerked before Etorhma let out a thunderous whisper,

"He was a loyal servant of mine. He lost sight of sanity long ago, I'm afraid. He believes in an unholy union of the old and the new. That thing you know as Althea was his creation. He found one of my other Avatars. Yawm killed him and used me to create Althea thereafter. In the end, you are much closer to what he is trying to create than anything he made. That hivemind that made you was talented, to be sure."

Baldag-Ruhl's reputation kept spiralling upwards. Etorhma ebbed, "Yawm of Flesh will bend you, if you allow him to."

I frowned, "Yeah, I'm not letting that happen."

"Good. You do not share his twisted vision. Yawm wishes for your kind to be melded with mine. He wishes for a new flesh, one that is neither old nor new. What he creates will rupture the fabric of all that exists. Even I and those like me will be torn asunder. You will stop Yawm for me. You will devour him."

I sputtered, "I mean, I can try...But, you said the fabric of everything? You can't honestly have put this on my plate. There's got to be better candidates out there."

The unknowable being let out the lightest chuckle, and my entire being quivered out in fear. Etorhma echoed, "Do not fret, for there is time, at least in your dimension. I am

merely informing you of what you've been tasked with. I would interfere, but that is...Difficult for me. While I am beyond your dimension, its limits still capture me when I choose to dabble there. My tools turn to mush and muck and ash."

My deep frown turned into a deeper grimace as Etorhma continued, "It is innate in you, however. Destroy Yawm and the others who believe in his ideology. Hunt down their fragments once he has perished. Decimate all that he stood for. You are the Harbinger of Cataclysm, a sign of what is to come. As Harbinger, you are the only one who knows how to stop the ensuing cataclysm that Yawm shall bring."

Both inspired and confused, I listened as Etorhma rumbled, "Stop the cataclysm you omen. Show them the might of your mettle, and the wrath of your will. Obliterate until they are but pieces of oblivion, a memory for only those left living after their ends."

I tapped the edges of my legs with my hands, "That's uhhh...A lot of pressure. You sure there isn't some other dude who's willing to do all this?"

"There are many who are willing. There are none who are able. Besides for you. Rise or fall. The fabric of time depends on it."

Thoughts tumbled in my head like food in a blender, and I mirrored a blender as I spoke. Mush came out,

"Alright. It doesn't look like I have much of a choice."

I blinked at myself. What the hell was I even saying?

Etorhma resounded, "What a fragile concept choice is. Despite the vast power I wield, you have far more freedom than I in this matter. Your choice will decide whether we will retain existence, or something new will come to replace us. Be ready, Harbinger."

Everything went black for a fraction of a second before my eyes popped open. Torix, Kessiah, and Althea were beside me. Not a second passed during my journey into Etorhma's domain, yet my bones ached and my mind throbbed. Sweat dripped off me, and my entire body shivered. The three here turned to me, and Althea frowned, "Are...Are you alright?"

I tried lifting my arm, but it refused my command. I mumbled, "I...Well, maybe not."

Torix's fire eyes narrowed, "Your entire bearing has changed. Sweat. Shivering. Even your mind is a jumbled mess. Tell us what just happened?"

Feeling returned, and I moved a finger. Relief passed over me, and I murmured, "I think I just met Etorhma."

Kessiah leaned over, her eyes narrowed, "You're sure about that little man?"

I narrowed my eyes at her, unable to move my head yet, "You tell me. I have no clue."

Althea chimed, "Something happened to you. You stepped off this plane and onto another one. It was a blip at most, but you're not wrong about it."

My fingers and legs moved in slow motion, "Man...Etorhma can control time."

Kessiah gasped, "You...You actually met Etorhma?"

I rubbed my temples, trying to massage out a headache, "Uh, yeah, and I'll be honest, he isn't even that bad a guy. Or a girl. He's more a thing, really."

Althea stammered, "W-what did he sound like?"

I tried remembering the events hazy and jumbled, "Like...Like he was talking to my entire life instead of just me. He spoke through me, but I heard the echoes."

Torix's eyes flared red, "Why would Etorhma contact you?"

My face wrinkled, "To kill Yawm."

Torix raised a hand to his chin, "Really now...That means Yawm is associated with Etorhma on a personal level. Is there anything that was said about their history?"

I rested my face in my hands, "Uh, my head...I think they mentioned Yawm taking one of Etorhma's Avatars out or something."

The three silenced. As my entire being settled back into this plane, I let out a deep breath. Feeling back in ship shape, I frowned at everyone. Kessiah and Torix peered down. Althea peered at them with concern. Torix's eyes flamed a pure white, and Kessiah's breathing became uncomposed.

Kessiah scratched the back of her head, "Alright, I'm done. Get me out of here, Torix. Now."

A jagged edge slid into her last few words, her demeanor turning desperate. Torix raised his hands. They shook as he spoke,

"Now, this isn't...This doesn't mean we can't escape."

I raised a brow, "Escape? I thought you guys wanted to kill Yawm? That's what you made it sound like."

Kessiah and Torix stared at me like I killed their families. Kessiah's brow furrowed, "Gah, this world is so backwater."

Torix pinched the bridge of his nose, “Daniel...Avatars of Old Ones are some of the most powerful, defiant presences within all of Schema-owned space. They define eras. They decide epochs. We are not their equal in any way. If Yawm has managed to kill one-”

Kessiah snapped, “We don’t stand any chance of killing him. None. Nada. Zilch. We’re going to die. Your entire planet is doomed. It’s over.” Kessiah stood up, her fear infectious. She pointed into the distance, “Now Torix, get me the hell out of here. We had a deal.”

I sat up and snapped, “What the hell happened to you guys and your big talk earlier today? We took Althea. You guys just ripped open dimensions too. You honestly think Yawm is just going to stop chasing us? I don’t think so.”

Torix stood and placed his hands on my shoulders, “The situation has changed. We’re no longer in a position to fight Yawm. He’s beyond us.” Torix lowered his hands, “Kessiah, I’ll begin the warping ritual immediately, as I promised.”

I pointed at my chest, “What about finding my friends, huh? Let me know where they are at least.”

Torix raised a finger towards Kessiah, “Let me handle this situation, then I shall handle our arrangement.”

Kessiah propped her weight on one hip, displeased but not outright livid. Torix raised an arm, spawning a portal. A deathknight walked out. Torix gestured to it, “Take Daniel to projects forty and forty one. Ensure my disciple uses a safe route outside of the town nearby. I don’t wish for any accidents.”

I leaned back, “You’re not coming with me?”

Torix scoffed, “Me? Why would I come with you?”

A nervousness crawled up my spine at the thought of meeting my friends alone. I scratched the back of my head, peering off, “Er, you’re my master, right? I just thought you’d want to get to know them.”

Torix crossed his arms, “Hm...How to say this. You see, I’ve been keeping an eye on them for well over a week now. You’re more than welcome to meet with them, and I wouldn’t dream of stopping you either. That being said, they aren’t ready to see someone like me or Kessiah. They will panic at the sight of us.”

I furrowed my brow, “I mean, maybe at first, but they’ll warm up to you guys. Michael let me go on family trips, and Kelsey’s family even paid for my lunch. They’ve been good friends, and I’d like them to meet you guys.”

Kessiah smirked at me, "You honestly think that a bunch of green, backwater savages will be fine with us?"

I scowled at her, "Yeah. I do."

Kessiah jeered, "You've got a lot to learn, kid."

Anger flooded in. I muttered, "So do you. About me and where I come from."

Kessiah blinked before her cynicism waned. Pity spread over her face as she mouthed, "Oh...You're serious."

I shouted, "Damn right I am."

Kessiah and Torix turned to each other, each of them saying a lot with a look. Not being a part of the conversation, I spread my hands out wide, "What is it? Got something to say?"

Torix raised a hand, "I think it would serve you better to go alone."

I snapped, "If that's how you guys want it, then alright."

Althea tapped my shoulder, and I glared at her. I grunted, "What?"

She made herself small, "Uhm...Can I come with you?"

My animosity tapered off, "Oh...Really?"

She grabbed her hands behind herself, "Yeah, sure. I want to see this place. It's Earth, right? It looks pretty lush with life."

My eyes widened and my brows rose, "Well, er, thank you."

Torix sighed before shaking his head, "Do as you wish. Please, at least introduce yourself before showing them any extraterrestrials. Your friends may be less welcoming with Althea than you'd imagine."

Remembering how someone shot me, I recoiled. I peered away, "Yeah, ok, I can do that. It's to keep her safe."

Torix waved a hand, "Speaking of safety, I'll have a shadow elemental follow you both. It will assist with your secrecy, and it shall give each of you time to escape should one of Yawm's summons find you."

Surprised at his goodwill, I nodded, "Thanks."

Torix's eyes brightened, "You are my disciple, after all. It does me well to keep you alive. Good luck to each of you." Torix flashed his grimoire, casting a spell in an instant. A muffling aura spread over Althea and me before Torix murmured, "That shall silence you both. It shall wear off within an hour, but that should be enough time to arrive at your friend's residence."

Torix turned to Kessiah, "Now, about this warping. I'll need somewhere with a lot of stone, preferably somewhere with soft rock like marble. That is the easiest place for the required carving."

Feeling a bit bad about my outburst, I raised a hand, "Guys, I know where I place like that is. Come on, let me show you."

Kessiah frowned, "I thought you had to find your friends?"

I shook my hands, "That can wait. I know Torix is keeping them safe anyways."

Torix swung out an arm while tilting his head, "Then show us the way."

Our resident necromancer cast silencing magic over us all, and we crossed through the forest surrounding Springfield. Before nightfall, we got a view of Springfield, the leaves changing color with the coming of autumn coming soon. Trees in the distance, especially close to the city's center, shifted color early. Reds, oranges, but especially yellows crisscrossed those towering spires near the heart of the town.

As we passed, I pointed out a few herbs and other species along the way, selling Springfield a bit to them.

I grew up here after all.

Passing towards the opposite side of the small town, we kept our distance from other people. Given how Yawm hunted for Althea, we wanted no witnesses of us passing if at all possible. Having loose ends would've made a complicated trip even more so, but worrying about it proved pointless. Few, if any, people littered the town's outskirts. It left me a little confused but more concerned than anything.

People still roamed around in chaos, no group having formed or rallied here. Even worse still, the shambling, robed summons of Yawm roamed the countryside at random. We avoided them for now, but the sheer presence our enemy cast left a sinking feeling in my chest. That worry rested in my stomach like an anchor ready to pull me through the ground.

But, it wasn't all bad. Far out of the townscape, people found refuge in random houses darting the countryside. Campfires popped out here or there, the endless green hills draped in night. Those bonfires signalled people were alive, and I took solace in that. We avoided their paths, crossing creeks and tearing unturned turf. An hour later, we

neared the abandoned quarry. It rested far from the city, having been left after the turn of the century.

Burrowed into the side of Mt. Verner, the quarry's white marble glistened in the moonlight. Large slabs of unharvested marble laid out, reflecting some of the sunset. The orange clay dried out from the lack of rain. Trees bordered the entire expanse, caging the sky in at the bottom of the pit. At its base, the last few patches of harvested rock made a tiny cave.

It was like a hideout. That's probably why Kelsey, Michael, and I had hung out here sometimes. Kelsey drove us here a few times since she had a license while Michael and I didn't. I smiled at the familiar place, graffiti of all kinds covering the nearby shacks and blocks of marble. We weren't the only kids visiting this place, the quarry being a hangout for many.

When we reached the inside of the quarry, I leapt into the bottom the pit. My feet sunk deep into the clay as I landed, squatting down. I spread my arms to Torix, "This should be perfect, right?"

Torix hovered down, inspecting the slabs, "Why, I do believe so. This is better than what I'd hoped for. You've done well."

Althea hopped down with high leaps, her steps making almost no sound. Even the dull hum of nearby cicadas overwhelmed her landings. As a burst of wind pressed from all sides, I grinned at Torix, "We'll leave you both to it then."

Torix reached out, snapping several torch stands into existence. He sparked bluefires into them, making this place lit and homier. Kessiah lifted her hands, "Gah, I'm tired. Going to bed."

Kessiah pulled a glass sphere from her pocket, a ring of metal surrounding the device. She fiddled with it before a white sphere wrapped around her. I gawked at technology, but I silenced my curiosity. I had waited on finding my friends long enough. I waved at Torix's death knight, "Alright. Let's go."

Heading out, Torix gave us one last round of silencing magic. Althea never needed it, her traveling and movement both flawless and graceful. I trudged through the dirt with heavy stomps by comparison, so I appreciated the cover of quieting magic. Into the night we ran, traversing more greenery and underbrush. Half an hour passed as Althea and I crossed empty roads.

Smothered by empty cars, the metal covered wasteland ran beside many empty houses, each a husk of its old self. This left cicadas and grasshoppers dominating the soundscape instead of the highways. Despite the desolation, the stars shining brighter than I'd ever seen them glow. Staring up at the sky, I breathed in a deep gulp of air. It

tasted better, the lack of smog and light unveiling our planet's beauty. It also came with a creeping loneliness.

One I aimed to end soon. We approached where Michael and Kelsey hid themselves, the both of them embedded within a log cabin out in the woods. No light leaked out, but a few fires and oil lamps lit the house's insides. The two story building showed no signs of decay, maintained by the humans within it. From the garage, the light smell of gas drifted into the wind. Peering from afar, I found gas kegs lined up along with a muddy, battered jeep.

I grinned. They used an offroad vehicle and siphoned the gas out of other cars to make their way around. They hunted too, a butchered deer hanging upside down on meathooks in the garage. Its blood drained into a bowl. Outside the garage, Michael's family owned a garden, one with new patches of tilled soil for winter vegetables. They even dried food rations for later.

Althea whispered, "Why are they hanging an animal like that? It's going to attract eldritch."

I murmured, "The blood makes the meat taste worse, and hanging it makes the meat more tender."

Althea furrowed her brow, "That's not worth the risk."

I frowned at the cabin, "Maybe not anymore, but they don't know that. Not before I tell them."

I stood up, ready to walk up to the cabin. Althea put her hand on my shoulder, "Remember what Torix said? You're going to get attacked if you walk in like this."

I facepalmed, embarrassed by my impulsivity. I took a breath, "Yeah...Thanks for the reminder. Almost messed up there. We'll wait for the right time. I don't want to mess this up."

Althea nodded, and we walked over towards a cove to rest. Even out in the open without cover, I remained comfortable. The elements no longer bothered me. By comparison, Althea shivered, so I took a few minutes building a shelter for her. I piled dead wood in a circle, staggered the large branches, then piled pinestraw and leaves over the crisscrossing twigs. The entire time, Althea helped and asked what each plant was, how it got here, and what happened to it.

We spent a few hours explaining all of that, and it kind of surprised me how little Althea knew about, well, everything. It reminded me where she came from; a lab with only concrete walls and surgery tables to keep her company. Remembering that gave me more appreciation over my own situation. Despite the trails, I at least got to see the open world. Althea hadn't.

Protecting us from that open world, I got the shelter fixed up to a decent standard. It protected us from the wind while we both laid out in the darkness. Painfully aware of her presence, I couldn't fall asleep beside Althea. Her breathing kept me awake, along with other, ahem...thoughts. Trying to get some sleep, I paced outside and fell asleep after a few minutes.

As I laid out under the open sky, Althea's voice whispered to me,

"Uhm...Am I making you uncomfortable? You can have the shelter if you want it."

My eyes popped open before I raised my hands at our hut, "Wait...What? I was asleep."

She murmured, "I was wondering why you're out there instead of in here."

I lied, "I prefer sleeping under the stars."

An edge of disappointment leaked into her voice, "Ok. I get that...So, for me, it just feels safer when you're in here. That's all...Sorry for waking you."

Althea knew nothing about Earth, so she might assume the worst. I mentioned bears and wolves before, creatures she familiarized herself with via dungeons. Those stories painted a grimmer picture than our actual reality showed. Knowing I caused this, I crawled back into our hut. I flopped down, "Feel better now?"

I couldn't see her face, but her voice lightened some, "Heh. Yeah...Thanks."

I turned to my side and closed my eyes. Half asleep, I murmured, "No problem."

Thinking I'd be unable to sleep, minutes passed before I fell into that familiar abyss. My eyes snapped open. Daylight leaked into our hut as I woke up. Althea nestled under a bunch of leaves on the other side of the enclosure. I snuck out, watching out for dry, cracking branches that might wake her. After sneaking away, I spied on the log cabin again.

Activity swarmed in the inside of Michael's home, people active, voices laughing, and everyone having fun. I wanted to run in and say hello, but I waited for Althea to wake up first. A long and boring hour later, Althea did. She rubbed her eyes while muttering, "Gah, it's so early. Why is the light attacking me?"

I gazed at the enclosure, my eyes razor sharp, "You didn't sleep well?"

Althea peered up, "I did...Considering we're on the ground. It's better than the cave in BloodHollow." She got beside me, and she squinted at the cabin, "What are you waiting for?"

I sighed, "I'll go in after the hunters leave. I heard them talking about it earlier."

Althea turned to me, her brow raised, “Oh, you’re using your head this time?”

I lifted my hands up in mock surprise, “I know, I know. *Stunning.*”

Althea let out a laugh before we waited. A few minutes later, a group of people I didn’t know walked out of the house. They held their rifles in hand, carrying large bags on their shoulders, and knives on their sides. After packing up into a jeep, they headed out. Without that group of gunners able to kill me, no more obstacles stood in my way. It was time to head out and meet my friends. Having someone to talk to would make this so much easier.

Looking forward to that, I willed myself to stand, but my legs stayed where they were. I looked down at them, surprised my hands shook a little. I blinked, squeezing them into fists. I gritted my teeth, ashamed of my fear. Doubts raced in my mind. What if they hated me now? What if they changed and we were no longer friends?

Those fears grounded themselves in nothing, yet they surged under my skin like maggots in a corpse. I leaned my head onto a hand, disappointed in myself. I mean, I faced death and smiled. Why was seeing my friends this damn hard? I fought a sinking feeling rising in my chest. I breathed faster, my frustration mounting by the second.

Althea whispered, “Daniel. Er, what are you doing?”

I muttered, “Getting ready.”

We stayed there for a few minutes. Althea frowned at me, “You’re afraid, aren’t you?”

I scowled at her, “How would you know?”

She raised a brow, “Oh come on. Your hands are shaking. I can hear your heart beating like a drum in your chest. It’s obvious.”

I grabbed the sides of my head, “Oh man, maybe it’s better if I just leave. They’re doing fine without me.”

Althea smacked my shoulder, and I turned to her. She chided, “I’m not coming out this far just so that you can back down right here and now. Go be the brave idiot who likes to fight all the time, ok? If not for you, then for me. I want to meet some people...Geez.”

I stared at her, stunned by the outburst. I gave her a nod, “Alright, alright. I’ll go get tit done.”

I stood up, and Althea gave me a pat. Her hand landed heavy on my back, and I used the momentum to slide down the hill. I passed through the front yard, my metal boots clanking on the concrete driveway. They banged louder than I thought they would, and

after a few claps, a voice sounded from within the home. I sprinted back towards Althea, tearing the yard's grass apart. Getting beside her, Althea frowned at me,

"What was that? Not exactly brave."

I frowned, "Just shut up and watch."

Michael stuck his head out of the house. Scars traced his pale cheeks, neck, and arms. His brown hair matted onto his head, his face sinking in since the culling. In general, the guy leaned down a lot since I last saw him. He glared around, his eyes hard. Michael shouted, "Who's out there? Come out." He pulled the rest of himself out.

He hobbled together several beast shells over his shoulders, back, and chest, lacing them together with rope. A potion stayed on his right side, several knives across his chest in leather satchels. Even stranger than the makeshift armor, a visor covered one of his eyes. It came from a dungeon, its worth exceeding everything else he owned. Rifle in hand, Michael yelled,

"Hands where I can see them."

I shouted so he could hear me, "Hey man. It's me. Daniel."

Michael's eyes widened, and his jaw slackened. He stammered, "W-which Daniel?"

"Daniel Hillside. You know, your friend."

Chapter 28: What Friends Can Be

Michael's eyes widened, "Wait a minute...Daniel. The actual Daniel Hillside?"

I dragged my hand down my face, "Who else has my terrible last name? Huh?"

Michael leaned back, "Your dad, I guess."

I peeked my head over the hill, "Point is, I don't want to get shot at. Can you put the rifle away?"

Michael held it tight before his eyes narrowed, "Ok...I'll do it, but I'm not putting it too far from me. It's been dangerous lately." Michael set the gun down onto the side of the house, "There. Happy?"

I shouted, "Yes. One last thing Michael, I look totally different, so, you know, be ready for that."

Michael rolled his eyes, "Bro, you've always been ugly. A few scars and a scrape or two isn't going to change that."

Althea's eyes narrowed, "Wow. He's supposed to be your friend?"

I waved her concern off, "He just knows me." I yelled, "I'm coming out." I stood up, and jogged down the hill. As I came into Michael's view, I spread my arms wide with my helmet pulled off, "It's good to see you."

Michael's face wrinkled up in disgust while he raised arms. He almost peered away while jeering, "Gah, what in the hell happened to you?"

I let my arms flop against my sides, "I wasn't expecting that kind of a reaction...Do I look that bad?"

Michael winced, "Kind of. You got metal all over you, but it doesn't look like platemail. Is that a disease or something? Did a monster get you?"

I sighed, "Technically, yes, but oh man, it's a long story. There's so much to tell you and Kelsey."

Michael gave me a sidelong look, "Yeah. Same here...But just so you know, if you're looking for a handout like usual, you're not getting one. We don't have food to spare."

Not expecting a verbal jab, I rolled with the punches. I spread out my hands, "Come on man, I found you guys despite the literal apocalypse. I'm not exactly struggling for food."

Michael took a step towards his gun, "How did you find us anyway?"

His standoff approach to me set off alarm bells, but I kept it together. I planned out an excuse before coming here, so I turned a palm to him and said, "I talked to some people in town. They mentioned you guys being here. It sucks what happened to Kelsey's house, by the way."

Michael's eyes widened before his shoulders slumped. His face contorted before he took a breath. He looked exhausted as he put his hands on his hips, "Ok...That's good enough for me. We'll talk out here. I don't think my family's going to want to let you inside either way."

My left eye twitched, "Why not? Am I that scary to look at?"

Michael rolled his eyes, "Dude, yes. Besides that, I still don't know if you are who you say you are. It isn't like I can't see your status."

Panic surged in me for a second as I recalled what Stacy and David's appraisal mentioned about me. I waved my hands, "Hey man, if you need more proof, I got proof."

Your family enjoys camping. You've taken me to Prier's Creek, the Evergreen Ravine, and Red Mountain. We've never been to Mt. Verner, at least I haven't been."

I counted on my fingers, "Your friends with Kelsey and me. You got grades like mine, in the C's. You liked Kelsey when we were younger-

Michael raised his hands, his face blushing, "Ok, ok, shut the hell up. Damn dude."

I grinned, "See, it's me."

Michael shook his head, "Ok, it's you, but let's still talk out by the garage. It's less intrusive there. Some people are still...you know, jumpy after the tutorial."

I frowned but accepted the reasoning. Michael opened the screen door, "I'll get Kelsey. Wait here."

I gave him a thumbs up as he left. When he shouldered his rifle, a chill ran up my spine. I shook off that feeling as he went into the house. Michael hadn't shot me. Some random dude did. After taking a breath, a notification popped up in my vision.

Althea Tolstoy | Level 164 | Unknown – Friend request received. Y/N?

I tilted my head at the message before selecting yes. Althea gained an enormous amount of levels from those summons of Yawm. It made her worries about safety last night sound absurd. Either way, I intended on catching up to her soon. Another system notice cropped up.

Althea Tolstoy | Level 164 | Unknown – That guy's a jerk.

I replied with just a thought.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown – What? No he's not.

Althea Tolstoy | Level 164 | Unknown – Why'd he mention the handout thing then? Or not letting you in the house?

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown – The handout thing was because they used to do a lot for me. Kelsey's family chipped in here or there, and Michael's did too. They probably thought I needed help, so they're trying to look after their own right now. The house thing, er, I don't know what to say. Maybe he's scared I'll break something?

Althea Tolstoy | Level 164 | Unknown – If you ask me, he's giving off some bad vibes.

I stared down at my status, frowning at her message. I shook my head.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown – It's going to be fine. I've just changed a lot, and they're struggling right now. They'll warm up in a bit. You'll see.

Althea Tolstoy | Level 164 | Unknown – If...If you say so.

After waiting outside for a few minutes, Michael opened the garage door. I stayed a couple feet away from the garage entrance, finding Kelsey behind him. Her red hair frazzled into curly tangles, and freckles dotted her face like they always had. Like Michael, Kelsey thinned down some, but the transition weighed on more.

Her skin paled since the system started, eyebags forming on her face. Clumps of dirt and bits of food embedded into her shirt, and I worried about that. Kelsey always kept her clothes and person in pristine condition. She enjoyed girly stuff, to my and Michael's chagrin at times. The worst sign showed from her bloodshot eyes. She'd been crying. Concern spread over me, and I stepped over to her.

Michael raised a palm as I did, so I stopped. Awkward silence passed over us, and Kelsey stared off at nothing. Breaking the ice, I spread my hands, "Yo, Kelsey. What's up?"

She murmured, "Nothing."

I leaned back, "Y-you look a little worn down."

She blinked in slow motion before mouthing, "I'm *adjusting*."

Her tone carried a deep edge of hurt in it. Michael kept his eyes on her, his stare intense. Michael's emotions coursed over his face in waves. One second, pain roared over his face like he lost someone near and dear to him. In another second, Michael's fatigue overwhelmed him, and his expression numbed, all passion leaving him.

They were in a sorrier state than I'd thought they'd be. Kelsey peered up, her eyes hollow, "What happened to you?"

I shook my head, "I got armor now. What happened to you guys?"

I tilted my head, trying to get a better look at her. Kelsey cringed back, and Michael held a hand out, "Come on man, stop staring."

I stepped into the garage, "Sorry man, it's just obvious something bad happen-"

Kelsey hissed, "Don't get any closer."

At this point, their attitude pissed me off. I turned my hands to them, “What? Are you guys scared of me? Or am I just that disgusting?”

Michael frowned, “I’m not scared of you man. I...I just don’t know how to handle the situation right now. Kelsey...She’s been through a lot, and I don’t think she can take anymore right now.”

I put a hand on my chest, “Ok, but what do I have to do with that?”

Kelsey grimaced, “Everything.”

Peering at a hollowed out shell of Kelsey, her demeanor distressing, to say the least. I cut her some slack before I spread out my hands, “Kelsey, I’m sorry you lost your home, but you’ve got someone to stay with, you know? It could be worse.”

She simmered, “I doubt that.”

Taken aback, I gawked at her. Kelsey acted like the life of the party in most situations, the certified firestarter of our little group. Her throwing a bunch of cold water over everyone wasn’t like her at all. In fact, a cloud of gloom smothered her and everything around her. Kelsey churned out her next words,

“So...Where have you been all this time? Three mystery marks, huh? You must have been out ‘leveling’ up?”

I facepalmed. That’s what this was. They thought I abandoned them. I smiled while spreading both my hands, “Oh, so that’s what this is all about. I can explain. You know how I was out there caving with Michael before the system started?”

Kelsey gnarled out, “Yeah. We already know about it.”

Michael winced as she spoke. He put a hand over her shoulders, and he whispered, “Kelsey, just calm down.”

Something simmered right under Kelsey’s uncomposed surface. She bordered on flaring at any moment like a grenade with its pin pulled. I raised my palms to her, and I said,

“So when the system started, I didn’t spawn in some tutorial. I was stuck in a dungeon called BloodHollow for the first few weeks.”

Kelsey tilted her head, “And you expect us to believe that? No one else spawned in a dungeon. Why did you?”

I tapped my chest plate, a seedling of anger spawning in my chest, “Kelsey. Look at me. Do you think I just had this happen at random? I can’t take this off.”

She rolled her eyes, "Yeah, ok. Sure."

I stood up straight, "Here's proof."

I let the armor slide over my face and then back again. The metal coursed onto my back again while I tilted my head, "There you go. This is just a part of me now, and I'm dealing with it, kind of like how you guys are dealing with the system changes like me. Now look, I know you're both struggling, but that doesn't mean you have the right to just tear into me before I even have time to explain myself."

She pointed at me and shouted, "What is there to explain? You were gone when we needed you, and now you show up after everything's settled down. Everybody died while you were off killing monsters."

Michael put a hand over his face, "Oh god, Kelsey. Don't-"

Kelsey shoved him before she threw her hands out at me. She howled, "Now you just want our damn help like always. That's all you ever did was ask for help."

I narrowed my eyes, my anger turning cold, "I never asked for anything because I did just fine back then. In fact, I'm doing just fine right now. You know, besides getting screamed at for no apparent reason."

She let her hands flop on her sides, "Yeah, that's just great for you then. I'm so glad you're doing well."

I turned to Michael before saying, "Why is she throwing a tantrum like this?"

Kelsey stammered, "Tantrum... *Tantrum?* They're all dead. All of them."

I raised a brow, "What do you mean everyone?"

She snarled, "My family. Who else?"

A rush of thoughts poured into my mind. A dousing of empathy oozed in, but more than anything, a coldness permeated my mind. I already lost my father from the system and my mother before that, so maybe that's why pity didn't overcome me. I frowned at her, my composure remaining firm,

"I lost my dad too. It's been hard for everyone."

Kelsey's face flushed, "And what else did you expect? It's not like you ever had a real family in the first place."

A primeval rage seethed in my chest. In my head, this entire situation played out with smiles and hugs. I expected soft laughs and hard stories. I wanted someone to share

my journey with, someone who knew me before the system started. Instead of being able to take a load off and relax, the situation turned into a spiral of emotions. At this point, Kelsey unhinged at the seams, and Michael let her wallow around and wail into me.

But even if I blamed Kelsey's words on her situation, her words carried a cutting, premeditated edge. The family remark, in particular, held an acidic hate. It was less a response and more an attempt to hurt me. It was like this entire time, she stewed with that in her head. Now, the boiling overflow poured right over my head. That kind of statement would've left me reeling in most situations, but a part of me cut myself off after hearing it.

That piece of my mind rushed in as a frigid wave. It made an ice wall that guarded me from whatever they had to say. Parts of Michael and Kelsey's words still seeped in. The worst part was how all of this sounded like old sentiments, ones they both believed but never bothered sharing. It made me ponder our relationship before this moment.

Did my friends always think of me like some beaten puppy, begging for food? Kelsey even made it out like I let her family die. Those accusations didn't go unnoticed. The more I thought about it, the angrier I got. My mental whiplash mounted from good expectations for this meeting as well. My anticipation contrasted a grim reality, one where I awaited coffee and found a cup of squirming roaches instead.

I closed my eyes, pushing down a wave of insults. I shook my head, "Kelsey. I know you're in pain right now, but don't talk to me like that. Don't you ever."

Her anger doused out in a wave. Panic cropped up over her eyes, and she looked up at Michael. The guy looked back and forth between us before he scowled at me. He pointed, "Dude, what the hell's wrong with you?"

I pinched the brow of my nose, "Did you not hear what she just said now? She crossed a line."

Michael pulled her close, "Yeah, but that doesn't mean you get to make death threats at her."

Searching for answers to their insanity, I peered at them both. Searching for an answer, I inspected their status and found one.

Kelsey Lanier | Level 6 – Kelsey is a member of Springfield who specialized in music and scrapbooking before Schema's arrival.

Michael Johnson | Level 20 – Michael is a member of Springfield who specialized in outdoor activities and drawing before Schema's system. His skills in rifle handling enabled him a respectable output of dungeon clearing, so wariness regarding his gunfire should be taken into account.

My jaw slackened at their statuses. Their levels paled in comparison with my own. My hands dropped to my sides,

“You guys have a low level and all, but me not wanting to get treated like garbage has turned into a death threat now? *Really?*”

Michael waved a hand, “Look, the point is, don’t talk to her like that.”

My eyes narrowed at him, “So she just gets to say whatever she wants to me, but I can’t even defend myself?”

Michael glared back, “Dude, she’s been through a lot.”

Losing control, I shouted, “So have I, but I’m not being given any kind slack here. It’s like you set this up so that you can just both say whatever the hell you want to, and it’s pissing me off.”

As if truly aware of our level gap for the first time, Michael put his hand on his gun. It wasn’t a conscious arming; he did it without thinking. Fear made him do it. Not wanting this situation to head in that direction, I stepped back, giving them space. I peered away,

“This isn’t going like how I thought it would. I thought we’d just talk like we used to. I thought this would be fun.”

Kelsey peered at the ground, and she seethed, “Yeah...Well a lot has changed.”

I winced before reaching out to them, “Yeah, but I didn’t think we had. I mean, I haven’t been able to talk to anybody. Look at me. I got shot on the day I left BloodHollow, a dark pit where I was stuck for *weeks*. I had to fight to survive for so long. I was alone, and I was afraid.”

My throat burned as I pointed at them both, “I come back here, and you two act like I left you both behind, like I should’ve done more. Do you know how that makes me feel? It’s like I’m worthless, like my best isn’t good enough.”

I poured my soul out, and a tense silence passed over us. For a second, I thought I got to them. I thought they let all this animosity go and we could reset. Kelsey fumed,

“Maybe you feel bad because you should.”

The attacks mounted, and my eyes watered. I furrowed my brow, “What? How was I supposed to help you guys? I couldn’t find you. You went to some cousin’s house I’ve never heard of. You didn’t leave a message where I could find you. Oh, I could understand this kind of a reaction if I ignored you guys or something, but that’s not what happened here. If anything, you guys have no idea what it took to find you. *None.*”

Michael peered down, "Yeah...but that doesn't change how it feels to us."

I closed my eyes, rage spiralling in my chest. I didn't have to fight for them. Besides that, they never mentioned me owing them for all those 'favors' in the first place. I'd have never taken anything from them if they let me know they'd hold it over my head like that. Peering at them, I almost laughed at the irony of the situation.

They called me a roach while asking for protection. They acted like I was a beggar, but they asked for help in the same breath.

Rage mounted, my breathing strained. Kelsey and Michael both took steps towards the door, as if the thin panel of wood could stop me. It would never. They'd melt to jelly in Oppression if I wanted them dead. Silencing those thoughts, I took a few breaths, hard and heavy. Staring at them, I realized how soft the two of them were. They stood with bones of gelatin and flesh like liquid. They could pop any second, and they blamed that weakness on me.

I wouldn't let them.

I pointed a finger at them, "Go ahead and blame me for what's happened to you, but know that I'm not why you're both so feeble. Now you're turning your weakness into a weapon, as if your softness is your strength. It's not. It's why you're suffering. I'm not letting you throw that on me. That's all on you. Both of you."

Kelsey glowered, "Yeah. Sure."

I stepped away, my emotions numbing. I stated, "I don't have to sit here and listen to two kids blame me for their problems...I'll see you when I see you."

I kept walking away, and they said nothing. I expected them to pull me back, to apologize, or maybe hug me from behind. They did nothing, letting me go. By the time I reached Althea, my hands and feet prickled like I dipped them in needles. My heart thundered in my chest from a rush of adrenaline. That turned into a battle, one I struggled more with than most real fights.

I stepped beside Althea and behind the hill. Althea stared at the ground, grabbing her elbow with a hand, "I...I'm sorry. That wasn't fair."

I rolled my shoulders, "Life isn't fair. Let's go."

Concern spread over her face as we ran away from their home. Torix's deathknight, a monster I lost track of a while back, already shuttled itself back to Torix. Althea and I left in a random direction, my brain working as if sludge ran through it instead of blood. After about fifteen minutes, Althea and I stood in a patch of abandoned woods. I quit walking, leaning up against a tree. The wicked numbness faded, and a vicious, violent burst of anger roared out in place of it.

I smashed my hand into the tree three times. My knuckles crushed through the bark and wood. Chunks of the trunk pulped away from the poor pine, and sap covered my hands. I grabbed both sides of the trunk, squeezing through the bark before kicking it one last time. Several inches into the wood, my foot stuck into the mass. I jerked my leg out of it while turning my back to the tree. The spike of rage dissipated as quickly as it came.

I let myself drag down the trunk. My head flopped forward while grabbing the sides of my head. My throat burned, and I laughed,

“Hah. You were right. Michael is a jerk. I mean, you have to be happy about that, huh?”

Althea walked over. She shook her head, “I’m not. Not at all.”

I stared forward, “I guess I should thank you for the warning. I can’t imagine doing that without one.”

She walked over and placed a hand on my shoulder, “You didn’t deserve that.”

My eyes watering as I fumbled my words, “Did you hear them? I mean, that went worse than I could’ve ever imagined. I have to admit, Torix was right. Him coming would’ve been a bad idea. A terrible one. It would’ve made that even worse than it was. Hah. Hah.”

Something about the situation made me laugh, a painful, cynical sort of chuckle. Althea winced in pain at the sight of me, and she nodded,

“Yeah...I’m sorry it happened.”

I took a shaky breath, letting my hands flop on my sides, “So yeah...Those were my friends. I hope you liked them.”

Althea peered down, unable to meet my gaze. My breathing turned ragged before I covered my face. I leaned over, tears falling off my nose and chin. I snapped, “Just go.”

Althea frowned, “No.”

I gritted my teeth before growling, “I said go.”

She closed her eyes, wincing at my words. She kept her hand on my shoulder and stated,

“No.”

I howled out, “I said leave.”

She kept her eyes away from me, but her hand never left my shoulder. Her voice was like stone,

“I’m not leaving.”

And by my side, she remained. I blinked a few times before breaking down. I turned away, wallowing in self pity. I took jagged breaths and my hands shook. My eyes burned and my body writhed. Tears coursed. Snot ran down my nose. It was ugly and raw and real. At first, those emotions came in a flood. They roared out, a thunderous, bleating might that ripped me to shreds. Minutes passed. Scorching breaths became burning lungs. My eyes quit watering, and the wave of emotion devolved into a trickle.

Like a scorching flame, the sadness left me, and I lingered as a pile of ash. Sitting there, my mind wandered. Michael and Kelsey experienced some life changing events since the system started, just as I had. I predicted that, but blaming me for everything? Oof. That caught me off guard. Even after trying to open up, they just stabbed me in the ribs. From someone else, I would’ve shrugged it off. From those two, their words split my chest with fire.

Those emotions raged, but in time, they passed. As always, I remained. After my pity party, I wiped my face and blew my nose on a leaf. I stood up, Althea having waited with me the entire time. I turned to her, “I...Thanks for that...And, er, I’m sorry you had to see me like this. And for telling you to leave. And just being a general jerk. Gah, I’m awful.”

Althea peered off, a bit embarrassed, “It’s ok...It happens to the best of us. And, uhm, don’t worry about it. You helped me get my senses back. No one else has ever done anything like that for me. This is the...It’s the least I can do. Heh, this is the only thing I can do.”

I smiled, “Well, know that it’s plenty. A lot more than my *friends* ever did for me.” I turned away, peering off into the distance, “But, yeah...I’ve got to reassess. This didn’t go like I wanted it to. I have no idea what I’m going to do now. Maybe Torix has answers.”

We got over a cliff, getting a view of Springfield. The yellowed trees near the city’s center ebbed and swayed in the wind, an eerie howl echoing over the small town. Althea grimaced at it,

“Yeah. We may all have to reassess soon.”

We ran through the tall timbers, etching a path of our own as we did. As we headed back, my mind raced through different trains of thought. One mental track accepted Michael and Kelsey’s accusations, but I silenced that dark voice in the back of my head. I already saved two people from BloodHollow, proving Michael and Kelsey wrong before I even left my first dungeon.

That wasn't to say I was a saint, but I wasn't evil either. A cursory glance showed those two were in denial. The notion dismissed, another vein of thought dwelled in my psyche: Springfield's situation. Althea's words resonated with my own ideas because the Yawm guy sounded like bad news. Even as we passed the woods, the evil overlord's summons dashed through the trees anytime we closed in on the town.

The sheer enormity of our enemy's presence intimidated me, but other worries added up as well. Even while passing by, we found people fought more against starvation than the eldritch. My 'friends' were a great example of that. Kelsey looked like a vampire stole her soul out of her chest while hunger squeezed Michael's whole body dry, shriveling him to his roots. Not everyone got free rations from an undying lich, but regardless of the situation, the eldritch wouldn't wait for us to get situated.

The dungeon monsters strengthened everyday, and even while running through forest, I found a few strange, hulking beasts littering the woods. They waited for prey, though Althea and I weren't on the menu. We tore them apart while passing by Springfield. As we did, the empty buildings whistled from the wind. Shattered windows let in the cool air. The early autumn spread further by the day, the town's center cast in a haunting beauty amidst the early morning sun.

Echoes in the distance reminded me of people screaming, the abandoned buildings sending chills up my spine. I intended on inspecting that place after getting my thoughts together. For now, I needed some time to myself. Althea and I arrived at the abandoned quarry in an hour. Torix labored in the light, his mind always active. Kessiah napped in her white forcefield, her mind the opposite.

Kessiah's stayed in her blank energy ball, hovering over a marble slab. We raced past her before Torix turned to us. His eyes flared for a second before the lich coughed into a hand. He spoke as if walking on stilts,

"Ahem...It is quite good to see that...that the two of you are back. I hope all was well when meeting with...Your friends."

Shame burned in my chest, and I peered off, "Huh...Yeah. It went well. You know, it was good. Great. Yup."

Torix gave me a knowing look. I scratched the back of my head, "I...I don't want to talk about it."

My fingertips met hair instead of steel. Staring at my hand, my helmet slid back over my face without me thinking about it. Moving my hand back up, my helmet peeled back through reflex alone. I grinned at that as Torix turned back to his runes. He took a breath,

"Then I shan't speak of it."

A quiet surged over the entire expanse, and I let them know I was heading out. Althea and Torix had plenty to do, each of them studying something or the other. Passing the forest and trees, my day wasted away before my eyes, my mind drifting off as I piddled all the while. Unfocused and distant, I went to bed early that day, finding no need for a bed. Waking back up, I walked around aimlessly for the second day in the row.

Along the outskirts of Springfield, my mind paced about on its own. The conversation with Michael and Kelsey kept spinning in my head. At this point, I didn't regret shouting at them. If anything, I wished I said more. I hoped they both regretted what they said to me, but that hope was grounded in naivete. Michael and Kelsey said what they meant. In the end, they felt entitled to my help, something I couldn't give at the time.

For that, they lashed out with all their fury.

They happened to be in a position to wound me, but spinning my wheels over that only wasted my time. Frowning at myself, so did daydreaming. After two days of wallowing about, I stayed at the camp. I gave myself a few light slaps, wanting to get back to doing something. Anything, really. Getting started, I hopped down the quarry's edges, finding Althea and Kessiah chatting while Torix worked.

The necromancer moved onto a different slab of marble. He already carved out several patches of runes, his work quick and efficient. Althea set up a table of inspection work for her cannon, even having paper and pens set up for diagrams. Kessiah lazed about, doing nothing but trying to distract Althea. Althea didn't mind, so they talked about whatever and whenever. Nearing them, I put my hands on my hips, "What are you two talking about?"

Althea turned to me, "Oh, Daniel, you wouldn't believe what Kessiah's done. Her stories are incredible."

Kessiah peered at her nails, "Psh, those were nothing. I've got way better tall tales to tell than that." Kessiah met my eye, "Want to hear some, little man?"

I clapped once, "Actually, I got a new skill I wanted to test out." I cracked my knuckles, "Mind sparring, Kessiah?"

Kessiah raised a brow, "Wow, you want to get torn apart again *already*?"

I frowned, "If that's what it takes, then yeah. I do."

Kessiah bounced up onto her feet, "It's your funeral. What's the new toy called anyway?"

I raised a brow, "Toy?"

Kessiah frowned, "You know, your new skill. I'm guessing it's a unique one since you're so up in arms about it."

I raised a hand, "No, it's a mythical tier. It's called A Boundless Storm."

She sneered, "A Boundless Storm, huh? You? Heh, that's funny. It's good you got jokes."

I raised my brow, "Believe what you want. It's how I finished this tree I had."

Torix's fire eyes brightened as Kessiah leaned towards me. Kessiah frowned, "Wait...It's a mythical skill? You're serious?"

I opened my skill menu, showing her the skill's description. Kessiah put an arm over my shoulders, leaning against me, "Hah. Wow. I'll admit it. I'm actually a little impressed." She raised out her hand, a minute distance between her two fingers, "Emphasis on little."

I grumbled, "Please stop crushing me."

Kessiah pulled herself up, "Ah, whoops. Sorry about that. I forget your level sometimes. It's *low*."

Considering how lazy she was, I'd catch her sooner rather than later. Once that happened, I'd let her have a piece of my mind. For now, I waited.

Torix raised a hand, entering the conversation, "Allow me to offer you and Althea some perspective. For most, it is truly difficult to develop a mythical skill. They are exceptionally powerful. To make my point, the method I use for summoning and controlling Moloth uses a mythical tiered skill. The enhanced hardness and strength of Kessiah is, in fact, a mythical skill as well."

Althea murmured, "Oh...Heh, I don't have one. All I have is a few unique skills...They're ok, I guess."

Torix swiped a hand while turning to us, "Indeed, that's all you should have. Gaining a mythical skill so early...To be blunt, it's quite unlikely. In Daniel's case, even more so. He's ahead of the curve from a net power perspective. Most people at your development aim on amassing levels. It happens to be more reliable than honing skills tends to be."

I raised an eyebrow, "You seem impressed about the skill, but what about my armor?"

Torix tilted his head, "What of it?"

I gestured to myself, "I didn't get that kind of reaction to *this*, but it's more unique considering you and Kessiah both have mythical skills. They're more common."

Torix turned a palm while giving me a sidelong look, "True, but at the same time, you didn't create your armor. You are merely the benefactor of it. This mythical skill was produced via your own efforts, and that makes all the difference in how it is perceived by yours truly."

Kessiah propped her weight onto a hip, "Yeah, yeah, enough philosophy and back to skills. Think about them like this. Skills give you the ability to do something without thinking. It's like muscle memory. Even walking requires moving a bunch of muscles together at once. Skills are the same, and that's why you can handle several skills at once while training."

Torix added, "A unique skill is like tying a bunch of skills together. You may use several of them in conjunction as well. In essence, your skill gains prove you aren't just mindlessly battling. Your mind is genuinely engaged in the activity. It's a promising sign."

Kessiah shook her head, "You wouldn't believe how many people neglect their skills. Yeah, sure, maybe the numbers aren't as obvious as levels, but they add up. It might be because most people in Schema's system rely on magic or firearms. Range this. Range that. Range, range, range. Melee fighters like us? Oh, we're more than just rare. We're like collector items."

I cupped my chin in my hand, raising my brow a few times, "So that puts me out there as unique, in a way."

Torix shook his head, "Yes, though not in a good way. Melee combatants are often looked down upon until they've amassed a certain reputation. You lack said repute."

I snapped my fingers, "Oh, Torix, can you make me a mirror? After my friend's reacted to me, I'm curious what I look like."

Kessiah scoffed, "Hah. Ugly."

I put a hand on my chest, "Oh, so kind of like you?"

Kessiah raised her brow, "Huh. Look at mister witty over here."

Torix snapped his fingers before water vapor condensed into a thin sheet of ice in front of me. Torix gestured at it,

"Try not to indulge your vanity for too long."

I squinted at the mirror, "It's not vanity. Trust me on that."

I glanced at the mirror, and I gawked at my changes. Hard hands led up to hard arms that ended in a hard face. I peered at myself like moving stone. Scars traced any exposed skin, most of them small and shrinking. My eyes pierced with more focus and clarity than I remembered having. My ragged, dark hair covered some of my now grayish skin, and a more angular face peered back at me.

Like Michael, I lost weight, but my constitution perks stopped me from looking thin. The armor itself crossed over me with spikes and rivets, more menacing than I expected. I looked like an ashen warrior. Isolating my face, I bordered on handsome in some respects, but that could just be wishful thinking. When I pulled my armor back onto my face, the metal warped without squealing. Long, jagged horns jutted from the top of it. Spikes crawled up from my neck. For one last look, I lifted my hands.

The armor clinked around my joints to perfection, appearing as smooth as they felt. The singular red slit on my helmet glowed an ominous crimson as I stood there. It shone on the mirror with red. Despite the sanguine filter, it changed no part of my vision. When the armor's smile cracked across my helm, I leaned back from the mirror in horror. If I saw this, I'd think I was a monster too.

Kessiah's face came into the mirror's view while she leaned onto my shoulder, "Alright, let's see what your new skill can do. I'm done waiting."

Kessiah and I walked outside of the quarry towards the nearby forest. We left since Torix set up shop inside the quarry's base. The lich estimated a two week deadline before Kessiah could leave. We'd touch base on Yawm after that. Kessiah and I passed tall spires of wood with the forest floor covered in shade. Little spots of light leaked through the canopy. Pinecones and pine straw crushed underfoot as we walked into a dense cluster of trees.

Kessiah looked up at the plants, "It's good your planet has this kind of environment. It matches a fringe world, actually. The forests are spires of man eating tentacles instead of trees, though." She peered down, "And there's teeth all over the ground. Eh, those are just details anyways. It's pretty much the same if you think about it."

I cracked my neck before rolling my shoulders. Mocking me, Kessiah did the same, her joints popping out before she let out a yelp. I laughed before slamming my gauntlets together. They echoed a satisfying clunk as I grinned. Adrenaline built in my veins as the anticipation of a good fight deluged me. Needing an outlet, I waited for her as if waiting for Christmas morning.

Kessiah grinned, flashing sharp teeth, "Ready?"

I covered my face in armor, "Always."

She dashed towards me, weaving between the trees. Chunks of earth flew out from behind her steps, roots tearing under her feet. When I charged towards her, I slid

between the trees as well. When we met in the middle, Kessiah kicked towards my feet. With a stroke of ingenuity, I jumped up and kicked off a tree beside, my other foot kicking towards her.

My foot collided into Kessiah's face. The tree kicked off splintered and shook as Kessiah stumbled by me, her momentum pulling her further along. She gave me a nod,

"Hah...That's new."

Kessiah charged again before I shot out a stiff, left jab towards her nose. She ducked underneath it, but I had already stepped forward. I kicked off the ground, my knee whipping straight into her face as I brought my elbow down onto the back of her head. Like a guillotine, my elbow and knee smashed into the sides of her face.

Ignoring my simultaneous strikes, Kessiah shot a vicious right hook towards my body, but I pulled my stomach back just enough so that her blow skidded across my armor. Using the rebound off kneeing her, I plopped my foot back onto the ground before turning my hips. I countered her missed right. My hand landed right against her jaw, the metal ebbing a dull thwack as it clapped against bone.

Thrown off balance, Kessiah stumbled backwards before glancing at me,

"Like seriously, did it really matter this much?"

I clamped my hand, gawking at it, "I don't really understand it exactly, but everything feels right. I'm not thinking anymore. I'm doing."

She frowned, "Well it's time to even the playing field a little bit."

She didn't dash towards me this time. She slowed her steady pace before reaching me. She swung with enough speed that I couldn't dodge anymore. Her hits tightened too, Kessiah firing simple, straight kicks and punches towards me. Deflecting head on attacks never worked, so instead of just backing away to avoid her thumping blows, I swung my own fists against hers.

My hands slammed into her incoming blows before bouncing off. I angled my strikes so that whenever they bounced off, they let me swing right back into another punch. This increased my speed by using hers. After diverting a few of her attacks like this, I gained enough leeway for striking back.

All the bonuses from my skills culminated until I got a swing in once every ten seconds or so. As the fight stretched out, my aggression turned visceral. I sliced my armor out as my hits landed, scraping Kessiah's skin. I tightened my core while deflecting her strikes. After a few minutes of going untouched, Kessiah smirked,

"Alright then, little guy. I'll kick up another gear."

Her blows grew heavier, some of them knocking me back. My feet dug deep into the ground as I slid, piles of dirt building behind me. She shot a right hand straight towards my head, but I ducked down. Her fist cleaved through a tree, wood fragmenting as she touched it. Wood wielded like water against her graze. She could've swam through the tree trunks if she wanted to.

Ignoring any roots or branches, Kessiah tore through them. Redirecting her blows took all of my strength. Even after swinging through a tree, Kessiah's strikes still hit like cannonballs against my arms and shoulders and chest. To me, her strength and speed reached no limit. No matter how much better I moved and positioned myself, Kessiah overwhelmed me with raw power. It left me relishing in excitement.

I kept my eyes on her, and I didn't stop pressing the issue. I ducked and dodged. I punched and pummeled. I kept fighting, relentless as a plague. I watched her every movement, taking in how she timed her strikes and made her movements. I adjusted my own movements, taking advantage of the slight mistakes in her own style.

Like before, she strung her blows together in a continuous chain. That required concatenating her momentum together. Taking advantage of that weakness, I tucked in my own forms. My strikes shortened and condensed. My steps turned smaller, more lightened. When I hit back, I planted my heels until the force of the blow connected. Once the damage came through, I moved light on my feet once more.

This fluidity of motion combined with my timing during my deflections allowed me to maneuver around her brute strength. It was a strange feeling that came from A Boundless Storm. When I boxed and fought people before, I'd be the person trying to crush them with raw power. At that point in time, I evolved into the little guy darting around my opponent. Well, I attempted being that person.

Even with all these tactics and techniques, Kessiah slipped in more than a few blows. They dented my armor, sinking deep into my guts. Pain Resistance kept me afloat, ignoring the gravity of her hits. My augmented regeneration prevented the wounds from piling up as well. The main issue stemmed from my stamina. Fighting at such a high level for so long resulted in exhaustion, the kind that bled deep into the muscles and burned them.

Fatigue led to mistakes. Mistakes led to more pain and more exhaustion. After an hour of this undertaking, Kessiah sliced an uppercut into my chest. Her oppressive fist slammed into my stomach, the armor around her strike bending. My ribs broke and I keeled over. She struck the side of my unguarded head.

My body flung through the air, everything in sight spinning as I tumbled through branches and brambles. Blood seeped out of my armor as she walked towards me. I laid there heaving for breath before she lifted a foot over my head. She stomped down, and I pinned my arms to the ground. My armor dug tendrils into the dirt, giving me a solid grip. I shot my legs up while tilting my head.

An executioner's axe, her foot missed, scraping the side of my helmet. At the same time, I shoved my foot towards her chin with all my strength. My heel clashed into her mouth as her foot boomed on the ground beside me. My ears rang while the bones in my leg creaked at my heel's collision. Kessiah actually stumbled back a few feet before spitting out a bit of blood. She wiped her mouth,

"Hah, you actually did damage. Good for you."

My hp bar drifted just below a quarter at this point. The shockwave off her stomp busted my eardrums and left my head spinning. When I tried standing up, I stumbled sideways before falling back onto the ground. Sitting there and scrambling, Kessiah walked over. I mustered a defense, but she ended the spar there, sitting beside me. She put a hand on my shoulder, and she smirked.

"Hey. That was a good fight."

I stared up at the sky with some frustration. I disagreed with Kessiah because this acted less as a fight and more a slaughter. Closing my eyes, it bought me some time away from my situation. Peering up at the treetops, I focused my thoughts on what I'd do next. Fighting Yawm looked like my only answer, as the guy aimed at destroying my hometown and maybe the whole region.

To beat someone like that, I needed more than just my fists.

After orienting my thoughts, I thanked Kessiah before moving back towards the quarry. Althea sat on top of a tree, looking out into the distance while fiddling with her biotic rifle. She used a few tools Torix gave her, Althea's eyes set on the interlocking parts. On the other hand, Torix singed marks into the marble with a constant flow of his finger. He wrote less and welded more, sticking to etching.

I sat down onto the ground beside him. He didn't bother looking at me or asking where I'd been. Based on the filth enveloping me, Torix must have had an idea. The lich snapped his fingers, the dirt clearing off me before he said,

"You seem aimless. Anything bothering you?"

I frowned, "Yeah. It just feels like I was trying to find my friends forever, and now that I have, I lost my goal. Now I'm just...Floating around."

Torix tilted his head at his runes, "There are other goals for someone such as yourself, you know."

I leaned towards him, "Like what?"

Torix tilted his head at me, but continued working, "You can always improve yourself, or perhaps set your own goals. Besides for that, was there something particularly stinging

that your friends accused you of? Perhaps something dissuaded you that you're not fully aware of. All these factors may work against you, motivationally speaking."

I furrowed my brow, peering at the ground. A second or so of thought passed before I nodded, "Yeah. My friends acted like I should've done more for them...Maybe I should have."

Torix cackled before sketching out a few more runes, "Now, I'll say this only once, disciple. If you expect others to do for you what you must do for yourself, you'll live with disappointment at every turn. If you expect nothing from others and treat yourself well, then your life will brim with excess. In that regard, your perspective and actions dictate how your life is experienced."

Torix tapped the wall with one of his dry, skeletal fingers, "It's actually quite interesting to ponder, isn't it? How much of our lives are decided by our perspectives? Being a rather cerebral individual, I assume most of it is, in fact, based on our mind rather than our reality."

I raised a brow, "So you're saying even something like pain is only based on perception? I don't know if I'm buying it."

Torix swiped a hand, "Ah, a great example to my point. We'll use your pain as a case study. It can be seen one of two ways: a force that has broken you down or a stimulus that incited your growth. Look at your trajectory and compare it to your friends." Torix turned only his head to me, his eyes glowing green,

"By finding meaning in your pain, you've gained quite a bit of strength. That correlates to agency, a key component to overall satisfaction in life. Your friends, on the contrary, rob themselves of agency by blaming you for their circumstances. In their accusations, they gave the purpose of their pain away. That is why they stagnate whereas you grow, even if you're rather beset by ruminations as of late."

Torix went back to his work, etching into the runes. I pondered over what he said, his words more philosophical than what I was used to. After grasping Torix's meaning, I liked it. What he said resonated with me, and I found truth in it. Those factors made believing easier, but the main reason I liked Torix's ideas came from his results. The guy's level and prestige came from somewhere, his methods working well.

And in time, I'd make those ideas my own. I gave Torix a slight grin, "Thanks for talking to me about this. It's helped me out."

Torix flourished a hand, beaming with pride, "It was my pleasure."

I stood up, my eyes narrowing, "But, uh, you spied on the conversation, didn't you? It's obvious based on how much context you have about it, but I'm confirming."

Torix took a step back, putting his hand over his robed chest. He made a mock surprise at my accusation, “Me? An undead lich *spying*? Why, I would never do such a thing. It would breach my ethical standards. After all, I draw the line at wielding other people’s corpses.”

Enjoying his dark humor despite myself, I crossed my arms, “I thought your deathknight got out of there after we arrived.”

Torix shrugged, “He did. It was the dark shade that saw everything. And don’t worry for your friend’s safety. I’m maintaining a few scouts for now. They’ll stop them dying, though they shouldn’t anticipate more than that.”

Torix peered up, “I wonder if the Force of Iron shall accept them? One can hope.”

I tapped my side, “Force of Iron, huh? What’s that?”

“Why, it’s a generic, branchless guild that Schema sends to new planets. It’s supposed to ease the transition process for new planets Schematization by offering advanced technology and magical techniques. Unfortunately, like all bureaucracies, they are incredibly slow, often arriving months after Schema’s initialization.”

I spread my arms, “Then they don’t do very much?”

Torix pondered, “Hm, not for anyone that happens to be far away from wherever they land. I’ve sent scouts, and there happens to be a branch for the Force of Iron here. It’s small, though existent. Michael should be more than able to receive the standards for recruitment. That Kelsey girl is another issue entirely, but I doubt she’ll ever be much of anything.”

Torix spoke with contempt dripping from his voice, “She is someone who blames circumstances for her failures. I’d like you to find anyone who does that and has done much of anything.”

I clasped my hands into fists, “Eh, my armor and living in general was due to luck, and that’s a circumstance. Either way, at least you’re honest.”

“I attempt to be.”

I raised a hand, “So, you talked about goals. One of mine is learning magic. Not the book kind, but actual spells.”

Torix snapped around as if waiting for me to say so, “Well then, you must know that for someone with Blood Magic, casting is more than merely painful; it’s excruciating. Are you sure you’d enjoy incorporating it into your repertoire?”

I shrugged, "Yawm isn't going to wait, and I can't beat Kessiah with just movement alone. I'm gonna need a little bit of an edge."

Torix steeped his hands, "Oh, that can certainly be arranged."

Chapter 29: A Pound of Flesh

I pursed my lips and murmured, "Can it though?"

Torix shrugged, "It can, but there's a distinct reason why Althea doesn't use magic. You are about to discover it."

I raised an eyebrow, "Then why does she have arcane blood?"

Torix shrugged, "Likely, she was born with it." Torix turned to me before sitting in a chair of black. The dark energy buzzed lightly as he put his fingertips together,

"What kind of magic interests you? Your aura is powerful and with a few levels, you'd be able to beat anyone in hand to hand combat. What's with the sudden urge to learn the arcane arts?"

He snapped his fingers before a chair spawned behind me. As I sat down, I adjusted myself, noticing just how soft these things were,

"Well, there's three things I'm trying to fix." I lifted a finger, "First off, I've gained quite a bit of intelligence, willpower, and perception. I have the leveling perks for them too. This makes for a very potent combination, letting me learn magic with relative ease. That's not something I can neglect, especially not long-term."

Torix tilted his head, "Fair enough."

I raised two fingers, "Second, having no meaningful way of attacking someone at range is one hell of a weakness. If I could get some way of elongating my attacks or something like it, I'd gain a lot of options."

Torix leaned back, crossing his legs, "Hmmm, very true."

I put up my third finger, "And I want to be a badass, fighting sorcerer."

Torix gave me a serious nod, "But of course. The most important reason of all. How else could you be a, what was it...ah yes, a *badass fighting sorcerer*? That is as good a reason as any."

I frowned, "Come on Torix. You're busting my balls. Why do you have to bust my balls?"

Torix actually laughed a little before waving an arm, "Alright, enough foolishness. I'll show you some of the basics."

Torix stood up before spawning a plume of cerulean shaded mana. It formed a blue fire in his right hand and a spiral of water in his left. He lifted them, "Magic is usually taught with the three forms of magic. Origin, dominion, and augmentation. I've spoken of them before. Each of them results in differing outcomes."

He pulled the fire and water together, creating a ball of steam. He clenched his hand, forcing the steam to collapse back into water, "This was the magic of origin. It is used to create something from nothing. In another word – generation. You become the origin of fire, earth, metal, whatever you can imagine, you may project. Elemental magic, summoning, even most high level healing spells are of this class."

He lifted a hand outwards, and a dark, sinister mana ebbed from his fingertips. Torix lifted a rock in the distance. He split the rock into cubes before making the pieces of it spiral like electrons around an atom,

"This is the magic of dominion. By extending your will, you may warp and bend the material and immaterial to your desires. Corruption, mind magic, and telekinesis are all under this branch of magic. Gravitation is as well. Forces that manipulate reside in dominion's domain."

Torix let the spinning rocks hit the ground as his hand encompassed in a wave of orange energy. Torix smashed that hand into an unmarked wall. The wall thundered out an echo before he grabbed a falling chunk of stone. He crushed it in his palm, "This is augmentation. By using your will, you may build on whatever it is you wish. I've seen augmenters even enhance their eyes and bones, or let their frail, old hands punch through stone."

I turned a hand to him, "And I was augmentation earlier, right? My mana was orange based on that affinity test."

Torix locked his hands behind himself, "Indeed, and the purity of your augmentation is quite high. You must be a believer in the self, one who thinks their fate is in their hands. Hold onto that, for it shall strengthen the augmenting effects you gain. Most people are like that, owning a singular affinity. The more focused a person's personality and actions, the more affinity they have for certain styles."

Torix leaned forward, "I, for instance, have an affinity for dominion magic. While I've practiced origin and augmentation magic as well, dominion comes naturally to me. I remember never creating something as powerful as the monsters I found on fringe worlds. That was when I focused my efforts into dominion magic, eventually even being able to control creatures as powerful as Moloth."

I leaned over Torix's hands, "All the books you gave me never mentioned all of this. It all seems pretty integral, if you know what I mean. Why didn't any of your books focus on it?"

Torix leaned onto a hand, "I was trying to teach you as much about magic as I could without you actually using any. Blood magic is truly painful, after all, and we may be diving into dark forces here. The arcane arts can be a malevolent journey, should you ever stray from its most obvious paths. I am an example of that. That Yawm of Flesh is as well."

Yawm summoned creatures far stronger than I was. He commanded armies of them, and his underlings far exceeded the might of anything humanity organized. I shivered at the thought of them capturing and using me as a mana battery or worse. Despite what they said to me, I even dwelled on what might happen to Michael and Kelsey.

As if reading my mind, Torix sighed, "Listen, disciple. I know leaving them wasn't easy. I understand that hollow feeling of loss, trust me. You have to swallow it and keep moving forward. Use that emptiness. Don't let yourself be consumed by it."

I peered up, "I think you're misunderstanding something. They chose to spit in my face. They'll deal with the consequences."

Torix leaned back, "Ah, so that's how it is then? Would you prefer I called my minions back then? I had a few overseeing them just in case any eldritch happened to wander by."

Trying not to care but failing, I frowned, "If you could, just leave something overlooking them. It doesn't have to be much."

Torix nodded, "Of course. Now, to continue with mana types. The most vital aspect is learning your affinity, then trying to work within it. The easiest method for finding your affinity is taking an emptied mana crystal and siphoning mana through it. Depending on what comes out, that may determine your natural generation."

I raised my brow, "What about the mana someone can tolerate? Would you run a test where you throw some raw mana on me to see if I can handle it or something?"

Torix turned up while grabbing his chin, "Hah. What a novel idea. I suppose we could. We already know your mana type, but if you're willing to perform the research, I'm willing to help. That being said, I'll need a piece of you."

I grabbed my arm out, "Why not just throw it in and see what happens?"

Torix shook his head, "The reason is simple – the consequences therein. Most likely, your body will reject another being's mana. If you aren't compatible with the mana, it can create horrific side effects."

I lowered my arm, "Then that's why the rip in dimensions was so dangerous."

Torix scoffed, "Dangerous? That was paramount to suicide. You lived through it, but count yourself lucky. Dabbling further in that nonsense will get you stripped into finite particles."

My armor wriggled across my skin, "Eh, we'll see. Couldn't I just give you some hair?"

"Hair is keratin strands squeezed out through follicles. What we need is tissue that is still alive. Some blood will work but flesh would be better."

I sighed before clasp my hand into a fist. I banged my helmet a few times, keeping my neck strut. After a few strikes, I peeled the loosened armor away from my arm. Squirmy tendrils writhed from the wounded edges, healing me. Before the wound closed, I dug the sharpened points of my gauntlet into my arm. Quick and decisive, I ripped out some meat from my forearm.

It still hurt, though nowhere near the amount I expected. My brow furrowed, but I remained poised. I only let out a slight grimace before Torix guffawed,

"Disgusting, yet excellent. Tell me, what is your Pain Tolerance at?"

I checked my status screen, "Ninety four."

Torix's eyes flared, "No wonder that was rather anticlimactic. You weren't exaggerating about that old skill of yours, were you?"

"Yeah, Agony was, well, agonizing."

Torix lifted the bloodied flesh with telekinesis, "Duly noted." The necromancer lifted a hand, inducing a wave of mana like a tropical ocean's water. The mana fell into the patch of me, but the absorption slowed to a snail's pace seconds after. Torix's eyes flared white,

"And here I was doubtful that you'd have any talent for origin mana. It would seem that you have a slight inkling for it. That is...Unexpected."

I shrugged, "Well, I'm not really an airy type. I didn't think I'd have any talent for it either."

Torix leaned back, "Hm...Let's proceed."

Torix then created a stream of writhing black mana. Its purity and strength far exceeded the previous flow. The lich doused that torrent into the flesh. The mana seeped straight in before Torix gasped. His eyes flared a bright white,

“Your affinity for dominion is..Remarkable. I could’ve sworn you carried a singular affinity before. What’s going on here?”

I pursed my lips while raising my brow, “What’s the big deal?”

Torix gawked as more dominion energy seeped into the hunk of meat, “User’s of dominion magic are often those that put their every effort into control. They plan out their actions whilst abusing every detail and piece of knowledge they have at their disposal. They don’t desire control over themselves either. They desire control over their environments.”

I crossed my arms, “Maybe this is because of the portal? This dark mana seems similar to the energy there.”

Torix narrowed his eyes, “What? That energy is nothing like dominion. That portal carried deforming, volatile energies that warped and took over whatever it touched. Well, everything aside from that armor of yours. On the other hand, dominion never consumes, it merely controls.”

I tapped a finger against my forearm, “I have no idea then. I know I didn’t have this before the warp, and now I do. Call it obvious, but I think the two are correlated.”

Torix nodded, “Perhaps. It’s impossible to say without more information. Your next affinity will determine whether or not that is the case.”

A vibrant stream of orange mana floated from Torix’s hand before he guided the stream into the skin. The mana cackled and arced bits of energy before Torix leaned back into his chair,

“It was most certainly the portal. You have an excellent affinity for augmentation mana as well. That confirms it.”

I raised a hand but kept my arms crossed, “I mean, we still don’t know if I can produce the mana yet.”

Torix grabbed his arm rests, “Each style of magic is guided by certain personalities. An excellent affinity in one oftentimes means a poor affinity in the other. Origin, for example, requires a loose, carefree individual. In order to originate, you must allow the magic itself to breathe and grow. This means relinquishing control, something the other two types of personalities struggle with.”

Torix wisped dominion mana over his head, a looming cloud of black, “Then there is the magic of dominion. In a sense, this is the polar opposite of origin. Dominion users want control of their environment and the people around them. They do not blame nor hate themselves after they make a mistake. They find fault in the situation and those around them. This gives them the drive and desire to change and warp the world around them.”

I pointed at the cloud, "Ok. This makes sense so far."

Torix swirled the dark cloud, "Indeed. Augmentation users are different from both. Instead of focusing on the external, they look inward. They wish for control, but unless that control is of themselves, then it lacks any meaning. They are an interesting case study. They will often be the most afflicted with guilt or self loathing out of the three mana types."

Torix leaned his hands onto the chair, "Of course, most people fall between these three different types, or in other realms altogether. I had you pinned as an augments, so finding such a strong affinity with dominion was surprising. This gives us plenty to work with as far as magic is concerned."

I narrowed my eyes while pursing my lips, "So, uh...How do you turn your mana into different colors?"

Torix pinched the bridge of his nose, "It is no color change. It is a total conversion."

He released a stream of dense, colorless mana from his hand, "Notice the lack of direction in this mana's current state. This means the mana is unguided and pure. The more mana, the more unstable it becomes."

The mana swirled into a compact ball before changing into a light blue, then a vibrant cyan. The mana pulsed in his hand, as if it were struggling to escape from his clutches, "This is converting it into origin."

The ball turned black, the edges rippling. The mana's trembling form eventually pulled outwards, like it was crawling into everything around him. "This is dominion."

The ball turned a vibrant orange, arcs of electricity rippling from it. This mana circled around the central point, a misty ball spiraling like a top. "And this is augmentation."

Torix pulled the mana back within himself, "It's simple really. You must focus on what you want and nothing else to produce a type of mana. That focus, resolve, even determination is what changes the mana. I shouldn't have to spell out what each desire is for each mana, now should I?"

I raised my hand, "Well, origin is the desire for creation, dominion is the desire for control, and augmentation is the desire for discipline. Hell, if I took it a bit further, I'd imagine some attributes help a lot with certain mana types."

"As for desires, you hit the mark aptly. For attributes, that isn't quite the case. The magic oriented attributes assist with all the different types of magic, regardless of your affinity. Still, having excellent strength would help tremendously with using your augmentation, for example. Dexterity allows for finer use of dominion magics. Even origin is amplified by charisma, allowing you to control whatever it is you create."

I stood, "Alright, then do you have any tips on how I'd work on my augmentation?"

With an edge of disappointment in his voice, Torix coughed into a hand, "Ahem...Perhaps you should rethink your primary magical typing? Why not work on dominion magic instead? I have a few common breakthroughs I can share with you."

I punched forward into the air, "But I mean, augmentation will weave into my fighting style without me really having to adjust to the magic. It seems a lot more natural to use too."

Torix crumbled back into his chair, "Bah. Of course. I chose a simple minded soldier as a disciple. Fine. Go learn how to convert your mana then *weave* it into your style. I'll be here creating the ritual."

I patted Torix's shoulder, "I'll learn some dominion magic when we get Kessiah off world. We need you working on the ritual, not teaching a newcomer how to use basic magics."

Torix considered what I said before he straightened himself up, "I suppose so...Good luck then."

I turned and walked away, "You too."

"Oh, I don't need luck for something like this." Torix leaned towards the wall and began carving with a dark blot of mana on his hand, "I only need some time."

I ran off toward an unused portion of the quarry before creating another red stream of mana from my hand. This cooling energy carried no real intent or anything behind it. I just wanted a stream of magic, and boom, it arrived. This time, I tried controlling it, making it turn orange and let out the sparks from earlier. Nothing happened. After a few minutes of thinking about it, I tried out a different approach.

I aimed for control of myself as I summoned the mana. While willing the energy out, I remembered my history. I sifted through my past, focusing on regrets and mistakes. They stuck out, like missing bricks in a wall. What if I tried discovering Baldag-Ruhl's plot before killing Alfred? Torix may still have his son by his side. What if I handled the situation with Kelsey and Michael in a different way? Maybe we could still be friends, albeit at a distance.

This sinking feeling of regret molded in my chest before taking form in my palm. The lightly red mana turned into a reddish orange, more like blood soaked fire than thin red wine. Arcs of orange lightning rippled from the mass, like glowing sparks given life. They ebbed out from my hand and into my arm. My palm burned as I pressed more and more energy into my limb.

It mirrored Agony in its entirety, trading vitality for energy. All those weeks of wielding Agony granted me a close understanding of my health regen and where its limits were. Cranking the mana's power up, the orange radiated into my arm, a liquid and palpable power. I siphoned until I hit an equilibrium. The drain on me ached more than I remembered. By now, I drew a large portion of my total health each minute.

Blazing through my blood and bones reminded me of Agony, but the feeling wasn't entirely unwelcome. It reminded me of BloodHollow and my triumphs there, that urgency both familiar and homey. I slept for a month with Agony keeping the bats away. In a twisted reversal, the discomfort signalled protection and safety to me by then.

Using that feeling, I found my threshold for my health regeneration matched my mana usage. After a few minutes, the feeling faded. The mana poured from my palm like a wild, blazing torrent. At that point, I tried pulling the mana into my arm.

My hand shook as a bead of sweat poured from my head. The torrent flattened in my hand before coming into my arm. A skill notification came up.

Skill Unlocked! Augmentation | Level 1 – Why fight with many when you may fight with one? +1% increased ease of generating augmentation mana.

Skill Unlocked! Augmentation Manipulation | Level 1 – Empower and embolden yourself so that none may stand against you. +1% increased ease of manipulating augmentation mana.

I gripped my hand, the power incredible and welcome. The pouring torrent of mana began sparking from my hand before another skill notification appeared.

Skill Unlocked! Surge | Level 1 – You wield your mind, and it wields your body. Now you've taken the next step, using the mind for physical fervor. In this, you turn your spirit into might. +1% to the effects of augmentation internalization.

My health depleted far faster as another message appeared.

Mythical Skill Interaction | A Boundless Storm promotes the skill Surge into Unending Tempest. Synergy between two skills amplified.

Unending Tempest | Level 1 – Pain is fleeting, but victory is forever. +1% to the effects of augmentation internalization. +1% to the effects of A Boundless Storm during augmentation internalization.

The energy and vitality kept mounting and building in my palm. Strength flooded every fiber of my being, but the energy consumption burned my body away. It was like dipping my arm into a pit of magma. I stopped the stream before looking at my hand. The armor looked fine, so I pulled it off my fingers. Struggling to keep it off, I inspected the skin underneath.

It wasn't pretty.

Blots of blood were leaking out of my fingertips, like the flesh in my hand disintegrated. The nerves and control of the limb lessened, the nerves fried from the energy. I retained feeling via the metal wires lingering in my hand. Those strands stayed fine, surging with strength. After waiting a few minutes, the blood disappeared and sensation returned to the skin and muscles. With Blood Magic, using augmentation would be risky business.

Of course, if I learned to handle it without letting it destroy me, its potential was limitless. Getting to that point was the real challenge. With that in mind, I ran another round of experiments. I produced as small a stream as possible from a finger tip. I figured just having the buff on at all times would be a tremendous increase in my effectiveness. This was because of the skill Unending Tempest.

It amplified the effects of A Boundless Storm when assimilating augmentation mana, but it never mentioned how much energy I needed to actually absorb. I kept that amount as low as I could, hoping I garnered the maximum benefits possible. This exercise of control also stopped the augmentation mana from running wild, giving me something to work at. Sitting cross legged on the ground, I hopped up and tried moving around. I ran into a problem immediately.

This whole magic thing was easier said than done. Finding the right balance was like balancing on a tightrope. That was too easy. Magic and moving reminded me of playing darts while on a unicycle. If walking with magic proved difficult, then using A Boundless Storm with sorcery far exceeded my abilities. Even if it seemed impossible, this absurd challenge gave me a goal, a condition I thrived under.

As I had before, I struggled through the process, one step at a time. Over and over, I tackled the mana while moving. It took me hours of working at it to walk. It took a day to run. Two days later, I overdid it. I drained mana until my bones gelatinized. My arm broke from lifting it, not even needing to hit anything. That accident illustrated a gruesome reality. If I died from overusing augmentation, my goopy remains would be turned into Torix's worst underling ever. I couldn't even be a zombie or a skeleton. I'd be a goopy slime.

However, that stress and the discomfort focused my efforts. Three days into this struggle, I activated A Boundless Storm. The clarity of the skill washed over me when it flicked on, helping me progress in my mana manipulation. Still in that deep concentration, I honed in on throwing punches as I wielded mana. From being, someone tapped my shoulder. I jumped, utterly unaware of my surroundings.

I turned and shouted, "Who the hell is that?"

I turned around, finding Althea leaning over my shoulder. She grabbed her arms from behind,

“Want to spar again?”

I raised my brow, “Really now?” I stood up, reaching out with my arms, “Alright, sure. What’s got you smiling though?”

Mysterious and grinning, Althea narrowed her eyes, “You’ll have to find out when you lose.”

Rolling my shoulders, I grinned, “Nice confidence there. I look forward to breaking it.”

Chapter 30: Taking Off Shackles

Heading out towards the forest’s edge, Althea raised a hand to me, “I wanted to thank you for capturing me that day we met.”

I scratched the back of my head, remembering the bloody battle, “You sure you want to thank me? I wasn’t the one that captured you either. That was Torix.”

Althea faded between trees, “I talked with Torix, and you’re one of the biggest reasons I’m still here. Your armor gave me this opportunity, and Torix told me you took a risk so I could learn about my powers. Why didn’t you tell me that before?”

I leaned against a tree trunk, “If I had to guess, it’s because I didn’t want undeserved thanks. I chose to do that because I thought it wasn’t risky, so it kind of feels disingenuous to accept good will when I didn’t give it in turn.”

Althea’s brow furrowed, “You can’t lie that you helped me with our fights.”

I winced, “I mean, all I did was beat the hell out of you.”

Althea glared, “That’s exactly what I needed...At the time.”

“Look, I’ll take your thanks. I just don’t think I deserve it.”

Althea peered at a passing bird, “You don’t know what my life was like before all this. Heh, it wasn’t the best. There’s a lot of pain and discomfort in this new life I’ve got, but-”

The bird landed on her finger, and I gawked at it. Althea gave it a pet with a finger, “This is a lot better than concrete walls, flavorless mash, and being alone all the time...So thank you. I mean it.”

I shrugged, “I’ll be honest. I didn’t do it for you. I wanted Torix to find my friends faster.”

Althea smiled, “Does it really matter why you did it?”

A peered at the bird perched on Althea's finger. It let out a cute little tweet. I said, "Eh, I guess not...You ready for another fight?"

She threw her hand up, the bird flying over towards a nearby branch, "Always."

I pointed at her, "Wait a minute. I said that first."

Her arm reformed into a biological mass, and Althea cringed during the process. I let her finish before she took aim. She narrowed her eyes, "Let's do this."

I dashed towards her before she directed her gun and fired. A bone harpoon drilled towards me. I shot out an arm and diverted the spear. Instead of knocking it away with force alone, I shifted my momentum as the spear made contact. I reangled the back of my hand, and I molded my armor at the same time.

Despite my adjustments, the spear rocked against my hand, skidding off with sparks. It slid into the ground, disappearing beneath a carpet of leaves. A few more spears shot my way, but I took my time deflecting them. It took all my effort each time she fired, but her ammo limited itself to her health regeneration. With time on my side, I formed my armor into landing pads so her spears skidded off me better than before.

Several spears into the process, and the mental strain for deflecting waned. Several minutes later, and it took a few seconds of thought at most. Althea sighed, "Gah, if I learn how to fire my spears, then you just learn how to deal with them."

I kept my gaze on her, "It's a learning process. What else have you got for me?"

She leaped onto a nearby tree, lodging claws into the bark. Taking a second, she fired her cannon before leaping to another thick trunk. I deflected them, but she kited me well, keeping me in her sights as I approached. She grew a fleshy sack of green over her arm grasping one. She tossed it at me. I tried catching it to throw back, but the green ball detonated at my touch.

I breathed in a bit of air. The gas turned into bile that burned my lungs and throat. It kept sizzling like an acid. The thick mucus squirmed around in my body, growing needles out into my lungs. My chest impaled in all directions, my breathing strained. Blood flooded into my mouth from my throat. It dripped down my chin as I murmured,

"Damn, doesn't this seem like a bit of overkill?"

Althea's eyes widened, "I...I'm so sorry. I didn't think it would come alive like that."

Strands of my armor reached out, shearing the green needles. The metal in my body absorbed the invading mass of green, and the wires even cleaned up my blood. Standing straight again, I shouted, "Maybe keep the killing moves to a minimum, huh?"

Althea flushed, and she frowned, "Sorry. It won't happen again."

We readied again on the ground after a reset. This time, I shot forward, reaching beside her. A pair of wings ripped out of Althea's back. The dark membranes mirrored BloodHollow's bats, and she darted out of my grasp. As she flapped her wings, her clothes tore, her bones creaked, and her back ruptured. She grimaced, a fresh coat of blood covering each wing.

In the air, those new appendages extended out several times longer than her body. Althea landed on a tree branch, smirking down at me, "Heh...Pretty cool, right?"

I smiled back, "I suppose."

Augmentation mana flooded my legs, and I stomped my heels into the dirt. A slight shockwave rippled through the clay surface. I shot up from a patch of dented dirt, crags of soil uplifted around me. Transforming yet again, Althea expanded long, black claws from her feet. They mimicked the crimson bears in BloodHollow.

Althea gripped into my raised arms with those talons. Her eyes watered out as the claws shoved her toes aside. Despite her pain, those claws pierced through my metal skin, something the bears could never do. In response, I wielded my armor, shifting spines up and out of my shoulders. Denser than the claws, my spikes stabbed through Althea's talons. She howled out before reaching up her hand.

Her face wrinkled as she cut her talons off. I fell down, the dark claws puncturing several inches into my shoulders and arms. Thumping onto the ground, the dirt caved in under me, making the fall less backbreaking. Pulling myself up, I took a deep breath, my lungs emptied. My armor grasped around the talons in me, soaking them into the steel.

I shivered at it, and Althea let out a few unsteady breaths. I put my hands on my hips, "You sure you want to continue? We don't have to."

Althea's feet returned to normal, several holes puncturing her slick, black boots. She let out a breath, "Woah...It's ok, and I'm fine. It's just really, really painful."

I raised a brow, "Why do it then?"

She slapped her cheeks a few times, "Because I'll have to fight like this in the future. It's best to just get used to it now. Otherwise, I'll be wasting a lot of my abilities." She grimaced, "Even if it hurts, like, so bad."

A bit of respect spawned in my chest, "Man, that's a good mindset. I'll see if I can't help you out then...Ready for another round?"

She stayed balanced on the thin tree branch with ease, "Sure."

I picked up a nearby rock, flipping it over my head. I caught it before hurling it at Althea's branch. It snapped into fragments, but Althea leaped from tree to tree. She fired at me while I kept getting rid of her roosts with rocks. After a while, Althea timed her firing in tandem with my tosses. That let a few of her spears land, each of them impaling right through me.

Knowing this wouldn't work in my favor, I used my trump card. Oppression expanded from me, smothering all life. It killed grass, nearby birds, and even the trees. With better control of the aura, I whipped it at Althea's current roost. The branch rotted and collapsed under her heft. Althea tumbled in the air before reorienting herself. Before she dove away, I heaved another rock into one of her wings.

It snapped, blood leaking from the fragile limb. Althea thudded into the dirt, and I charged at her. I deactivated Oppression, and I jumped at her with my fists raised. She rolled sideways, my hands crunching into dirt and roots. Althea leaped backwards and murmured,

"Geez. That would've hurt."

I scoffed, "I can't hold back too much."

She narrowed her eyes, her cannon molding back into her body. Flesh and sinews popped before she expanded long, white claws from her fingertips. She brandished them out with her arms wide. I stepped forward, confident in my close combat. Althea whipped her claws at me. I pulled a leg up, kneeing her hand into the air. The impact threw her off balance while I pulled leg down. As my foot hit the ground, I bounced myself up into the air.

As Althea got her footing, I lifted my legs against my chest. Right in front of her, she raised her arms, and my heels pressed right against her. Being heavier than her, I pressed her straight into the ground. My feet landed onto her chest, holding her down. I gave her a grin from above,

"Got yah."

She slid right into the ground, and I gawked at her descent. I turned in different directions while she rumbled in the ground below. A spine of bone launched from behind, gouging into my back. Another spine landed into my stomach. From all angles, she fired at me with bone picks, the damage mounting. Before she gained too much ground, I sprinted towards a tree.

I ran up its side before leaping into the air. With a momentous slam, I crushed my heels into the ground, sending out a shockwave. The sound of claws tearing the soil ceased before I formed my hands into dull, thickened plates. With those panels, I dug into the ground. Finding something, I jerked the thing out from a tunnel below.

I held a silver eel, thousands of tiny claws coursing across its elongated body. My eyes widened at the abomination, and it whipped itself at me. Unbelievably strong, the eel sliced my helmet. It tore through and sliced a gash across my forehead. It snapped its body at me again, but I ducked down. I grabbed it with both hands, and the thing writhed in my grasp.

I turned it in my hands like a whip before slamming the monster into the ground. After several slams later, The bottom half of her body detached like a lizard's tail. Althea reformed, her clothes tattered. Her eyes shifted color, her chest heaving for breath. When she exhaled, she let out an inhuman wail. I frowned. She lost control again.

Staring down, I peered in horror as her leftover piece of tail opened a toothy maw. The eel fragment stabbed into my armor, and it shoved itself under my skin. I reached out at it in terror, trying to pull it out. Like a blot of animated pain, it crawled through my arm. Before it reached my chest, my armor snapped out with wires of metal. They pierced the fragment of Althea, mincing and eating it in seconds.

I let out a breath, my hands shaking as I gawked at the sight. I turned back up, raising my hands, "Althea. You need to calm down."

She glowered at me. Her stomach bulged out as she darted forward. The lump traveled up into her throat then out of her mouth. She vomited the green acid straight onto me. This time, I molded my armor into a smooth, solid shell. The acid poured over the plate before I shoved my arms out. Acid sprayed in all directions. Some smothered Althea, leaving her howling out in agony.

Her deformed voice radiated across the landscape.

While watching, mana swelled inside my chest. The fiery aura and arcs of lightning flashed out of my skin as Althea generated a spear of bone and chunked it at me. I clapped my arms together. I grasped the lance, gripping with all my strength. My feet skidded back as I caught the spear in my hands. The dust settled as I stared at the harpoon, riveted so that it looked like a narwhal's tusk.

Althea threw another spear, and I diverted it. Spinning in a circle, I lobbed the spear in my other hand at her. The spear dug straight into Althea's arm, ripping through her flesh like tissue paper. The harpoon pinned Althea's engorged arm against a tree, and I darted towards her. She lashed out with a hand, but I ducked under the wild swing.

I kicked up, stomping my foot onto her chest. My foot fell through her sternum, and I gawked in horror, thinking I killed her despite the soft impact. The inside of her ribcage showed itself, and her ribs turned into two sets of teeth. They clamped down onto my foot. They stabbed into my armor before her body tried pouring into mine. I gritted my teeth before growing my armor from my foot like a set of spikes.

They stabbed through her chest and ribs, but her ribcage of teeth kept clamping down before slicing through my foot. I fell onto my left side before she writhed on top of me. From inside her sternum, intestines poured out. They crawled into my helmet, digging under my eyelids and into my nose. In that moment, no fear or terror or pain engulfed me.

I only hungered.

My armor pierced her at all angles. Wires dug into her body and sapped her strength. Oppression's aura smothered her, and she pulled back. My armor's helmet opened a toothy maw, latching onto her. It bit and tore. Chunks fell from her as Althea's monstrous form lunged back. Like a bug being thrown in fire, her tentacles withered and wilted as she scrambled away from me. I walked over and reared my foot back, ready to kick her head to mush.

I smiled as the thought came over me.

Before I kicked, awareness rushed over me. Althea's monstrous form trembled in my vision. She shook in pain, no longer a threat. I snapped myself out of whatever took a hold of me, and I let my foot down. I deactivated Oppression before letting out a sigh. Althea returned to normal, and she looked up at me. Tears littered her eyes, and blood oozed from her mouth. She covered her face, and she whimpered,

"I'm so sorry...I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to do...Whatever that was."

I closed my eyes, remembering the moments in the forest where Althea stayed with me. She helped me then, so I forgave her now.

"It's nothing."

She blinked out tears, "I just...I wanted to win. And I was close before...And then I lost it and...Gah, I'm a freak."

My armor trembled over me, hungry for more of her blood. I smiled, "Hah. You and I both."

She peered up at me, stunned at my apathy. She blinked for a second, "You're...You're not mad at me?"

I stared at my hands, having an out of body moment. I leaned back from them, "Huh...No I'm not. I'm fine. I feel good, actually...Great even."

She peered up, "So...We're still friends?"

I let my hands flop on my sides, "Absolutely. Relax."

She looked away, unable to meet my gaze. She murmured, "But that was... That wasn't ok."

I frowned, "I get to decide if I'm angry over it, and I'm not. If you're worried about this kind of thing happening again though, we should fight with Torix as a referee. He can pull you back from the brink, so it won't ever reach that point again."

I grabbed one of my hands with the other one, "But yeah, I'm fine. That didn't affect me that much, surprisingly."

She shook for a second, remembering something. Althea gazed up, "What was that skill you used?"

"You mean Oppression?"

She flinched, "It was like my entire body was thrown into a vat of molten acid. I couldn't even think it was so bad. It actually snapped me out of my, uhm, transformation."

I crossed my arms, "That could be useful in the future." I turned to the abandoned quarry, "You want to head back? Torix told me not to use Oppression, and you need some more clothes."

Althea leaned back against the tree, her inviting figure more displayed than she'd like. With outstanding grace, she reached around the tree, grabbed it, and pulled herself behind it. Landing upright, she stood behind the trunk. She murmured, "Can you, uhm, go first... Please?"

I turned, "I'll get Torix to get you some new clothes, preferably some that won't tear so easily. The robes aren't cutting it anymore."

After jogging towards the quarry, I found Torix and Kessiah doing their thing. Kessiah covered herself in the white orb of energy, and Torix kept his fire eyes centered on his ritual, running some calculations. I reached up a hand to the lich, "Yo, Torix, I used my aura earlier. I remember you mentioning that it could give my location away, so I figured I'd let you know about it."

Without turning from his work, Torix's voice sounded into my ears as if he were right beside me, "Send me the location, and I'll have one of my undead sorcerers replace the life there with origin magic."

I looked at my minimap, putting it in front of my vision with a thought. I enlarged it, and I placed a fingertip over our sparring location. The coordinates popped up where we fought. Wondering how to copy paste the info, a message with that data automatically sent to Torix. I guffawed, "Man... This messaging system is so intuitive."

Torix's voice resonated, "You should try using an obelisk. It allows for full customization of your system layout. My own is highly personalized."

My eyes widened, "What's an obelisk?"

Torix sounded out, "It's a tool used to interact with Schema's interface. Kessiah's over there playing games or wasting time on hers."

I peered at the white, hovering orb. I raised a brow, "It's kind of like a smartphone."

Torix murmured, "What is a smartphone?"

I blinked, "Think of...Like, it's a device that lets you talk to other people, but it also lets you do other stuff."

Torix scoffed, "Well that much is obvious. Why would you have a device that only handles a single task? It would be a waste of valuable space."

I shrugged, "It was like that in our society because of limited technology."

Torix's tone lightened, "Oh...It must be similar to how a burgeoning species starts their own fires physically instead of via magic?"

"Uh...Yeah. Sure."

"Was there anything else you needed? I really must put my full attention into this."

"Althea needs new clothes. Her transformations are tearing them apart."

A portal spawned over me, and robes fell out. Torix mumbled, "She simply can't contain herself, can she? That's the fiftieth pair this week."

My eyes widened. Althea practiced quite a bit, but I still beat her despite the level difference. My armor and Oppression gave me that edge. If she filled in some of her weaknesses, she'd take me out with ease. Those thoughts drifted in my mind as I took the robes back to Althea. I got back to the tree she hid behind. I called out, "Hey, I'm tossing the robes to your left."

I tossed them, and her hand wove through the air, snatching all the garments. I walked away, letting her change. In her new clothes, she walked up while putting her hair behind her ear,

"I...I can't believe you pushed me so hard in that fight. Heh, you actually won."

We walked back to the quarry, and I avoided the underbrush while saying, "I think my aura's the main reason. It's brutally effective against you...Have you invested into constitution yet?"

She peered off, "No, not yet. I put a point into the attribute for the damage resistance, but I found it makes me all thick and clunky."

I pushed a branch aside, "Being thick isn't always a problem." I gave her a mockingly promiscuous look and raised my eyebrows a couple times. She laughed before I smiled in a different direction, "Either way, the mass shouldn't be a problem for you. You're strong enough to move yourself even with some extra weight."

She hopped and skipped over each branch, her movements light like magic, "I guess I could, but the damage resistance makes my transformations hurt more. It's like instead of morphing water, I'm morphing ice. It makes the whole process, like, way harder to pull off."

She did a round off, cartwheeling over a bush before bouncing up over a branch with a backflip. I frowned at her, "Now you're just showing off."

She landed on her feet, smiling at me, "Maybe a little."

We reached the quarry, taking a break to eat. Althea actually ate a few cans of human food, using a heated gemstone and pan from Torix. I drenched my face in Torix's desert rations, the food sinking in through my skin in seconds. I trained my mana while Althea sat nearby. She moved the pan, warming up some beef stew while hugging her knees to her chest. She talked to me,

"You know...I tried using my powers this time. It's like...If I didn't fight using my strengths, I'd lose every time." Her tone dampened, "Even though I still lost, and I become a *thing* when I fight."

I stared down at a tiny orange plume coming from my finger, "It's a part of who you are, like my armor. You should accept it."

From under the cover of her knees, she peered at me, "Maybe I could do that a little...It's tough though."

I raised an arm, flexing it, "Not as tough as me. Did you see me catch that spear?"

Her eyes brightened, "Yeah. That was cool...Your aura's the hardest part to deal with though....I-I think I could beat you if you didn't have it."

I made two tiny plumes of augmentation mana from my fingers, "You just need more constitution to fight against me. If you had maxed out damage resistance, I'd lose. Hell, I

can't believe you wormed all my tricks out of me like that with a suboptimal build. My mythical skill was also supposed to dominate once we got close."

She rocked back and forth, "My uh...Powers makes me really good at overwhelming my opponent once they get close. If we were standing, I think you'd have gotten me. Once I get someone on the ground, I can just block their breathing in a, er, a bunch of different ways, actually."

My skin crawled, "What skill lets you do that?"

She put her chin onto her knees, "So, it's not really a skill. It's an ability like that aura of yours. IT's called Flesh of Eldritch. It lets me use my mana to manipulate my body. The mana also impacts my mind, and it makes me less stable...You've seen the side effects of that plenty of times. I *hate* it."

I nodded, and a natural silence passed over us. It kind of surprised me how little strain that quiet carried, most long lapses in talking both awkward and uncomfortable for me. With Althea though, it was fine. I relaxed, pouring mana into my hands. Seconds later, I hopped up onto my feet,

"What's got you so chatty all of the sudden?"

She blew on her stew, cooling it down, "I don't know...I just feel like I have a place here now...It's nice."

I tried envisioning an opponent and fighting them. I punched as I talked, "I get that. I suppose the way you got into our group was rocky at best. To be fair, my introduction wasn't the smoothest either."

Althea shrugged her shoulders, "Yeah...For me, I felt like I was going to die for the longest time. Torix is scary, maybe even scarier than the doctors I worked with. Once I got to know him though, he's a big old softie."

Torix's voice radiated around us both, "I heard that. Don't force me to prove your accusations false, young lady."

She put her head behind her knees again, "Sorry Torix."

The lich's tone lightened, "Then I'll let this matter slide. Let me know if you need other rations."

She smiled up, "Will do Torix."

It beamed at the interaction, knowing Torix was indeed a big softie. At least to Althea and me. Another silence passed over us. It coursed like a cool breeze. Breaking the quiet, Althea lifted a hand, morphing it. The flesh snapped and cracked while she

wincing, "But you know, if I think about it, those doctors did *this* to me. I don't think anything Torix has done reached this level of...Of awfulness, I suppose. Maybe Moloth."

I frowned, "Is that what lets you pierce my armor or cut through stone?"

She shook her head, "No. That's my other passive skill. It's called Etorhma's Tears. I don't understand that one. Like...At all. It's really ambiguous and eerie." She raised her hands, waving her fingers, "You know, one of those *spooky* descriptions."

I sighed, letting my hands down, "That's just like my armor. It's been acting up since I got caught in the dimensional slice. It's become more active since. I can't tell if it's a good or a bad thing yet."

Her eyes widened, "Wait...Is that armor why you're not mad at me?"

I nodded. Althea mouthed, "Oh...Then it's got to be a good thing."

I scoffed, "That's all it takes for evil eldritch carapaces to get a good wrap these days?"

She grinned, "In my book, yeah. Why not?"

I smiled at the thought of Althea raising a bunch of eldritch to sooth other people. I could imagine her doing something like that. We sat there for a second before Althea stared at her hands, "Do you ever feel like you're not who you say you are sometimes?"

I peered up, "Huh. If I give it some thought, I'd say no one is who they say they are. You are who you are, and your thoughts about it are just interpretations." I raised my brow, "Damn...I'm becoming like Torix. This is bad."

She rolled her eyes with a mischievous smile, "Oh, he'd be proud."

I raised a hand, whisper-shouting at her, "Don't talk too loud, he'll get mad again."

We laughed before Althea peered at the ground. She frowned, "I know we're different than what we think about ourselves. What I meant is do you feel like we shouldn't be here? Like we shouldn't exist? I know sometimes...Sometimes I do."

I peered up at the sky, thinking about it. I turned back to her, "Honestly? I don't think those questions have answers."

She took a bite of her stew using a pseudo spoon from Torix. The apparatus used a tiny amount of mana, letting someone wield a telekinetic array to pick up food. The artifact let Althea talk between bites, "Really? It sounds more like...You might not want answers...To those questions."

I willed mana into my legs, "Huh...Maybe, but you know what I think?"

She raised a brow, "I did just ask."

"I think we're not here for any reason. We get to decide why we exist and what for. You can make that choice or decide to coast along. I know my dad, he lost his reason to live forever ago. His body moved like a puppet attached to strings, dark ones, ones I despised. Hell, even he hated them at times."

I peered at my hands, "I never want to be like that...Like a ghost still breathing. I want to live out a good life, one worth remembering."

She glanced away, "Yeah." She turned back to me, "You sound like Leda."

I raised an eyebrow, "Who's Leda?"

"One of the other experiments. I got to talk to people when I was young, and Leda was my best friend out of the bunch. She always told me to stop crying when I was younger. Stand up. Be strong. She was like lightning in a bottle, the whole room changing when she walked in." Althea's eyes went distant,

"One time, she went away with a doctor and never came back. She wasn't special like I was." Althea closed her eyes, her voice wistful, "I already processed that awful, horrible day. I learned I'd be the last to go because everyone, and I mean everyone, was going to wither away and die...Sooner or later."

Althea peered at her finished meal, "I really, really hope I don't end up like that."

She stayed there, daydreaming about nightmares from long ago. Interrupting her trance, I raised my hands, "So, I've got a revolutionary tactic for stopping death. Want to hear it?"

She gazed up, "Sure."

"I call it not dying. I know, I know. I patented it myself."

She smirked up at me, "Heh. Tell me how that strategy works out for you."

I walked off while raising a hand, "So far so good, but I'll keep you up to date. Let me know if you find some answers to those questions you mentioned earlier too. I wouldn't mind hearing whatever it is you come up with."

Althea grumbled, "What are you about to do?"

I murmured, "I'm about to learn some magic."

Walking off from one of many lunch conversations I had with Althea, I searched for Kessiah. She left her obelisk's field, and I set myself on learning some more

augmentation magic. Althea closed the gap between us by controlling her transformations and her raw level count. A Boundless Storm, Oppression, and augmentation magic kept me in the lead. For now. If I faced off against an Althea with full damage resistance, I'd probably lose.

That pressure excited me. I bounced off my heels as I jogged over towards Kessiah. Having a rival was fun and challenging and new. It gave me a nice benchmark for checking my progress, and I enjoyed chatting about skills and tactics with Althea. With that spurring me on, I looked around for Kessiah in the quarry. She disappeared. I looked throughout the nearby forest, finding Kessiah carving into a block of wood with her finger.

The intricate carving mirrored a sleeping child, both delicate and detailed. Kessiah hummed a lullaby as she worked, her finger hard enough to press and mold the wood through her touch alone. She had a warm, almost motherly expression on her face before my foot hit a branch around a hundred yards away.

Kessiah's eyes locked with mine, her eyes soaked in wrath. She stood, sculpture in hand, and she sprinted over. A second passed and she appeared in front of me. She hissed, "How long have you been there?"

I raised my hand, "I don't know. A few minutes, maybe?"

Her shoulders slackened before she dropped the carving beside her feet. With a quick stomp, she crushed the wood, "So what is it that you want, little guy?"

I raised a hand, ushering forth orange energy, "Ah, I was wondering if you knew anything about augmentation? I was trying to learn it and struggling during the process. Torix is busy, so I figured I'd ask you."

Her arms dropped to her side as she looked around, "Hah. That's a terrible excuse. Are you sure you're not spying for Torix or something?"

I shook my head, "I'm not. I'll keep the humming to myself."

She walked over, placed her hand onto my shoulder. Kessiah bent the shoulder plate between her fingers as she seethed, "Oh...You'd better."

I saluted at her, "I won't tell him anything...But that doesn't mean he doesn't know. You know how Torix is."

She eyed me before pushing me away, "Good point." She leaned her weight onto her hip, "Ok, I'm bored, so I *suppose* I can help you out. What exactly are you struggling with?"

I raised a hand, augmentation siphoning into my palm, "Pretty much everything. When I use augmentation, the stream of it just keeps growing until it eats through my hp bar."

She nodded, "Sounds like a classic case of battle fervor."

"Battle fervor?"

She leaned onto a tree at her side, "It's when someone likes fighting, so they get more and more into it. As their spirit rises, so does their consumption of mana. I could definitely see you having that problem."

I stared at my hand, "Any tips on how to fix it?"

She glanced up, tapping her chin with a single finger, "I mean, there aren't any easy ways of handling it. You have to be able to relax while you fight, and that can only come with a lot of practice. And I mean a lot."

I lowered my gaze and frowned, "Experience, huh?" I lifted my head and spread my arms, "What if I used dominion magic to taper down the augmentation?"

She waved the idea off, "You're an augments, not a dominion user. Just the fact you're asking for augmentation help means you can't use the other styles. Not effectively, at least. Your affinity is set in stone, so get used to it."

I shrugged, "I have a dual affinity."

Kessiah's head whipped back and she blinked a few times, "Really? You of all people? I took you for a purist augments type. Color me surprised...And your other type is dominion?"

"Yeah. It surprised me too."

Kessiah ran her fingers through her white hair, peering down at me, "That's good. Really good. Here I thought you'd be more primitive in how you fought. You know, headbutting stuff to death. I thought it'd go like this, 'Me Daniel. Me fight with fists. Me so strong.' Hah. Maybe you're more of a magician like Alfred or Torix."

I crossed my arms, "Me? Like Alfred?"

Kessiah leaned close while pulling me beside her. She whispered while cupping her hand against my ear, "Don't tell him I told you this, but Alfred had far more oomph in his magic than Torix does. His son was like you, someone with a dual affinity. It was origin and dominion."

Kessiah patted my back, knocking me forward, "Good luck living up to that guy. That's enough juicy gossip though." She opened her hands so that they faced each other.

Orange mana spilled out, "Like you, I was always more of an augmentser myself. If you could learn dominion magic as well, that would allow you to do a lot of crazy stuff with your magic. The thing is, most melee dominion builds are based on telekinesis. You know, floating rocks or pulling people apart."

Kessiah raised a hand, narrowing her eyes. The orange mana darkened but remained distinctly orange, "There's quite a few side branches of dominion that focus on taming summoned monsters like what Torix does. With that mana type, you can turn, flip, and dip any kind of energy you want. Fire, ice, *radiation*? That's in your grasp, hon. But, you can't *make* the energy. You can only manipulate what's already there."

She sighed, "Gravity is in that long list of manipulatable energy sources, along with mind magic...Persuasive magic, controlling magic. To be frank with you, dominion is just about as varied as it gets. For an augmentser though, telekinesis is your bread and butter as far as the dark ooze is concerned."

She strained, veins creeping up her neck. Darkness poured into the spiraling ball of orange. The shadowy strands circled in her palms, like she was holding a tiny, dark jupiter. She strained out, "This ball right here...It would let me help augment myself...I may even move the augmented limbs with my mind."

Kessiah sighed as the ball dissipated, "But yeah, that's just theory. The idea is, instead of moving a rock over there, you move your body to help you hit harder. I've tried doing it for a while, but I just don't have any talent for dominion magic. I was much more of an augmentser with a little splash of origin."

She tapped my forehead and she smiled, "You'd be the perfect guinea pig for trying out all kinds of ideas I've had."

I pushed her hand off me, "Huh. It sounds like those theories are going to stay theories."

She wore a teasing grin, "Oh, don't worry. I treat my toys very well."

I rolled my eyes, "Come on. Keep it classy. Let's get back to the magic."

She frowned, "You're still no fun."

"And you're still distracting."

"Only when I wanna be." Kessiah put a palm onto a nearby tree, "So I guess the easiest way for you to learn any more about all this would be through the language of magic. That, and I'm not going to stand here all day talking to you about elementary magic. If you could write and make your own formulas, you could create rituals that make controlling augmentation a lot easier. I think that would be the quickest way to progress."

I grimaced, “That...That sounds hard.”

She pushed herself off her tree, and she wrote into it with a fingertip. Strips of wood fell at her feet. After a few minutes of this, a series of fifty characters exposed themselves on the wood, the symbols more complex than letters. She pushed her hand into the tree, the wood splintering as she scooped out the wood with her bare hands. A quick rip and pop later, she offered the wooden slab to me, sap still dripping.

She frowned at the sap, “This is the alphabet for magic’s language. It’s Schema’s public diction, and it’s a lot, lot more complex than the simple stuff you use in your own backwater, primitive writing.”

I took the wood, “What’s with hurling all the insults about my planet, eh? Earth isn’t so bad, and it’s not overrun by eldritch like a lot of places.”

She shook her head, “When, well, *if* you get to see other planets some day, you’ll understand what I mean. Besides that, there’s no guarantee that Earth won’t be overrun.”

I narrowed my eyes, “We’ll see about that.”

She smirked down at me, but I let it go. I glanced down at the hunk of wood. Each character on it carried some kind of radiating emotion, the symbol surging out with feeling and sensation alike. With fifty symbols in total, some of the etchings took on nuanced sentiments. Primal emotions, like sadness or anger, carried the simplest symbols. More complex emotions, like disdain, contempt, or nostalgia, owned complex characters.

This language took it a step further, however. A few carried the sensation of a color. One symbol reminded me of the color blue, both calm and soothing. Another reminded me of red, being full of wrath and passion. Eying it all closely, it reminded me of art, each image coming together in my hands.

Kessiah picked at her ear, “Boring, isn’t it?”

I gawked at the etchings, “What? No. This is...It’s like I’m holding a symphony in my hands.”

Kessiah stuck her tongue out in disgust, “By Baldowah, are you serious? Gah, lame.”

She mentioned an Old One like it was referencing a religion. Getting used to ignoring her jabs, I spotted a notification in the corner of my vision.

Skill Unlocked! Comprehension of Oblivion | Level 1 – You’ve stepped into the unknown. Now you must learn to see in the dark. +1% to comprehension of oblivion.

Returning to the markings, I lost myself staring at the alphabet. The sigils carried great power, though they lacked the same primal edge that Baldag-Ruhl's runes harbored within them. These markings gave out the same waves of emotion that a favorite song evoked. The symbols captured memories, some of them nostalgic like a bittersweet fog. The etchings put feelings into words in ways that normal languages couldn't.

And in that, they defied reason.

The essence of the designs could tell stories that words never could. Someone could show color to the blind or demonstrate sound to the deaf. A master of the markings may even transmit the wonder of a mountain's view or the majesty of a symphony. Getting lost in that latent potential, I ogled the etchings for a few minutes. They took my breath away.

Kessiah snapped me out of my daydreaming,

"What's the big deal? You've seen them before, haven't you?"

I squinted at them, "I haven't."

Kessiah raised her brow, "Oh really? Then what was in BloodHollow?"

I blinked, "Something else. This is like a lake of crystal clear water. The Runes in BloodHollow were like a deep, dark ocean. This makes sense, but I couldn't grasp whatever Baldag-Ruhl was doing. It seemed...Unknowable."

Kessiah scratched the side of her head, "So...I didn't think you'd be the type of person to marvel at this kind of thing."

I tore my eyes from the runes, "To be honest, me neither."

Kessiah placed a hand over one of the characters and laid it onto the center of my chest. With a burst of colorless mana, a vision of an egg hatching came through me. That passed, and other images of a mother holding a newborn baby popped into my vision. The mom and the child owned violet red skin, like Kessiah.

The image faded. Kessiah smirked, "From my experience, words can't transmit the meaning of this language like mana can. That's what Schema made it for anyways. I'll give you a transmission of each character, and that should give you a general feel for each."

She took another character, pulsed it through me. Lightning burst. A spark of fire ignited. In the distance, the explosion of a far off supernova roared into space. I marveled, overwhelmed in awe. The feeling passed, and I nodded, "Woah...give me a minute. That hit me harder than I expected. If I'm honest, both of them did."

She snickered at me, “Hah. It’s like a shot of Sorekai cactus juice, isn’t it?”

I shook the sensations from my head, “Does that juice show you memories?”

Kessiah pursed her lips, “What do you mean memories? You’re hallucinating?”

I shrugged, “Yeah, that’s happening with each image. The mana comes across as a series of flashbacks or something. It’s all very vivid and intense.”

She grinned, “Ohhh, really? That’s a bit, hm, unusual. Well, you’re going to have fun with a few of these then.”

If a picture was worth a thousand words, these memories were worth millions. Each character slammed into me like reading a book in an instant. One crept through the back of my mind like a deep dread. It inched forth like knowing the date of my death. Another echoed in like the vigor before a fight or the anticipation before a test. One of the last symbols roared out in a thunderous rage, the savagery irreconcilable and bloody. It left me blinded, everything red and gory.

Each glyph boomed and crashed with explosive emotions. I stood on wobbling knees by the time we finished the entire fifty character set. I even vomited water when shown the character for disgust. With a fresh sheen of sweat on my forehead, I wheezed,

“Ugh...I hope writing it’s easier...What a ridiculous learning process.”

Kessiah crossed her arms, “Most people don’t learn it like that. They learn a character’s meaning then the standard formulas each. After a few years of writing with the language, they gain a firm understanding of it and can start forming their own spells. At that point, the emotional kick is set up to spur the mind into action. It evokes a lot of will in someone.”

She squinted at me, “It’s a sharp but necessary part of the process...But uh, usually it’s not this intensive. Not by a longshot. Psh, you look like someone stole your soul.”

After taking a few breaths, I walked over towards a tree and sat down. As I heaved, Kessiah waved a hand, “Ok, cool. I’ll, uh...See you around.”

I waved with weakness, “Yeah...For sure.”

I let myself get my bearings before searching for the feeling of the first character. Sharpening my fingertip, I used it like a chisel. I couldn’t remember the rune’s form, so my scribbling came out all wrong. When I looked at the sigil and tried recreating it, it came out all wrong. Kessiah explained this was the way to learn it, but something nagged in the back of my mind. Compared to Baldag’s runes, these were shallow imitations of something far more real and far more powerful.

Despite my unease, a notification pinged.

Skill Unlocked! Carving Into Oblivion | Level 1 – You’ve gained the means into another world. +1% effectiveness of runic carvings and their longevity.

With the skill learned, I kept on trying to write the sigils, even moving towards full words after a few hours. I memorized the lettering fast, my attributes helping me out some. In time, I left several trees covered in the markings. My head pulsed with a headache, and my mind dulled out with exhaustion. Having a plan of what to do next, I extended a sharp blade from my armor.

I sliced several plates of wood from the trunks of trees for later practice. I found a shelf of mud surrounded by bushes and trees. There I settled myself in for a long night. I gave myself a few slaps to focus my attention, and I set to work. Hunched over that tree, hours passed while I carved the runes out, learning the language.

My eyes glazed over after a while, my attention lapsing. I gave myself mental slaps to get my brain going when I caught myself daydreaming. I scheduled breaks every now and then, letting my mind rest. Eventually, my finger ached after several hours, but merely slowed me down. It never stopped me.

With a little stream of augmentation mana from my right hand, I lit my workplace while I carved with my left hand. The various words took firmer shape. The symbols cleared up. Of course, they lacked the precision of Kessiah’s characters, but I accumulated definite progress. As the morning sun rose, I stacked fifty or so plates of wood around me.

Peering around, gashes and scars lingered across the treescape. The poor trunks served as my chosen material, the cutting of the wood serving as a solid break. During those lulls, I considered what each character needed to improve. Before writing sentences, I wanted a complete and utter understanding of the sigils before I tried making my own formulas.

Like a good jab, my knowledge about the basic characters would serve as a strong foundation for my future. In no context would understanding these letters hurt my progress. It was like swimming across the ocean. I needed to know where to go and how, but first, I had to learn to swim. So swim I did until the next day.

By the time I headed back to camp, a midday sunshine poured over everyone. Althea reformed her hand into a variety of nasty looking blades while Torix carved in the background. He continued running calculations and making more marble for his work. His progress and diligence inspired me, the guy prolific as people come. Kessiah lazed about in her obelisk, either asleep or doing little worthy of note.

That’s how she chose to spend her time, so I tried not to judge.

Hopping down into the quarry's depths, I passed large patches of the walls covered in the ensuing characters. Having written some myself, the sheer difficulty of Torix's incantation floored me. The guy's glyphs surpassed Kessiah's ten times over, the lich's decisive and precise movements yielding better results. Marveling at them, Torix's precision illustrated a night and day difference.

Kessiah didn't write so much as sketch the language out. On the other hand, Torix stuck with Schema's diagram like a drowning person did with the air in their lungs. I watched Torix carve for a few minutes, spellbound now that I understood his mastery. In that instant, an idea popped into my head. I sprinted back towards my spot in the forest.

I resolved myself to compose these letters as Torix did: perfectly. I sat in place, not leaving it for several days, outside of lunches with Althea or Torix. I woke up, carved into the sheets of wood, then went to sleep. Every now and again, Kessiah stopped by to check on me. She stopped coming after a while, always finding me hunched over a plate working with a frenzy in my eyes.

Boring Kessiah like a broken record would, I hammered away at the monotonous task. I lingered over the duty for so long that everything else devolved into a misty haze. I forgot to eat or sleep for days at a time during this process. My obsession engulfed me for a while, but it yielded sweet, delicious fruit.

My engravings turned intense. They evolved from the scribbles of a child to the prose of a professional. I fell deeper, further absorbed in the process. I walked into trees and lost track of where I physically was. From my normal self, I shifted into an airy professor at some college. Something about the runes just sucked me in, and I relished that sensation. Having a purpose and a drive gave me meaning. It silenced my doubts. It left me alive and in the moment.

What more could I ask for?

During that haze, I took a few breaks. I wandered off into some of the nearby dungeons. The low-level monsters took no effort to clear out, but the dungeons still cleared my mind. The fights acted as hard, mental resets. Unnerving signs of Yawm's presence leaked out as I ventured. Some kind of forest formed in the middle of Springfield, monsters shambling in the yellowed trees. I got close at times but kept my distance.

I wanted nothing less than to be captured by a guy called Yawm of Flesh. Anything he wanted sounded pretty bad to me. His scouts no longer searched the area with the same fervor as before, the minions clashing with Torix's forces. Our lich led his soldiers to victory each and every time, the necromancer skilled at tactics and battle. According to Torix, the Force of Iron wasn't so lucky.

The generic, Schema led guild lacked sound leadership, not that I knew much of anything about them. I still hadn't seen them yet. They set up shop in the industrial district of Springfield, far from our camp. Torix warned Althea and I against nearing the

Force of Iron yet, as their technology gave them the ability to kill me. They'd do it too; it was a part of being an unknown.

At some point, I'd meet that guild, but postponing that date some did me quite a few favors. In fact, time marched forward with a steady thump, and it unnerved me. I was a small, insignificant ant in the grand scheme of Schema's universe. To get out from under other's heels, I would need to push myself and hard.

A little bribery never hurt anything either. Trying to get on the Force of Iron's good side, I gifted them a dungeon core. I had Torix edit a message and write it with some mana infused ink. He sent a summoned eagle towards the Force of Iron's base of operations. The mana Torix used radiated augmentation, the lich mirroring my own mana signature. A skilled professional could tell the difference but not anyone in this new branch.

The entire reason for the energy came from a desire for sincerity; the mana acted as a calling card for it. After establishing a relationship with the Force of Iron, I kept my head down and focused on leveling my various skills for the runes. The skill names carried a lot of awe and ambience, but for the life of me, I couldn't tell what they really meant. Carving Into Oblivion? Comprehension of Oblivion? I lacked any understanding of why Schema named them that.

Oddly enough, neither did Torix. It was one mystery among many.

Enigma or not, I directed all my efforts into carving those sigils into hard wood then soft stone. At the two week mark, the plates turned to cast iron that Torix gave me. At three weeks, I hit a breakthrough, and my carving changed. When I wrote each character, I emboldened the sigils with my memories. I correlated those events to the emotions of each magical marking. If it was a rune of rage, I dwelled on my father. If it was a rune of sadness, I remembered my mother by her hospital bed.

Exhausting, biting, and personal, those memories washed over me in waves. They metamorphosed the runes, giving them a weight they otherwise lacked. With that technique in tow, I tried out my first working line of the language. I inscribed sigils about power and how it consumed and overwhelmed. The passage went on, casting the calm of a clear ocean and the silence of an empty field. At the end of the written letters, it told the tale of two perfect opposites, each incomplete without the other.

The runes flared in furious fire before diving into a deep cold, like a wild, frenzied animal calming at its master's touch. After all my weeks of practice, these few lines acted as the culmination of my efforts. Compared to my old school work, I'd never worked this hard on anything in my life, scholastically speaking.

Finishing the sheet, I lifted it up, inspecting it with a burst of pride and pop of joy. This was what living was all about. Excitement overriding reason, I channeled my mana through the runes. They glowed a blazing orange before a surge of power coursed through my muscles and bones. Arcs of sun shaded lightning streaked across my skin

as a dark fire ebbed inside my chest. The rush of power was palpable, a torrent, an unending might.

And in seconds, the wood burned away in my hands. It burst in a frenzy of flames before I gawked at the ashes in my palm, my jaw slack with surprise. The slab crumbled, the gray ash powdering in the gentle wind. That rush burned through a tenth of my health. I laughed at myself, enjoying the wicked onslaught's aftermath.

It was incredible.

And it needed work. I frowned before picking up an unused iron plate. After spending half an hour carving the sentence into the slab, I channeled the mana once more. Less vitality poured out, though the consumption of mana still exceeded my health regen. Even with the pacifying aura, the battle fervor overcame me, building until the ritual devastated my blood and bones. That happened despite the incantation's focus on controlling my energy output.

Worse still, the plate in my palms turned white hot in a few minutes. After half an hour, it deformed into a warped clump. After stomping out a few tufts of fire, I brainstormed for a solution. Steel might work better, but etching into it took forever. Torix mentioned his plate reserves were limited as well, the lich not having an unlimited supply. The economics of the situation played out against me in the end.

But my mind lingered on the surge of strength. It sifted, a seductive, tantalizing sense of possibility. That latent potential lingered at my fingertips, but circumstance stopped me from accessing it. I lacked the materials to make the most of my newfound skills, and I bristled at the thought of that. Frustration gave way to an epiphany as ideas flourished in my mind.

I lacked any material around me that might work for the runes, but I didn't lack that material in me. I stared down at my arm, the dull, dark gray metal sheening. I smiled at the substance, remembering how I always regenerated no matter how grievous the wound. I was about to see if that idea held up under scrutiny.

Lots of it.