

The New World

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I grasped one of the spiked prongs along my elbow and jerked. It stayed strut over my skin, the metal strong and dense. I peered up, wondering how harvesting this would work. After wracking my head, I channeled augmentation through my palm. I let the energy course and strip the skin away. In seconds, it bled through my health. As my fingernails loosened and the skin softened, so its connection to the armor over my limbs.

I peeled the armor off my hand, the bloody remnants beneath grotesque and molten. Using another burst of augmentation mana, I snapped off a strip of armor. The actual metal degraded little while the meat beneath it disintegrated. Using the same process, I broke another shard from my other arm and let myself regenerate. As expected, I recovered without any worries.

Taking my time, I carved an identical passage into the unclad armor. Thirty minutes of etching later, I channeled a bit of mana through the smoothed plate. Energy coursed into the rune with ease. Unlike with the metal or wood, this material stabilized under the mana's current. It kept rigid and stable, easily handling the energy of the mana stream. It also conducted actual augmentation better than the other kinds of matter before it.

This difference in rigidity aided the entire process, evolving the runes from a temporary bonus to a permanent upgrade. Channeling mana, I marveled at the potential of the plate. Without this sheet of my armor, casting augmentation mimicked standing on a surfboard in the middle of an ocean. With the panel in my palms, my casting was like a rock with indentations made for my feet.

Between those two places, a world of difference manifested.

And yet, issues uncovered from this new strategy. Holding a slab of this stuff while fighting limited me, and if I let it go, the incantation's effects spiralled out of control. Worse still, the drain on my mana ramped up in an explosive surge after the plate stripped from my hands. It kept the same potent effects but not the absurd efficiency. That made this strategy risky albeit potent. I considered a few ways of holding several plates on me, but one solution sprang out instead.

I mean, the metal covered me. It isn't like I *had* to tear it off.

Staring down at my arm, it regenerated, the dark material sheening in the forest. If the sigils embedded into the armor itself, I wouldn't lose the runes. Using an elongated finger, I scratched at the metal on me. It bent into shape with more ease than the torn shards. I marked a small portion of the runes into my right forearm using my finger-knife. The metals grinded against each other as I strained to slice through my skin despite the greater ease.

After another thirty minutes of engraving, a line of symbols laid out on my forearm. Peering at myself in the shade of trees, the incantations felt right to me. The sigils fell in place as if they were a part of me. With a very slight tug, I pulled some mana into the runes. The indentations filled with the energy, controlling the volatile flow.

When I poured mana into wood, it mirrored flowing water through a pipe of sand. Most of the energy poured out into the ether. The cast iron patched up some of those holes by comparison, but inefficiencies lingered anyway. This material on my arm experienced nearly no loss of energy. Even better, the mana molded and shifted without the same struggle as before. It was superior in every way.

I kept pouring more augmentation in, and it swelled into the cracks of my armor. It hissed and crackled. It sparked and popped. I lifted my arm, squeezing my fist.

This was it.

Vibrant, orange lightning streaked through my arm. I gripped my hand with enough strength to crush steel. My armor smiled at my own machinations, pleased with the development. With the glyphs filtering a stream of augmentation, I pulled more and more without my previous eruptions. Excited to test my results, I reared my fist back before slamming it into a nearby tree.

My hand crushed into the bark, lodging itself in the wood. As I pulled it out, splintering chunks fell onto the ground. I gawked at my own might, stunned by the runes working so well. I stumbled onto something effective and efficient without really meaning to. A notification in the corner of my eye explained why.

Skill Unlocked! Soul Forging | Level 1 – Many would change their behaviour and maybe even who they are. You temper yourself more deeply, changing the core of what you are and will be. +1% to precision of runic control. +1% to ease of runic creation. +1% to duration of enchantments on your soul.

Skill Unlocked! Soul Siphon | Level 1 – Some channel energy through their environment. Those who live without fear, they channel mana through their bodies. You live with madness in every breath. You channel mana through your soul. +1% to mana efficiency when channeling it through your soul.

The skills added an explanation for why the whole process smoothed over without any kinks. The names and descriptions of the skills left me chilled, however. They left

behind strange, odd implications. I carved into metal over my skin, not into the fabric of my soul. Peering down, I wondered if that was actually the case.

It didn't seem like it. I mean, the runes on my arm lacked any impact on my personality or thoughts. To the skill's point, a bit of channeling did embolden my flesh and sizzle my blood, producing a power palpable. Without any real context, I lacked the references for what magic was supposed to be like, however. This was my normal, and it had been since the system started.

And yet, the skills and their descriptions insinuated I dabbled in more than just basic augmentation magic. At the same time, getting augmentation to work any other way seemed...Arduous at best. Raising a brow at my arm, I coursed energy through it. I soaked the energy in. My thoughts remained clear and my mind unclouded.

If the runes provoked any lingering changes, I'd stop. At that point, nothing felt off, so I marched on. I didn't want to live in fear, and these runes helped put me ahead of my old self. I didn't want to look back, so I moved forward. Wielding the strength in my blows, I took a few swings. I stumbled about like a drunken sailor. Having my right arm so much stronger than my left threw me off.

After another half hour of carving, I owned two sets of runic glyphs glowing on each arm. As I clenched my fists, the air hummed with energy flowing between my hands. My engorged health pool and amplified regeneration allowed me to wield more energy than a normal mage of my level. That vitality pulsed in my palms and ran through my arms, an explosive potency at my fingertips.

Taking a moment, I tested out how each arm felt. When I used my normal fighting style, my arm's swings threw me off balance. The weight behind each blow ruined my previous training, so despite the sudden surge of power, I actually weakened in a real fight. After another hour of carving, I slotted more runes onto the sides of my thighs as well. My forearm sigils eased my etching from the surging strength they granted me.

With the runes finished, I stood up. When I stomped the ground, it caved. When I kicked a tree, wood splintered. The sheer rush of power intoxicated my reason, even though a pure burning scorched my limbs from all angles. That burning seeped into my chest as I kept testing my limits out. After building up my exhaustion, I cracked my neck and rested. Once restored, I tried some more punches and kicks.

It was fun, what can I say?

The extra strength in my legs helped balance my arms, but the sudden shift in strength still took a while to adjust to. After a few minutes of toying with various techniques and stances, I handled the power increase. Another two hours of trying, and I added some complex maneuvers using the extra strength. Whipping my body around trees, swinging on thick branches, and acrobatic leaps added to my fighting toolkit. Like Althea, I aimed to use them.

Even better than battling, my movement took a leap forward. For a long time, I lived in a shelled, metal body. It slowed me down, moving it like swimming through tar. The runes liberated me from my body's restraints, enabling a mobility I'd never known. While not quite as elegant or explosive as Althea, I gained a ramping kind of speed, a momentum in my movements. She was a speedboat while I was dreadnought, and that suited me just fine.

Wielding my speed with glee, I ran through the forest for a few minutes, enjoying the sudden change in acceleration and power. It was a rush. With A Boundless Storm, I could flip, twist, and move with fluid control. I jumped up, ducked under, and shifted around the trees like my own personal playground. I ended up spending several hours adjusting the runes and their placement while playing in the forest.

Just for that alone, those weeks of effort had been worth it. It gave purpose to my health regeneration when my health capped out too. Adding to the victory, the efficiency modifiers for each of the skills outdid most other common skills. If anything, Soul Forging and Soul Siphon mirrored unique skills in how much of an impact they left on me. Combining them with other abilities might make them even stronger.

I teemed with those excited thoughts as I took full advantage of my mana and toughened body. I realized a vast well of potential at that time. I lacked levels more than anything, and executing on my skills in sync could create more unique or mythic skills. Another strong point, those runic markings hid an underlying promise for all kinds of utilities. My metal skin could be stripped and used for all kinds of magic.

Brimming with excitement, I sprinted back towards the quarry, my stomps tearing bushes and smashing wildlife. Augmentation mana hummed into my surroundings, a low growl as I tore the forest. With my discovery and effort, I aimed to surprise everyone. Even after my harsh conversation with Michael and Kelsey, I wanted recognition from people. That was especially true for people I respected like Torix or Althea. And maybe even Kessiah.

In a way, wanting appreciation was too hopeful. The last time I wanted acknowledgement, I got slapped in the face and by my friends no less. Despite that, I couldn't help but desire recognition. These sigils were something I uncovered mostly on my own, and I brimmed with pride over it. That anticipation fueled me as I jumped into the quarry, my runes unused but still present.

Walking up to Althea and Kessiah, I waited on a dramatic reveal. The girls of our group moved through a few motion exercises, their ducks, rolls, and dodges focused on evasion. It all helped with keeping someone at a distance, and that made sense for Althea, considering how strong she was at a range. Kessiah taught her, not something I expected out of the remnant.

On the other hand, Torix carved out another extra cavern for his inscriptions. He added many of these winding caves over the last few weeks, his efforts reaching a fever pitch.

As I approached, Torix peered at me, "Good to see you're still alive. What's been keeping you so busy?"

I put my forearms behind me, "You know, I was just testing some stuff out. I think I found a way of bypassing my lack of control for augmentation."

Torix finished his runes, "Oh, really now?" He turned to me, "Let's see this display of mediocrity...On with it."

I furrowed my brow, letting my hands down, "Y-You ok man? Anything wrong?"

Torix threw up his hands, "What isn't wrong is the real question. We've stayed here for a full week longer than I intended. Yawm's troops are searching all the nearby forests. I've combated his efforts for a while now, but it's only a matter of time before we are discovered. He'll uncover the plotpoint cluster of combat near this area, and he'll send stronger forces here."

I narrowed my eyes, "Torix...I don't think there's many people who'd think of something like that."

Torix snapped his fingers, forming a black chair and sitting on it at the same time, "But what if I'm not the only one with a few good ideas? What if this Yawm fellow is far more able than he appears?" Torix leaned against one of his hands, "If Yawm finds us, there will be more than a few complications. I've promised Kessiah an exit from this place. Now, I've stranded her here on this planet...She's becoming unstable."

Kessiah shouted at Torix, "I'm just fine. You're the one who can't even handle a single warping ritual. A real *archmage*, huh?"

Torix hissed back, "Ah yes, do excuse me while you two handle your basic movements over there. I'm creating a tear in the fabric of reality using an ancient runic language in the meantime...And being judged for it."

Kessiah glared, "Yeah, you're trying to do that. The problem is you're failing at it."

Torix gripped a fist, his anger palpable. I flinched at the thought of Kessiah and Torix fighting it out. Althea and I would be turned into paste and powder. Torix pointed at me and Althea,

"I believe my issues stem from you and Althea. You both are...Are making this difficult. Yes, much more difficult than it should be. Your mana signatures are utterly arcane. It's an amalgam of different energies, and I-I can't make sense of it. Not without a far higher perception than I currently have."

I leaned back, "That sounds...Difficult to deal with, I think. Is there anything we can do? Maybe us leaving would help?"

Torix sighed before dragging a skeletal hand down his face, "No, that won't be necessary. I'm merely coming up with excuses. How unbecoming of me. Please, dismiss my outbursts. I've been stressed as of late. I shouldn't shout at children for my own failings."

I let my hands flop onto my hips, "It's alright. I've been yelled at a few times, so I'm used to it."

Kessiah paced up, her eyes hungry, "Oh really? Do tell."

I scratched the back of my head, "Uh, let's talk about this later. I had something to show you all."

Kessiah leaned onto one of my shoulders, "Yeah, yeah, sure. That can wait till later. Tell us about being yelled at. I want to hear about that."

I pushed her off, "Just wait until I show you guys something first."

Kessiah raised a brow, "Tell me or I'm leaving."

I narrowed my eyes, "If you don't want to be here, then just go."

Kessiah smirked down at me, enjoying my reaction, "Not until you tell me about who yelled and why."

I spread out my hands while shaking my head at her, "Can you drop?"

She flicked my forehead, "I don't think I will."

She tried taking advantage of me, thinking she found weakness. I aimed to show her strength. I snapped at her, "Huh...Alright. Fine. When I was a child, my mom died."

Kessiah's demeanor changed, and she pulled herself off of me. Her desire for knowing evaporated as she mouthed, "Oh...Er, sorry to hear about that."

Turning the situation on a dime, I stared at her and stated,

"She died of cancer, and it wasn't quick either. It took half a year for her to pass. My dad was there with me when it happened. You know, it wasn't so bad at the start. But then, disease stole her strength. That wasn't so bad. After that, it stole her health. We all grieved, but we did it as a family."

I glowered at Kessiah, my words like iron, "It wasn't until it stole mom's smile that we broke down."

Kessiah blinked, coughing into a hand. She gulped, becoming uncomfortable. She mouthed, "That sounds awful. Like I said...Sorry to hear that."

Angry at Kessiah, I spoke about those memories, each of them frozen and numbed by time,

"It was worse than awful. Dad broke when that disease stole my mom's smile. It was a surreal thing for me. I guess I noticed when my mom quit taking care of the roses my dad bought her." Feigning strength, I shrugged, "It's like those roses mirrored her will to live. When they died, she died along with them."

A tense silence passed over us, thick and heavy as molten mercury. For me, those memories already calcified into shards of stone. I felt nothing from them, having already moved on. For Kessiah, she held onto a memory that mirrored my own. Something fresh and open and vulnerable. That hurt exposed itself as I spoke, and I dug my words in with all I had.

In a way, that was my retaliation against everything Kessiah had said to me since she arrived. It was a surreal scene. I turned one of deepest wounds into a profound weapon. Breaking the silence, Torix's eyes flared green. The lich peered down, "I'm sorry for your loss. Losing family is one of the hardest experiences anyone may suffer."

Ripping my glare away from Kessiah, I waved off Torix's apology, "It all happened a long time ago. I'm over it. Point is, my father started drinking after my mom died. At that point, he started falling apart. He made damn sure I fell apart with him." I simmered, "Dad stopped keeping the house clean. He stopped going out with friends. Eventually, he stopped smiling too."

I gazed at Kessiah, "So I'm used to getting yelled at. There. Happy now? Or do you want to know anything else personal?"

Kessiah peered away from my gaze, "Yeah, I'm...I'm good."

I stood tall, "Good."

Torix leaned back before staring at the wall for a moment. He tapped the edge of his chair for a few seconds. An awkward atmosphere settled over us like a layer of lung burning ash. Torix waved his hands to interrupt the quiet,

"She's sorry for prying...I know Kessiah didn't mean to open old wounds."

I rolled my shoulders, "No, you're wrong. She did. She was prodding me for a reaction, and she got one. Don't play that down."

Torix stared down for a second before he met my eye, "Ahem, I hope you remember our conversation from earlier. That pain you carry can make you strong or weak. That

hinges on whether you run from it or accept it. In that manner, our past defines us. It makes us who we are. At the same time, we decide what our pasts make of us."

I swallowed some sadness. I nodded, "Yeah. I know, but thank you for the reminder." Not expecting to blow up like that, I glanced at a wall. Torix walked up, "So, disciple, you mentioned you had something to show us. Perhaps you wouldn't mind sharing that now? At least to this old bag of bones here."

Torix tapped the side of his head, and dust fell off of him. Torix pointed at the dust, "Emphasis on *old*."

A reluctant smile ran up my lips before Althea walked up. She peered up at me, "I want to see it too...Is it, uhm, those markings on you? They look fancy."

I pulled up my forearm, my excitement dwindled to a lowlit ember. I poured mana into the runes, creating the vibrant, burning glow. A darkened orange energy rippled out with crescents of electricity. I stared at it, "I learned some of the runes you're using. I carved them into my armor. It worked out."

Torix grabbed my arm, his eyes flaring white, "Is this what you were doing over these past three weeks?"

I leaned back from him, "Yeah. It was."

Torix leaned close towards the etchings, "Remarkable...How does it translate...Ah, that's a strange wording you used there, but it fits, it fits...Remarkable, truly remarkable. You engraved this yourself?"

I nodded before Torix let go of my arm. He spread out his hands, "Incredible. So much progress...I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it with my own two eyes. This is fine work. Very fine."

I peered off, blushing a bit, "Ah, it's not that big a deal. I just thought it would help with my fighting style."

Torix turned a hand, "Oh, it'll do more than merely that." Torix nudged me with an elbow, "And besides, humility doesn't suit a disciple of mine. Come on. Stand tall with your shoulders back. It makes you look better when you do so."

Pulling me out of my grim mood, I did as the lich asked. He spread out his hands, "There, that's more like my disciple."

I really appreciated him saying that to me then and there. It made a world of difference. After propping me back up, Torix swiped a hand, "As for the runes, they will be potent tools, should they not destroy you. This wouldn't be the first time you've done something insane, however...Precisely what skill did you use for this?"

I opened my menus, forgetting the skills' names. I murmured after a while, "It was...Soul Forging and Soul Siphon."

"Soul Forging? I've never heard of it. I suppose your armor would be the crux of that mystery, however. Hm."

I tapped my armor, "Maybe it's because the armor's an extension of me or something? That means carving into the armor with these runes acts like carving into my body."

Torix tapped the armor, "It seems to me that you're giving your armor commands in a language it understands. It's very strange, as this would never work on a normal person. Your body would deform at best. At worst, you'd roast yourself alive. For those reasons, I'd have advised against this if I had known you were doing it."

Torix peered off, "But alas, my surveillance has suffered since I've been consumed with this disgusting ritual. Blegh. If only it were over."

I peered at a spike near my elbow, "Before we talk about that, do you mind telling me what's so dangerous about the sigils?"

Torix put his hands behind himself, "They work with magic, not flesh and bone."

I tapped the side of my head, "Blood Magic, remember?"

Torix leaned back, "But of course...Blood Magic. Gah, I must say, this was clever. Very clever. And here I thought you were simply *insane*."

Augmentation radiated out of my arms and legs, "This is insane?"

Torix nodded, "Oh, most certainly. It should warp and deform your personality, roast your blood and flesh, and it should even alter your body. As for the skill's name, Soul Forging, it should cause mental changes that are both unfixable and permanent. Being immortal, I'd rather not risk my soul like that. After all, I've got an eternity to lose should I make a mistake with any kind of soul manipulation."

He turned a hand to me, "For you, you've barely lived at all yet you put the little life you have left on the line...And at all times. It's incomprehensible to me." Torix gave me a nod of respect, "But by putting yourself at risk, you also put yourself in a position to gain. As before, it has worked once more...Well done."

I grinned at Torix, a bit more than I meant too. Torix raised a hand, pacing back and forth, "But, if we can create a more efficient conversion of this formula, we can come up with an even greater effect." Torix slapped my back, "Hah. I knew I chose you to be my disciple for a reason."

I peered up, standing tall. Torix's response outdid any expectations I had, and I beamed at him, "Heh...No problem."

Torix rubbed his hands, "Excellent. With this, we should have plenty of ways to fight against Yawm once we meet him."

Silence passed over us before Kessiah chimed in, "Speaking of Yawm, are you trying to get me to help fight him? Because, this whole ritual is taking a whole hell of a lot longer than you guessed it would."

Torix let out a sigh, "I really don't understand what's going on right now. I've developed the coordinates and set everything in stone. I've even made numerous augments via these additional caves. Nothing is working, which-

Torix leaned back, his eyes flaring red. He murmured, "Oh dear, that isn't good. Give me one moment."

The necromancer pulled out a circular, clear sphere with a gray ring around it. He tapped it, and Kessiah walked over. The remnant's eyes widened, "What's going on?"

Torix poured black mana into the crystalline orb, "That's what I'm wondering as well. Something's amiss."

Kessiah grumbled, stepping away, "Let me know when you finish your obelisk business. Don't think I'm letting you off."

Torix gave her a curt nod, "I wouldn't dare."

A blue ball expanded from Torix's glass orb, surrounding the lich and me. Cold air splashed across my face from atop a mountain. Clouds floated along an endless horizon, other peaks etching into the skyline. Two suns shone in the distance, and a gentle wind whistled in my ears. All the sounds from outside muffled in as if we swam underwater.

I reached down for the soft snow beneath me, but my hand phased through the white powder. I rubbed my fingers together, this experience mirroring a simulation. It was as convincing as real life, and I gawked around at the surreal scene. Snapping me from my stupor, Torix sent me a message. As I read it, his voice rang out in my head.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown – Make certain you utilize personal messages here. The obelisk will convert thoughts into messages, should you decide to send them. This is primarily for privacy when we may need it at times, but in this case, there's something that needs my inspection.

I frowned before thinking up a message and sending it over.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown – So what exactly is an obelisk? You mentioned it helped with Schema's system format.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown – That's correct, but as you may have noticed, an obelisk enables many more utilities outside of UI improvements. They may add options to it as well since Schema is rather stingy with his processing power. Obelisks enable a smooth interface with data you collect from Schema's status, letting you use it.

Personally, I use them for organizing my experiments, skill trees, etcetera. You can buy one from the Force of Iron for the price of a few dungeon cores, should you elect to do so.

Torix moved a few floating screens from in front of himself, organizing them.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown – Despite their many advantages, I despise these devices, but at times they are necessary. Obelisks offer convenience, saving innumerable hours of administrative work. I do worry that this convenience comes at a cost, however. Many struggle to focus on real events and more mundane details after immersing themselves in such a convenient, cybernetic landscape.

Torix peered towards Kessiah, who rested just outside of this simulation.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown – I find myself pondering if this device truly does save any time at all. Regardless, I peer into my obelisk's abilities as a necessary evil.

I glanced around as his messages rang out in the background. Swiping my hand through a screen, the display wobbled before stabilizing. The images and lists rippled like waves in a pond. Getting my feet wet, I sent another message.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown – Couldn't you just manage the addictive nature of an obelisk and use it all the time? You'd be more productive that way.

Torix pulled up an updated map of earth, most of it blank.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown – I wonder if such an idea is even possible in practice. I've yet to see someone use an obelisk frequently and not be absorbed by it. An even greater point is how an obelisk strips one of their creativity. Is it not a wonder how this device, designed and created to open the world up to its user, actually narrows their view of it? It's an ironic manifestation, I should say.

I peered at the icy swirls below us. Blizzards sheared a desolate landscape at the mountain's foundation. The sky peered down from all angles as several suns gently beamed. Getting lost here in a world like this appealed to me, the endless peace a welcome change from the real world. I blinked at that, surprised by the draw of the simulation.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown – I remember humanity had an internet before Schema arrived. It had the same kind of effect as an obelisk, and a lot of the time, people just found others who thought whatever they thought. This created spots where everyone agreed, like an echo chamber. Eventually, they became places where everyone shouted the same ideas, each shout louder than the other.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown – Quite a noteworthy observation. The way I've put it is that you learn exactly what everyone else knows if you use an obelisk. You learn what other people don't know when you read books.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown – Eh, you're probably right...So, what's the map for?

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown – I left packets of identifying mana on Michael and Kelsey before leaving them with a deathknight for surveillance. That sorcery tracked their location and ensured I could kill them if need be.

My jaw went slack as I gawked at Torix. The lich raised his palms to me.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown – Daniel, I don't believe you fully understand what will happen to those that are captured by Yawm. Killing Michael and Kelsey isn't a threat, as I could've done so at any time. I am using their deaths as a tool for mercy should the need arise.

I stared down, unnerved by the nightmare Torix presented. The lich wore the possibility of death or worse like a cloak. He focused his efforts on stopping the horrific outcomes instead of worrying about them. Keeping that industrious nature, Torix fiddled with screens and messages alike. Being far less experienced, I cringed at what might happen to my old friends or even the townsfolk.

Even worse, a bit of guilt sank in my chest like someone nailed it in with a hammer. Irrational or not, I held myself responsible for what might happen to my old friends and Springfield. It wasn't a conscious decision but an unconscious force. I willed the guilt down, keeping myself strengthened. Despite my efforts, a fragment of remorse lingered in the back of my mind like a bloated corpse staring me in the eyes.

And I couldn't get it to stop staring.

Torix glanced at the screens before tapping on the surface of an image. It bent ever so slightly at his touch as he tapped two red circles near the center of Springfield. Torix sighed, which sounded like a distant, deep echo.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown – Michael and Kelsey were captured by the Force of Iron. I've dealt with them on numerous occasions. Handling them should be relatively simple. On the other hand, if Yawm has found them and made them spill their guts, then it's best I detonate the mana signatures now.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown – Woah now, let's think for a minute. Why would the Force of Iron even question or interrogate them? They probably just want to help them or learn something, maybe about us. Besides, detonating the mana packets may kill some of the troops there. We don't want to burn that bridge, do we?

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown – The Force of Iron is hardly relevant to our battle with Yawm.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown – Althea could use some technology for her experimentation and cannons. I could use the Force of Iron to exchange runes for money. Kessiah might use them to get out of here. If we can save some of their members, then we end up tying up two loose ends without leaving a mess for later.

I think it's worth pursuing.

The sphere retracted, the mountain's peak disintegrating into the bottom of our quarry. Torix turned to me, "That's a risk I'd rather not take."

I frowned, "What if you didn't have to risk yourself? I can do it."

Torix narrowed his flaming eyes, "Why would you save them? They blamed you for their faults, spitting in the face of all your efforts. Their capture was non-violent as well...Though it was against their wills according to my death knight's testimony. As if either of those people would actually fight for their agency."

Torix threw a hand out, "In fact, I believe this may be the best outcome for all parties. I tire of hovering over those overgrown *children*."

A part of me wanted to defend them, but a larger piece dwelled on Torix's accusations. Why would I want to save Michael and Kelsey? I tried helping them, but it wasn't enough. Their expectations soared so high that nothing I did could ever have been enough. Despite that, I lingered on what happened. Something about the event rubbed me the wrong way, and after thinking about it, I understood why.

Kelsey and Michael weren't real friends anymore, but they helped me out of a couple tight spots. In my mind, I paid them back in full long ago. For instance, one time I beat the hell out of two bullies that messed with Michael. I got a black eye, but I unloaded some steam. Michael wasn't bothered by those two again. I did the same for Kelsey when a college student stalked her for a while. I confronted the guy, and that's all it took for him to stop.

This situation played out differently. By challenging the Force of Iron, I stuck my neck out for two friends who'd never do the same for me. They wouldn't even let me in their house, let alone pry me from the clutches of an organized guild. Even if they wanted to help me, they weren't able to. Kelsey hadn't leveled a bit since the system started. Only Michael had a chance, and in reality, he'd be walking right to his death.

Something neither of them would ever do for me.

Snapping me out of my contemplation, Torix put a hand on my shoulder, "Perhaps I was overly harsh. It is your life, not mine, and upon second thought, perhaps saving them is the right decision." Torix raised a hand, "After all, regrets will never leave you, and you may never have another opportunity to help them like this again."

Torix lowered his hand, "Should you choose not to assist them, this may haunt you forever. My son's death is proof enough of that, as I will carry it for eternity. I wouldn't wish for you to do the same with Michael and Kelsey's deaths."

I raised my hands, "Yeah...I'm thinking this will be my last payback, you know? I'll leave them in my debt and call it quits at that point. I think that will give me some closure, and I'll be able to let this go." I turned to Kessiah and Althea, "Do either of you think you can help me out with that?"

Kessiah raised a palm, "I can wish you good luck, maybe give you some information. I can't help you out directly though."

I frowned, "Wow. Unexpected,

"Hey, I'm sorry about earlier, but this has nothing to do with that. I don't want anyone knowing I'm on this planet. It could attract some bounty hunters. None of us want that."

Althea bounced on her toes, "I'll do it...If you need the help."

Torix took a deep breath, which he didn't need. He pushed up his glasses, which also didn't exist, "Ah, my indecision is mounting once more. This is putting us under undue risk. That being said, what is reasonable and what is right are two very different things...Ah, what to do...I'm done fretting. I'll allow you both to do this, should you both allow a shade to watch over you."

I put my hands on my hips, "You're just full of sage sayings today, aren't you? And, uh....Thanks for helping us out. It means a lot."

Torix waved off my thanks, "The story you told me earlier has me sentimental and nostalgic. That's all this is. Now, I will give you a few days to capture Michael and Kelsey before I detonate the mana signatures lodged in their skulls."

I gave him an apprehensive smile, "Huh...Well then...We should hurry."

Torix turned back to the marble tablets, "Then I shall return to my duties...Ah yes, back to *this*. I wish this ritual was over and done with. It shall be the death of me." Torix laughed in an unhinged manner, "Hah...If I weren't already undead. It will undo my undeath, causing the death of my undying. Hah. Hah."

Rolling my eyes at the absurd joke, I jogged over to Althea. She shrugged, "Any ideas what the plan is? I'm really hoping it doesn't involve storming their base."

I shook my head, "I don't want to ruin our relationship with these guys. That's one of the reasons we're doing this in the first place. I'm thinking we get to the facility, scope out their defenses, and use that new info to make a plan of approach. Does that sound good?"

She let out a sigh of relief, "Heh, ok. That's a way better plan than I thought we'd come up with."

I gave her a thumbs up, "Alright, cool." I turned to Torix, "Yo, can you send us their location so that we can see it on our minimaps?"

Torix snapped his fingers, and a message appeared with an attachment. I downloaded it, and a little map popped up on my left side. The two dimensional, overhead graph reminded me of an old rpg. Everything blacked out besides for long, winding trails of color crisscrossing the darkness. One led to BloodHollow, another to Springfield. Dozens of other lines exposed more routes, likely inspected from Torix's scouts.

All along the map, red X's signified dungeons. The density of the red marks meant many dungeons lingered across the countryside. Near the industrial sector of Springfield, far fewer crimson dots lined the surrounding area. The Force of Iron helped get those rifts handled, meaning the eldritch spilled out less there. In the center of that clearing, Two blue dots sprung up, one with the name Kelsey and the other with Michael. I gave our necromancer a thumbs up before walking up to Kessiah.

I turned to her, "Is there anything we should know about the Force of Iron before heading out?"

Kessiah gave me a stare of disdain before eyeing my runes. She crossed her arms, "So...You still want to talk, huh?"

I raised my brow, "Yeah. I just don't want you to talk down to me, my home, and my life all the time. I know, I know, it's a big ask."

Kessiah tapped her forearm, thinking for a bit. She took a breath, "What do you need to know?"

I shrugged, "Anything, really."

Kessiah peered away, "They use tech for the most part. Most of them aren't all that skilled. You probably know, but they bring in basic technology from Schema's era. All of it's used, hand-me-down stuff, but that's a lot better than what you guys have here...Currently. That's not to say you guys won't ever be on that level, just, right now-"

I waved her elaboration away, "I get it. What kind of levels will they have?"

Kessiah tapped her side, "It's based entirely on the local population. They send in kiosks with hauls of supplies. As you fulfill basic quests, they open more of the supplies. You can expect people to be about ten levels over the average because of those quests and the equipment they own. Considering most humans are around the low teens to mid twenties, you can expect levels in the mid thirties for everybody there."

I nodded, "Thanks for the breakdown. I do appreciate it."

Kessiah eyed me up and down. She sighed before peering off. She crossed her arms, "Hey, sorry about getting in your business earlier. I shouldn't have. That was my bad."

I raised my hand, "It's fine."

Kessiah pulled out her obelisk, flashing me a smile, "Good...Try not to die out there, little man. No one else here can fight like you can...Besides me of course."

I turned and walked off, "I'll stay alive only if you and Torix promise not to kill each other."

Kessiah opened her obelisk, "Hah. No promises."

Walking off, Althea and I reached a cubbyhole that she stationed her cannon schematics and other stuff in. Lots of trinkets and machinery slouched onto a table of sliced stone. Althea cut it out, the shining edge sheening with the natural beauty of polished stone. I rubbed my gauntleted hand over it, "Man, this is so well done. It looks like you cleaned it."

Althea scratched her cheek, "So, uhm, it just ends up like that after I cut it." She reached out a finger, a thin claw extending out. She cut out some of the quarry's marble and tossed it over towards me. Wherever she sliced, a shiny finish exposed itself. I flipped it in my hand,

“You could make this a business.”

Althea rolled her eyes as she packed, “Sure.”

I slotted the marble back where she cut it out, “I’m serious here. There’s potential for big money in this post-apocalyptic landscape. Trust me. You’ll be a *millionaire*.”

We debated the merits of a rock polishing business while jogging towards the edge of the quarry. Once we surrounded ourselves in the trees, we raced full sprint towards the facility. Based on where Michael and Kelsey were, the Force of Iron established a base in an old, abandoned factory. The refinery situated itself in the middle of many other industrial buildings.

People set up shop here for the coal and iron loaded in nearby mountains. Springfield’s inhabitants harvested what they could before globalization decimated those industries. I wasn’t commenting on whether that was good or not, but I had familiarized myself with the area a long time ago. My dad worked there, and he got fired at some point. By the time they let him go, I made a few memories in those empty buildings.

Heading in that direction, Althea and I passed Pier’s creek, trees arching over our heads as they struggled to get sunlight. Birds flew across the ravine now and again, and collections of fish swam deeper into the water as we passed. The rocky sand softened my stomping heels, keeping us quiet. Still, I left deep footprints behind me, but a shadowy presence passed over my markings. After doing so, it smoothed the evidence out.

Torix’s shade performed its duties well, wherever it was.

After taking a few turns, we reached another creek, this one nameless. Everyone abandoned the area after someone found a few miners dumping chemicals in the water. No one wanted a nice batch of heavy metals in their drinking water, and even after thirty years, no one remained here. Well, besides for the monsters that moved in.

Strange nautiloids lapped at the water, refining metals with their mouthy bits. They cleared the water of all the waste, though they still fed on nearby, vulnerable wildlife. Althea and I let them live, the both of us moving towards our goal. Althea, our lavender haired sniper, glanced around in wonder at everything as we passed by. I could imagine why Althea marveled. This might’ve been her first time seeing all of this.

An unconscious smile lingered on her lips, and I liked the look on her. I murmured,

“It’s nice, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. It’s very peaceful here. The sounds here are...Ambient. It puts me in a really clear state of mind.”

I stared forward, "Me too."

After another fifteen minutes of running, we found abandoned factories on the horizon. Old smoke stacks loomed over the buildings, beacons of a bygone era. Those old towers no longer belched clouds of dark smoke, birds resting where the toxic smog once plumed out. Under those hollow pillars, empty warehouses covered block after block. Railroad tracks traced the ground throughout the empty place, no longer used but still scarring the ground.

Multicolored cargo crates rested on those emptied tracks. All the trains stationed on them, some having crashed and piled up. Since Schema arrived, this place of industry deadened into something lifeless but peaceful. We ran down those railways, birds resting on them. They flew off over the horizon as we passed by, each of us hidden by the trains lining our sides.

Within a few minutes, a familiar yet alien sound radiated across the skyline – the humming of a car's engine. Peering under several carts, Althea and I found moving vehicles. Even though they should've been commonplace and expected, they surged excitement in my chest. Humanity rallied here enough to actually use cars. A small step to be sure, but a step nonetheless.

Althea and I slid under a train, getting beside several driving cars. Along the sides of these automobiles, a circular emblem beamed back at us. It was gear with a pyramid and eye on it. As I gazed at it, it too, gazed back at me. It reminded me that we infiltrated this place, and we weren't welcome here. From then on, Althea and I crept under train tracks, each of us calm and composed.

We found many more signs of human civilization there. Many old war machines scattered about, likely taken from nearby museums and repurposed. Parts from those machines scattered around with mechanics working on them. They wore combat fatigues imprinted with the gear and pyramid symbol. Around them, several soldiers stomped by.

Their combatant status was obvious; they donned blue gray armor, rifles strapped along their backs. The barrels and stocks glowed blue, a powerful symbol of Schema's dominance. If you bought in, you'd get great power, but their abilities didn't stop there. The soldiers carried shining, emerald green munitions on their chests.

I wondered what hid inside the capsules. Answering my question, one of the troops dropped a bullet onto the ground. It shattered, and the ooze painted the ground in green. It sizzled the earth, writhing deep into the ground. Within those glassy bullets, some kind of living acid squirmed around.

Althea mouthed, "Wow...I'd love to have that."

I shivered, remembering Althea billowing acid over me. I murmured back, “I’m not the biggest fan of that stuff, actually.”

Getting closer to the heart of the camp, some soldiers carried glowing, red liquid in their bullets. None of those members dropped their ammo, unfortunately. Gawking at everything, it all honed in on a sharp, angular aesthetic. Schema created all of this equipment with precision. Everyone wore their helmets all the time too. This faceless ensemble lacked eyes on those helms, showing no weakness just like the Sentinels.

Cameras viewed the outer world for them, keeping them secure inside their steel plates. I grinned at the prospect of getting some of that good stuff, but I feared fighting several of the people at once. Althea shared in my fear, and our sneaking slowed down to a crawl. We found plenty to see, so despite our pace, time flew by. Several factories reopened here, and soldiers carried goods in and out of the buildings on hovering platforms.

My eyes widened at the sight, and I murmured to Althea, “How do they do that?”

Althea gawked at the buildings with me, “Uhm...Magic?”

I narrowed my eyes at her, “Well...Er, duh.”

She flicked my shoulder, “You’re the one asking dumb questions.”

“Touché.”

We got close enough to uncover details about the industrialized equipment. Hooks and bars traced the armors, places for carrying the pieces around with ease. The practical, deadly weapons on their backs sheened with glossy finishes. A few of them even carried sword handles at their sides. In a sparring arena, two armored individuals pulled those swords out.

Laser blades arose from the handles, and they clashed with burning ooze dripping down their weapons. I ogled at the awesome display before Althea and I nestled between a few of the cargo crates. Squeezed together, I sent her a message.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown – Any ideas for getting in and out of there?

Althea Tolstoy | Level 164 | Unknown – Huh...Not really.

I brainstormed for a minute before I sent her a message,

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown – Wait a minute...I got the perfect plan.

I shifted my armor before turning my gauntlets into shovel claws. I turned and messaged.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown – How about we dig our way in? Eh? EH?

Chapter 32: Plans May Crumble

Althea frowned before sending a message.

Althea Tolstoy | Level 164 | Unknown – So, like, I'm not a genius or anything, but I'm pretty sure they'll hear you digging.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown – They probably won't if we get a little distance and dig a little deep.

She shrugged before we crawled further back until we were out of earshot of the guards. With a few quick swipes, my shovel hands clawed through the dirt in large chunks. What would've been hours of work for a normal person passed by in seconds before I submerged underground. Althea crawled off, chopping at portions of the railroad tracks. Althea sliced the steel bars and threw in a pile of them at the burrow's entrance.

I kept digging while she placed supports made from rebar to prevent the collapse of the tunnel. I gave her a nod of respect, "Damn. Nice idea."

She blushed, "Heh. Thanks. You're not too shabby yourself."

Adding to the structure, Althea spit acid at the ends of each railroad tracks. The green ooze melted the dirt as we traveled, making our tunnel pretty stout. Without worrying about a sudden cave in, we made decent progress over the next hour. By then, we landed fifty feet or so from Michael and Kelsey's holding chambers. Knowing next to nothing about the compound's insides, I turned to Althea.

I lifted a hand, sparking augmentation and bathing us in orange light. Althea stared back with worry wrinkles on her face. I whispered, "You ok?"

She frowned, "Just...a bit claustrophobic. That's all."

I leaned back, putting my hand on my chest. I dished out some sarcasm, "Oh, being close to me is that bad, huh?"

She pursed her lips at me, "What? No, it's the ground. I'm scared it'll crush us or collapse."

Remembering how she transformed into a burrowing eel at one point, she may have forgotten her own abilities. That being said, not all fears were necessarily rational, so instead of arguing, I gave her a knowing grin, "If it did fall, I'd get you out of here. Trust me on that."

Althea peered away, "Heh...I do."

I turned up, and from what I could guesstimate, Michael and Kelsey both languished in prison cells or something similar. Althea and I would have to take down a guard or two before busting them out and running back towards the unnamed, chemical creek. From there, escaping relied on Torix's shades. Considering how reliable they were, everything seemed pretty foolproof.

With some confidence, I pointed up, "I'll be a decoy. You focus on getting them out."

Althea frowned, "I could be the decoy, if you want."

I gestured at her arms, "I think I'll be better. You're stronger than me for one. Second, I can make a lot more of a ruckus than you can. Third, I can take a few bullets to the chest, and you can't."

"Hm...Ok. I was thinking I could escape after getting their attention, but your plan works too."

I cupped my chin, "Huh. You're probably right about that, but I'd rather bet on my plan."

"So like, I wasn't committed to my plan or anything anyways. We'll go with yours."

"Oh...My bad. Didn't mean to press the issue."

"You, uhm, you didn't. I just wanted to clarify."

After that awkwardness, we finalized the plan. Once we repeated the steps a few times, I dug upwards. I slowed down my pace until I reached concrete. By then, we dug underground for two hours, each of us sweaty and breathing hard. Planning anymore risked people finding the tunnel, and oxygen thinned out this deep down. Unable to stall anymore, I gave Althea a signal.

I tapped the concrete, the dense material reinforced with steel. For me, breaking through could've taken maybe a day or two, not to mention the soldier's would think a literal earthquake was infiltrating their base. For Althea, the task took seconds. She reformed her left arm, turning it into a biotic rifle. Extra adjustments covered the sides, along with an eye along the edge of the barrel. I whispered,

"Can you see out of that eye?"

The eye closed as she mumbled, “Uh, yeah. It makes aiming easier.”

I raised my brow, “Woah...That’s kind of cool.”

From her right palm, she grew a riveted rod of bone. She placed it into the ammo compartment before placing it against the wall, “I’m going to spit acid onto the wall before firing. That should give you enough space to get inside. We get your friends and then run. Y-you ready?”

I raised a brow, “It sounds like you’re the one getting cold feet.”

Althea took a second, raising her hands. She steadied her breathing, and I gave her a thumbs up, “That’s better. Let’s go.”

A swell formed in her stomach before she regurgitated acid onto the wall in steady increments. The acid steamed and hissed on the concrete before she fired. The sound of the shell blew back into our tiny tunnel, booming loud as a jet plane. My ears rang as the concrete gave way. A cloud of dust exploded into our tunnel from above, and Althea slipped through it. I followed.

I leaped up, mana filling into my legs. I crashed through the leftover splinters of concrete. As I came up and out into the air, I lost levity. My feet crashed into the oil stained floor, and I glanced around, powder obstructing my view. I waved my arms, the wind whirling the dust plume away from me. I found myself near the center of a garage, eyes already on us.

Several people worked on cars and machines, sets of tools beside them. Groups of armored soldiers spoke with technicians, and scientists hunched over tables lining the walls. Two large, open doorways let light into the room. Above me, a small hole beamed down light at my face from outside. Althea’s bolt pierced through the ceiling.

Along the edge of the vehicles, a set of clear, human sized capsules slotted into the side of the building. Kelsey and Michael’s names were painted onto the sides of them, their hair and feet visible while the rest remained covered with a steel plate. They floated in a vacuum, each of them unconscious but having their eyes open. Althea already reached them, and she cut at the steel with several people watching her.

Everyone else gawked at me, stunned by my entrance. I raised my arms, mana filling into the sigils, “Hello...Everyone...Uhm, what’s up?”

Compacted rifles expanded as soldiers readied their aim towards me. Dozens of laser pointers lined up on me before a deep, full voice shouted, “Don’t fire. Get him out of here, and I repeat, do not fire in this space. We cannot afford to bust the containment pods here.”

They held Michael and Kelsey in containment pods for something. I noted that while peering around. I also stood a head taller than everyone else. Their numbers worked against them because of friendly fire, but they used other means at their disposal. Several of them unsheathed laser knives, and they walked close. Getting behind me, a trooper sliced a shining dagger of red towards my throat.

He moved slower than a stream, and I grabbed his wrist while pulling him to me. He fell forward, and I punched his helmet. Letting him go, I crunched the metal armor on my fist, the runes giving me unnatural power. Another soldier came close and stabbed at my back. I wove sideways, the soldier's slice missing. The arm stretched out wide, and I grabbed the person's wrist. I shoved the straightened elbow, and the limb bent backwards, ligaments snapping.

The soldier howled out in anguish, and I jerked him sideways. They both flopped onto the ground, unable to stand. I peered at my hands, marveling at how easy it was to break them. It was like snapping a chicken's neck. Unlike a chicken, the broken soldier keeled onto the ground, an electronic voice blaring out of the speaker beside his helmet's camera.

Another soldier tried a sweeping kick towards my feet. I stepped just out of range and lifted a foot. I stomped my heel at their leg as the kick passed me by. Their armored joint crunched under foot, and I pinned them down. They collapsed before I lifted the person up with both my arms.

I threw them towards a car, and they collided with the windshield, shattering glass. I gawked at how I did all of that, and the others did as well. They peered at me in fear, the soldiers a bit more antsy to approach. My eyes darted towards Althea, and she heaved Michael and Kelsey's stasis pods. Wanting to make a real mess, I walked over towards a car. I bent over and lifted with all my strength.

The car flipped with relative ease, at least easier than I expected. It flopped over and crushed into another vehicle. Several people ran at me, so I leaped on top of the car. The jeep's fabric tore under my feet, and I fell into the cabin. Falling into the front seat, I looked at the ignition, finding no keys. A glowing blade stuck through the side window, and I bent my head away from it. They pulled the blade back over my throat.

Before it made contact, I grabbed them. I jerked them into the window, the metal covered soldier lighter than I was. Their head clapped against the window before I opened the car door into another soldier. They tumbled in a pile, one I stomped over while getting out of the jeep. As I got all the way out, three blades came from all directions. I stopped two arms, and the other blade pierced into my side. My armor reached out into the stabbing hand, shredding it.

The soldier pulled his hand out of me while thundering, "It's a monster."

I grimaced before kicking backwards at the guy. His chestplate caved, and he crashed into a wall. I crushed the two arms in my hands, snapping the bones in their arms before pulling them close. Their helmets clinked together with a loud ring, cameras shattering. Another trooper stabbed at me, but I used one of their own as a shield.

Another stab came in from an unseen angle, and it pierced into my chest. Fire erupted in my lungs, but I elbowed backwards. The soldier's facemask caved in, their head whipping into the side of a car. They slumped down, and I prayed they were still alive. Another soldier sliced down from above, but a harpoon impaled their raised elbows. The downslice fell apart, and I shoved the crippled soldier aside.

Two more stabs came in. I threw my fists out, and they landed like sledgehammers. Helmets caved. I struck once more, retaliating before they overwhelmed me. Chest plates sunk in. Arms shattered. Cameras fizzled to nothing. I whirlwinded through the group, tearing a dozen guards into broken heaps on the polished floor.

More came. I jumped up, grabbing the edge of a catwalk. I flung myself up, near several snipers. I tackled one, and their body flopped over the railing with force. The others followed their fall. Half a dozen tumbled down like dominoes. I charged through a less armored marksman before jumping back down. Another blade sank into my arm. An angry, violent voice rang out in the back of my mind to kill them, to eat them.

I grabbed my assailant's arm, breaking it. I jerked twice more, and it broke in three places. I kicked their knee backward. They crumbled down, and I roared out in a primal fury. My armor's crimson slit widened into a maw over the soldier's face. I kicked the soldier away, and they flopped back. They crashed into the wall. I inspected around me, most of the soldiers already taken care of or crippled for the moment. In my mind, I surged, my dominance clear.

Several of the gunmen tapped their triggers, wondering if firing might've been a good idea. Before they made that decision, more mana filled into my runes. I stomped my foot down. The crushed concrete from our entrance whipped into the air, hiding us. Althea hugged two stasis pods to herself, having taken several soldiers out herself. She ran over, a soldier grabbing her foot. She fell forward, and the glass jars tumbled.

They stayed together, the glass flexible and not easily broken. Althea glanced around on the ground, seeing faceless suits of armor closing in from every side. She pulled her legs up into the air before forcing them downwards. Her upper body whipped up off the ground before she landed on her feet. A tornado of motion, she knocked several soldiers across the room, bones breaking with each of her attacks. Her own arm bled from the punishment, her fingers and hands bent backwards.

She left herself and her enemies a bloody mess.

The reinforcements rushed in. They took an even more cautious approach as they closed in on me and her. Althea gasped, "Gah...It's so hard not killing them."

I raised my fists, "I got to agree."

Althea's body crushed and crumbled, her entire skeleton deforming. She sprinted forward, a beast transformed. She stormed through a group of soldiers. She sent them flopping back with her unbelievable strength. Metal met walls. They fell. They plunged. They plummeted. Her legs looked like a goat's hind legs while her arms and hands expanded into massive clubs. With a few quick swings, she crushed and crumbled the incoming troops in seconds.

The room, once full, brimmed with incapacitated soldiers. A delicate silence loomed for a moment. I murmured, "Are you still in control?"

She tore herself apart as she attacked, but she rumbled back, "Yes. I am. What about that growl of yours earlier?"

I gave her a curt nod, "Ok, fair enough."

I picked up the glass tubes before sprinting back towards our hole. The deep voice from earlier roared with anger through an intercom,

"You maggots. There will be hell to pay if you don't stop those eldritch. I mean literal Hell."

The soldiers redoubled their efforts to stop us. A group of them lined up from outside, blocking our way back to our tunnel. I stopped in my tracks with the stomp of a heel. A thin piece of concrete burst underfoot, sending a hail of rocks at their helmeted faces. Althea leaped over me, latching one of her massive hands onto my shoulder.

I dug my feet into the ground as she pulled on my shoulder pauldron to swing herself around. Her other arm reformed as if she swung a tree trunk. The soldiers crashed into the wall before Althea dove into our tunnel's entrance. I tossed one of the containers towards her before leaping in with Kelsey's tube held over my head. Althea slid the capsule through the hole before I followed her with the other one.

As we slid down, a rain of bullets slammed into the walls of the tunnel entrance above us. It looked like they abandoned orders. A hail of crumbling rock splattered down. I landed on the ground, my legs bent as the containment tube slapped against my back. The dense flexi-glass bent but held, the steel plate keeping them safe.

Tube in tow, I crawled with Althea. She bent over, crawling in her normal, unchanged form. I caught myself staring at her a few times, her figure drawing my eye. Althea had nice curves, and laid out like that, it accentuated each one of them. Tearing my eyes off of her, I focused myself back on the escape.

Not being as distracted, Althea expanded the tunnel with gouging strikes, letting me pull off a low trot along the ground. We dashed through our tunnel before jumping out of the

entrance. Crawling back out beneath a train, neither of us could move the stasis pods. Already working that out, Althea cut at the edge of a railroad cart.

I raised my brow, "Does that slicing power have any limit?"

Finished by then, she shoved a behemoth piece of pure steel from the crate. Her collarbone broke from pushing the metal hunk out of the way. Her eyes watered as she reformed the bone back into place. She mouthed,

"Yes...But by Schema...This hurts so bad."

Her putting this kind of effort to help me meant a lot, and I aimed to pay her back. I couldn't right now, so I winced at the sight, "Damn...I'm sorry. I'd like to wait for you, but we have to go."

Althea nodded, "I know...I know."

We walked out between two fully loaded trains. With my legs slamming the ground beneath me, I kept pace with Althea, each of us carrying a pod. We sprinted between two railroad tracks, the gravel flinging behind us before we started hearing the sound of revving engines. Althea glanced at me,

"You. Decoy. Again?"

I tossed the tube towards her, "Of course."

She caught the tube with one of her arms before she set them down. Her arms shrank as her muscles tore and snapped into place. Looking like a furless centaur drenched in a robe, she grabbed the two tubes under her arms before sprinting towards the chemical laden creek. I winced a little as she gasped in pain, but her speed mounted to epic proportions.

In the distance, several jeeps rolled out of the garages, finding a gap between the two trains lining us. The vehicles drove in while I sprinted away. My feet thunked against the ground with each step like hammers against stone. Augmentation empowered my strides, chunks of wood snapping under my weight. The air rushed past my ears as I enjoyed the speed of my own running.

Althea still pulled ahead, but I kept her in my line of sight at least. After two minutes of running, a bullet whistled right past my head. I didn't turn around. I pushed forward. Another bullet landed straight into the ground where one of my feet marched. The round slinked right off my armor, leaving an indentation in it. More and more bullets rushed in before I found stray rounds hissing close to Althea, sparks bursting off the train near her.

Coming up with a plan, I bent down and scooped up some gravel. I gritted my teeth before leaping as high as I could. Flailing my arms, I hopped onto the top of a cargo crate, stumbling forward but not falling. After getting back into stride, I stomped my foot down. The thin steel bent under my foot, giving my feet some grip.

I changed directions, my joints hissing at me in discomfort. I beelined in the opposite direction, towards the jeeps and guards. My runes roared out, and I hurled several stones at their windshields. Trails of fractures formed over the panels, rocks embedding into the reinforced glass. Blinding them, soldiers turned and fired at me, but I ducked under the firestorm of rounds. The jeeps let their covers down for sight, and I hurled another few stones at them between bullet bursts. Enraged at my stone tossing, they dragged back around in a circle, barely making the turn between the two trains. My advanced problem solving worked like a charm, and another hailstorm of bullets rained my way. Great. Just great.

They lobbed grappling hooks, each of them snapping against the sides of the trains I rested on. They kept me pinned with suppressive fire, soldiers pacing up the cables. I let them get up there with me, wanting the soldiers to get away from their vehicles. Heading to the side where the grappling hooks tied down, I hung myself along the otherside of the train. My fingers gripped into the metal, but no other part of me exposed itself to them.

The troops scattered over the top of the train, searching for me. I waited, their footsteps sending my nerves ablaze. Flipping back onto the train, my feet panged onto the roof, and they turned to me. I bolted forward, bullets smothering where I just stood. I leaped high in the air over a jeep before crushing my outstretched legs into the engine. The front of the jeep caved in, the engine block bursting out the bottom of the vehicle.

I jerked my legs out of the car's front before rolling towards the side opposite of the soldiers. Another volley of bullets painted towards me. With a grunt of effort, augmentation flooded my frame. I growled while flipping the car over. Bullets whizzed past the jeep at certain spots, the car less protective than I hoped it'd be.

But that wasn't my goal.

I bent down and tackled the vehicle's side. It slid right in place, becoming a barricade for several other vehicles coming my way. A storm of bullets snapped into my skin from above, my health dropping fast. I sprinted towards the bottom of a train, leaping between a gap in the wheels. My stomach scraped the rails as I slid beneath the train. Taking a few deep breaths, I gasped for air, dust pluming up as exhaustion set in.

I stopped the troops from catching Althea, but now they closed in from all sides. I took a few breaths before clawing into the gravel and dirt. I tore into the ground, getting just beneath their barrels peaking into the railway. They let out a pelting of gunfire above me, streaks of light tracing over my head. The bullets banged and burst, several gunmen hitting their own team members.

They scrambled to get underneath here with me, but they struggled getting under the train in their plated armors. It gave me a breather. After half a minute, they scrambled inside again. Refreshed and ready, I peeled the ground apart before bursting out from beneath the train's tracks. I sprinted towards a set of warehouses in front of me. Bullets flooded in, and I jumped straight through one of the older windows of the building.

The dirty panels burst into tiny pieces as I rolled forward. I landed onto a catwalk, my stomach slamming into the railing. Momentum carried me over it, and I flipped. I tumbled in the air before flopping onto the ground. Air left my chest, and I blinked, getting a sense of where I was. My hands flopped down as I let out a big gulp of air.

From my side, a click rang out beside me. A ball of metal shot upward, and I covered my head. The ball detonated, a set of blades spiralling in every direction. The force of the blades flung me sideways, several of the daggers lodged inches into my armor. Dizziness and disorientation muddled my view.

Shaking it off, I pushed myself back up, but my arms shook while drool leaked out of my mouth. Unable to keep moving, I leaned over. Vomit coursed up my throat and out of me. Falling back down, I puked my guts out, most of my health gone. A dull banging ebbed in from outside, the guards closing in. I lifted my head up, swallowing my spit. I stumbled back up, falling against a wall.

They spread mines out at random here, so it would take time to enter. If anything, spreading mines this close to camp seemed suicidal. They must've had a good reason for them. Stumbling forward, I found a soldier's corpse. Their head carried pin pricks all over their bloodied face, and their chest burst out from the inside from...Something horrific. As I walked a few steps further, a large spider jumped onto my face from the darkness.

Dozens of legs on its abdomen stabbed at my head. They poked and prodded my armor, unable to pierce my metal helmet. They left deep dents before I grabbed the bug. My fingers dug into the beast right through its exoskeleton. I wrenched its body apart. Green blood poured out, soaking over my face from the pieces of the creature. I leaned over, gasping for a moment.

My armor stabbed into the creature, absorbing its essence as I got a grip on my situation. Those spiders explained the mines at least. Still exhausted and dizzy, I willed my body forward. I pressed my heels back into the ground before leaping through another warehouse window. Once I picked back up some speed, I kept my eyes peeled for any more mines.

They couldn't kill me, but they sure as hell slowed me down. Even in this chase, I peered at the windows leaking in light as I passed by them. This place oozed an empty, dark beauty. At the same time, the mine's blades oozed out of my body, falling out of my armor behind me. My skin wriggled the daggers out of me. Taking a breath of relief, I leaped into another warehouse window.

As I landed, another mine triggered, releasing a blade ball. My eyes opened wide, and I slapped the ball away as it reached eye level. It launched into another warehouse. Windows shattered as blades snapped out in every direction. They put those death balls everywhere. I ran forward, crushing a leggy spider by accident.

Ok, *maybe* they had the right idea.

Footsteps ebbed in from outside the building. I bolted forward as the sound of helicopter blades ebbed into the warehouse. At this point, I rolled my eyes. The situation was getting out of hand. Hiding in my building, three helicopters passed by, the wind off their wings blowing trash up around outside. Each helicopter carried thick bracers on the outer edges of their wings, making them more durable.

Caught between the copters and the troops, I closed my eyes for a minute. A part of me just wanted to use Oppression and wipe them out. That piece of me smiled at the thought of just ending this whole charade right there and then. I wanted to gore them apart, to kill them and strip their bones out of their body. I smothered that urge, knowing the bounty and guilty conscience wouldn't be worth it.

After sliding a window open, I flopped out of a warehouse. I shot down another alleyway. I evaded some soldiers before making my way down several factory floors. The helicopters circled overhead the entire time. After passing a few buildings, another helicopter locked in on my position, and they fired an old minigun at me. The many barrels changed into a ball of light and the bullets into a stream of fire.

It was more like the mouth of a dragon than a gun. The rounds dug inches into the gravel ground before slapping across my back. The lead hissed in my wounds, evaporating my blood. I withstood the onslaught, though the sheer force of the stream nearly knocked me down. The helicopter whizzed past me, so I kept running. The helicopters took turns gunning me down. Hiding behind dumpsters full of trash, I protected myself behind them.

To my amazement, the bullets punched through the dumpsters *and* the garbage. Stripes of embedded lead traced up and down my body as a result. However, the sheets of steel slowed the bullets enough that grievous wounds turned into superficial scratches. From place to place, I moved like that. Heat built in on my back, the hot lead squealing on my skin. The metal cooled from molten red to a cool gray, the helicopters hovering lower and lower to aim at me.

After whizzing several feet over a roof, I found my opportunity. I ran up and leaped onto a wall. The tin wall caved in, and I kicked off the indentation. Flying up, I landed on the side of the roof. After pulling myself up, I stumbled forward. I kept my balance by pushing myself up with my arms. With a burst of effort, I stomped my feet into the metal roof once more.

My heels left imprints in the tin before I jumped up towards one of the passing helicopter's side railing. I missed my landing, diving straight into the helicopter blades instead of the helicopter's window. The metal blades gyrated near me, but I flew just short of the spinning rotor. I stuck an arm up. Instead of putting my arm in the blades, I molded a mass of my armor into the rotor. I clipped it, and the circling mass knocked me sideways.

I expected a blade but they hit me more like a baseball bat. I flipped in a circle. One of my armored feet clipped another blade. Slamming into the roof, air left my chest as I gasped for air. Above me, the helicopter spun out of sync for a few quick whirls. That slightly off beat spinning snowballed until it spun out of control. The blades crushed into the roofing. They gouged out the tin and steel, chunks of the blades impaling the building.

The helicopter lost any way of staying afloat. Blades shattered. The hull tumbled. It fell out of sight. I let my head rest against the roof, taking several deep breaths. Adrenaline spiked in my system, my hands trembling and my knees wobbling. I grabbed the sides of my head, closing my eyes. I shook off my unease and terror before pushing myself back up. I had to continue. I had to push through, so I did.

The other helicopter whirled around, getting me back in its sights. I grimaced at it before looking around. Half a rotor blade jutted out of the roofing. A slicing, glowing trail of bullets passed to me. I leaped sideways and picked the blade over my head. The helicopter passed closer before chunked the rotor blade at the other helicopter.

Blade met blade, and my lobbed one whipped away. It was enough to throw the rotating edges out of whack. Like the other helicopter, it spiraled out of control before tumbling towards another building. It skidded over the roof, a maelstrom of red sparks shooting off the tin before the helicopter flew straight into the wall of another warehouse.

The front bent against the building, the glass fragmenting. It slid sideways before cracking into the ground. A fire ignited somewhere along the line, but the troops got out in time. A fiery inferno engulfed the scene, heating my armor even at the impressive distance. Everything was a blinding red and orange before I turned and trotted away. I wiped sweat off my brow, thankful they were finally gone.

Getting my bearings again, I charged over a gap in the buildings. I dashed onto another building nearby. I landed, finding bits of flames following me. Peering at my back, pieces of fiery debris fell off me. I shook off the refuse before glancing around. Above me, a pilot floated down from above, a parachute attached to the back of his seat. I slammed my fists together and grinned at him. My armor contorted into a twisted smile.

The unarmed man in armor scrambled for a switch near him. As he floated closer, his scrambling devolved into a panic. He tapped a keypad on the side of his arm, and a jet of plasma erupted from behind him, shooting him away from me. I laughed a little at the guy's escape. I intimidated him more than I thought I would.

With nothing else in my way, I ran towards Springfield while aiming to lose them in the suburbs. After a few minutes of running, I neared the edges of the suburbs – this place was my ticket out of this mess. Adding to my escape, a dense fog clustered over the town. Perfect. I ran into it through the backyards of abandoned homes. People left this place for the Force of Iron's shelter and protection, and it emptied out like a ghost town.

Pacing through the desolate cityscape, I peered at the roads leading into Springfield. Lines of caution tape, safety cones, and gunmen surrounded the town on all sides. Many flames burned in the distance near homes, flashes of gunfire exposing marksman in the fog. Plumes of black smoke traced the compact mist, and a sickening smell lingered in my nose. Getting further in, that scent rotted down into a mix of ash and burning flesh.

My eyes watered at the putrid stench, but even with teary eyes, I found guards along roads arming themselves to the teeth. It unnerved me that so many people guarded every inch of Springfield's perimeter. Torix mentioned fights and whatnot, but this defied any expectations I had. I readied myself for more fighting because something was wrong here.

Very wrong.

Chapter 33: Infestation

Ready for anything, I slowed my pace to a crawl. Plastic covered several buildings. People wore hazmat suits. They spoke with radio intercoms, sterilizing agents being sprayed everywhere. For some reason, they quarantined the area. If my guess was right, that's why the Force of Iron captured Michael and Kelsey to begin with. Before moving on, I opened my status, giving the others a quick update.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown – Everyone, they're quarantining people near Springfield. It looks serious, and Michael and Kelsey might be contaminated. Just a heads up, and I'll let you all know if I find something else worth noting.

Pacing forward, screams echoed from inside buildings, muffled behind plastic linings. Gurgling oozed, a sickening splattering and sloshing ebbing out as well. I squirmed at the cacophony of the marks droning in. Several vehicles rolled in from ahead of me along an open road. The jeeps mounted flamethrowers with barrels still glowing from use.

Congeaed blood and yellow goo coated the fronts and sides of those vehicles. Something monstrous lingered in the mist. Staring at the quarantine line, I could either continue on or turn back. Pressing on meant going through this mess. Going back meant fighting my way through the entire Force of Iron's camp. I'd fight either way, but these monsters meant I might get some levels and experience.

Making a quick decision off that logic, I pressed forward aiming to skulk by everything. I'd pay for that decision.

After getting into the city, I aimed to get distance and escape later. Peering at the blockade from behind gates and trees, they lacked any real gaps in the whole area. Anytime anything approached, the soldiers turned around and fired. Jumpy as scared cats, the gunners laid it on thick too, each of them generous with their ammo. Taking my time to avoid their fire, I found a gap between two houses where no guards stood.

I bolted across a fence, beelining through the gap. Soldiers on the other side of the house found me sprinting away. They unloaded clips at my back. Hitting me like molten knives, lead dug into me again. Getting through the bombardment, I thanked whoever gave them normal rifles instead of plasma ones. I kept charging forward until I reached some pavement, and other soldiers closed in from the barricade's sides.

The troopers let loose, barraging my general vicinity with a storm of lead. I jumped up before landing dead center on the old road. Stomping my heels, the cracked asphalt caved in. Chunks of pavement and dirt rose up around me, high as my knees. Stabbing my fingers into the largest pad of rock, I pulled up the chunk and wielded the piece of road as a shield.

Dozens of bullets lodged into the earth and pavement as I trotted away, crouching behind my barrier. After a while, I slammed the pavement into the ground. Turning around, I dashed away. The fog cloaked me as bullets clipped into nearby homes. I kept running until I disappeared into a sea of mist, homes, and screams. After hurdling over several fences, I huddled between two closely knit houses.

I leaned my back against a wall, catching my breath. I had time to think, and I didn't squander the blessing. This outbreak looked like a rift that got out of control or something similar, as if a hivemind or something escaped a dungeon. At least it explained how the Force of Iron enlisted so many people. As citizens died here, the survivors united against their common killer.

While looking at my surroundings, that outright slaughter took front and center. Fresh blood stains lingered but no full bodies remained, only pieces here or there. Not being squeamish, I kept my mind whole and sane. Further adding to the mental pressure, howls of agony echoed in from all directions. They fused into a steady drone like I visited a circle of hell. Gunfire flared. Windows collapsed. People gurgled on blood, their own and from other sources.

Car tires squealed. Flames burned. Ash settled.

In the midst of it all, I wheezed for air, exhausted from running for miles but mainly from getting shot at. Either that or I hyperventilated from panic. I couldn't tell anymore. Lead pieces clattered onto the grass beneath me, and I peered around. The source of the sounds and burning seeped in. They sank under my skin and into my mind. The

townsfolk fueled a slaughter, an onslaught, a massacre, all of it molding together to form a dying city.

Blood splashed the inside of car windows. Blood spread across patches of pavement. Blood dried onto grass. The doors and fences. Blood. Even the bird fountains flowed with red. A sanguine aura soaked in from all angles, and it permeated the ground here. It suffused the air, a mist of iron and acrid bloat lingering. I never believed in superstitions or the rising of the dead.

This place changed my mind.

Where blood flowed, bodies followed. And the bodies piled by the dozen in the distance. Coming into focus, the corpses piled by the hundreds. Children, women, the elderly, nothing survived here. Bodies ruptured, torn in half and draped over wooden walls. Nothing left in my stomach, a wave of nausea poured over me as people's intestines swung in the wind. Dead eyes peered out from the corpses, empty as bottomless wells.

Many of those hollowed eyes peered in different directions. Limbs dotted the landscape. The sights pulled me into a surreal, hellish place. I gawked beside a car, freshly flayed fingernails missing off from a severed hand. Doors snapped apart in doorways, animals or beasts having pried them open. Peering at the horror, it all sank in.

This was hell. I was in hell.

I stood up, my knees quivering. I blinked, pins and needles tracing up my arms. I glanced into a nearby house. A man in black armor stared back at me. Scared out of my right mind, I put myself into a fighting stance. The person mirrored my movements. I leaned back, my hands dropping with a wave of relief.

I stared at a mirror.

Some metal lodged itself into my armor. I looked like I'd walked straight through an army and come out the other side, which, yeah, I essentially had. I sighed while pulling out a jagged blade from one of the blade mines. Over the next few minutes, I tore out bullets, bits of metal from the helicopter, and the blades from the grenades in the warehouses. As I finished pulling out the last unwanted decoration, I thought for a moment.

The blockade kept all of this inside. Torix warned me about what may happen here, yet I never imagined anything like this. However, there was one entity capable of this utter destruction – Yawm of Flesh. I dragged my hands down my face, mental exhaustion smothering me from all sides. I could wait here and die, or I could push forward and live.

My decision already made, I stood up and walked around the block, discovering horrors around every corner. Mauled to bits, the bodies carried bits of teeth, claws, blades, and puncture marks across every inch of their surface. I couldn't imagine what butchered

everyone. Staring at a pulped face, I thanked it for being unrecognizable. If I found someone I knew, I might've collapsed onto the ground.

At this point, I calmed down enough that rational thoughts swam through my head. I needed a way back to Torix and company. I rolled my shoulders, and I whispered,

"Torix...Er, shade of Torix. Are you there?"

Nothing answered. I frowned, sending out a message.

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Level 105 | Unknown – They've butchered everyone in town. I'll let you guys know if I need help, but everything seems fine for now. As fine as a massacre can be.

Torix shot back a reply.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown – My warping isn't long range, and doing it many times in a row will leave me weakened. My shade is caught currently, and Althea is returning here with your friends. Wait a day or two there, and I shall be there promptly. It seems as though something is amiss, and I believe I've missed it because of this ritual.

I pray that it isn't too late to change the outcome of whatever is happening there. Good luck, disciple.

Torix's logic resonated with me. The Force of Iron's search would die down after a few hours, and I could take advantage of that. The best plan involved sitting here, waiting a day or two before charging through another part of the blockade. As I waited, I sent a message towards Torix that mentioned the steel legion's blockade, Yawm's effect on Springfield, and me being fine.

It was redundant, but my nerves spiked by then. I took a breather, waiting an hour. I let my mind just wander aimlessly, my eyes glazing over. The eerie screaming staved off any attempts at sleep, and the unsettling bodies also haunted me. I numbed to it all in time, and that hour gave me back my mental sharpness. At least what little I owned in the first place.

Snapping me out of my trance, something moved in a house several blocks down. I ignored it, set on waiting out whatever infested this place. Situated between two homes, a pod of pink fluttered in front of my eyes. My eyes followed it as the tiny, pink petal drifted in the wind. A black pod swelled at the end of it, and it reminded me of a cherry blossom.

It flipped in the wind before landing on the ground. Another tossed through the wind and landed on the road. They kept pouring down, more and more falling from the sky. They danced in the wind, and they floated like hummingbirds at times. I stood and gawked,

awash in their haunting beauty. They mesmerized me, a piece of majesty amidst all the murder.

One petal landed on the body of a middle aged man. The black pod split open, revealing a tiny insect made of squirming legs and writhing teeth. It wriggled into the body before drilling into the open corpse of the man. Within seconds, black veins spread from underneath his skin. Seconds later, the corpse twitched. First one finger. Then an arm. Then the eyes.

More like a flesh puppet than a man, the body contorted and writhed before claws of bone grew from its fingertips. The cheeks of the man sunk inward before they split open, revealing the human teeth underneath. Fear crept up my spine as several tubes grew from the back of the man, before swelling to their brim with blood. They burst. The open squelch of tearing meat lashed out, revealing several eyes. Hollow eyes. Hungry eyes.

They glanced around, the limbs of the man bending backwards so that the creature could move. My breathing dampened, turning shallow as the beast turned towards me. The thing twitched before Schema recognized it.

Spawn of Yawm | Level 200 – This is one of Yawm’s new pawns. He and his entourage clear out entire populations before assimilating them into his army of mutants. This is the youngest and weakest variation you will see with Yawm’s name on it. If enough of these collect together, enormous, writhing balls of moving limbs will come together into something known as grikes.

The best method of preventing this is burning the bodies of the dead before Yawm can wield them. This isn’t always possible. The faster you can kill these monstrosities, the better since they rapidly evolve into more powerful variations and eventually gain sentience.

Even though this message tells you all this, little is understood about the potential of these enemies. Be wary, and most of all, be afraid.

I frowned before gritting my teeth. It would find me, along with many others. If a petal could infect a single person, then this entire place would be swarming in minutes. Killing this thing before others reformed was my only chance. If I killed it, leveled up, used the gained points, then I could fight my way out of here. Having no more time for a more developed plan, I charged at it while crushing my own fears.

The back of the man split open, revealing three tentacles, each with a blade at the end of them. As I reached the thing, one of the blades whipped towards me with enough force to cleave through steel. I moved my right arm and molded my armor, redirecting the tentacle straight into the ground. Another shot towards me before I opened my mouth and bit towards the thing.

My armor's maw followed, the metal rending open and cleaving through the metallic blade at the end of the tentacle. I jerked my neck, tearing the limb from the creature before stomping onto the blade that missed me. My foot crunched the dagger underfoot before the third tentacle snapped my way. I banged the tentacle away with a quick snap of my left forearm, forcing it to swing sideways.

The tentacle redirected towards my side, but I charged forward. The tentacle scraped my back, gashing me open like a filleted fish, but I encroached on the monster. I pivoted my hips, launching a hook towards the center of its black, veiny mass. The flesh of the dead man popped and split, softer than butter. The dark veins stopped the might of my fist, each black tube tough as wood.

I damaged the host of the monster, but it regenerated in a few seconds. No longer worried about killing normal people, I activated Oppression. The creature squealed out in an unearthly, monstrous bellow. It wrapped its tentacle around my waist, lifting me into the air. The tendril quivered from my weight, my body heavier than it expected. I raised a foot back and kicked it. The monster stumbled back, releasing me.

I tackled forward, pushing the tube of meat before lifting a foot. I stomped at its chest, hitting the creature like I kicked a door down. It flopped backward before I pressed a heel onto a wriggling tentacle. My planted foot kept it from fumbling backward. From the middle of my palm, I formed a dull, jagged spike. As if I swung a sword, I sliced the spike towards the tentacle. Tight and frail, the limb ruptured.

Black blood gushed from the limb, the tentacle whipping through the air like a sputtering hose of umbral fluid. The black ooze splattered onto my armor before I charged forward again. I raised both my arms overhead before pulling them down with all my strength. The blackening body squished under the impact. My shoulders strained at the force, but I held together. Before it recovered, I pummeled the body of the man to mush.

It lived through carnage, its body held together by a vitality unending and absolute. It reformed over and over, a regenerative ball of filth. The blood soaked into my skin, and my armor devoured it before the liquid infested me. It tried sliding into my mouth, but my metal maw ingested the beast's fragments. This virulent ball of death crumbled into paste. One strike after the other, my hands turned into meat grinders. The man's deformed body turned into red and black oatmeal with bits of bone in it. I ceased defending myself, other bodies changing around me.

I burned through most of my health, turning my own body into fuel for my augmentation runes. Other bodies morphed near me while this monstrosity stayed alive. My clawing and strikes devolved into desperate haymakers. I stomped. I crushed. I crumbled. It had to die, or its brethren would devour me.

Dozens of corpses squirmed, each of them shivering violently as black veins grew underneath their pale skin. The surreal scene surrounded me, becoming a living nightmare. In the middle of that blood soaked suburb, a graceful shower of pink petals

landed like a cherry blossoming festival in Japan. As the petals condensed, the number of corpses thinned and the number of shambling abominations thickened.

They closed in as the one below me stopped moving. In a panic, I opened my status. It died, giving me experience and levels. I poured my points into endurance, and I finalized my decision without time for anything else. In an instant, the dense, heavy coat of exhaustion over me wilted. I heaved a few breaths before charging into the nearest mockery of a human body.

Fear fueled me, and I wouldn't go down without a fight. Getting near the monster, I stalled for a second. The body of a child folded backwards, walking with its stomach bulging towards the sky. I took a step back, and something in the back of my mind roared. Bloodlust. Savagery. Brutality. It consumed me. It reached out, crawling into my mind. Having no other choice, I embraced the calling like an old friend.

Now was not the time for patience or calm or peace. It was time for bloodletting. For hatred. For murder. For hunger.

I roared, my cry primal, my anger bleating. I tore towards the corpse of a child, and as I reached it, the stomach bursted in a cloud of red mist. Two arms with hands made out of its ribcage swung towards me. My sympathy died as I let those hands crash straight into my shoulders. Like a monster, I shot my hand into the spawn's chest. I gouged out its organs. I tore out its entrails.

I grabbed the densest cluster of black veins and ripped it out. The skin stretched and swelled and split. I pulled out one of the writhing bugs. The petals split to two wings, each of them spread out as thin films of muscle. They latched into the child's body while the numerous black legs of the bug had grown into the black limbs of the creature. The abdomen of the insect turned into a heart, beating the black blood throughout the corpse.

Its muscle wings snapped onto my hand, and it crawled at me. I ripped the abomination onto the ground before heel stomping it into oblivion. It cracked like a hollow ball of wood under my heel, odd and unnatural for what it was. The crunchy remnants stuck to my foot, furthering its infection. It crawled at my foot, trying to dig under my skin. It met my armor, and I crawled back into it.

It died, and more levels rushed in. No time for thoughtful decisions, I poured more points into endurance and finalized. The decapitated corpse of a woman shambled at me. She walked on the road before having her head sliced clean off. Bark scales grew out of her skin, forming plates of armor as her chest split open into a gaping mouth with spiked teeth. The cheekless mouth growled, the maw like a crocodile-human hybrid.

Reacting as it charged, I stomped the mouth into the ground, breaking the new jaw of the abomination off. One of the arms whipped towards me, the arm's bone hitting my shoulder. I stayed together, but the monster's arm didn't. It snapped, the dull crack

muffled by the muscle and skin. The bark scales sliced out at me. They dug into my armor before I slung my fist at it. The creature's gut popped into the ground.

The woman's spine snapped, caving the monster in. The upper and lower body of the woman squirmed like a cockroach pinched in the middle. I stomped the monster into the ground before grabbing its leg. I howled as I pulled with my limbs screaming in effort. My endurance fueled my runes, giving me strength and power. Wielding my blood as a weapon, I tore muscle from bone and bone from body.

The leg gored out, the other parts of it scrambling for escape. Every part clambered in a different direction as if every piece of it lived. I restrained the beast. I growled, using the bone of its leg as a spear. I stabbed, piercing the black bug with the femur of the woman. Lifting it up, and my helmet devoured the squirming insect. My armor laughed. In hell, I was driven mad, but my armor gave my madness a purpose.

An eternal hunger. A relentless starvation. An endless famine.

I leaned over, glancing around like an animal. I found two bodies mushing together into a mass of meat. I bolted towards the aberration, crushing numerous bones before forcing it onto the ground. As I pulled myself upward, the skin of the creature latched onto me. Like a malignant infection, it filled into the cracks of my armor. It found no food, only a hunter. My armor collapsed onto the creature, my own flesh and blood giving me an airtight seal.

But this monster lacked my defenses, and I abused it beneath me. Jerking my arms off the beast, the skin of the creature split with sickening pops. Torrents of red and black blood pumped from the creature before I smashed it into pieces. I smashed pieces to pulp. I smashed pulp to liquid. From my feet, wires of my armor reached out and soaked the beast in.

I turned, finding the head of the decapitated woman chewing on one of the leftover bodies I left behind. It grew a pair of six pus covered legs. I grimaced as veins grew from the mother's mouth and pumped the meat of the body into its head. As it did so, the skull ballooned outwards until the scalp and cheeks of the mother split. The pumping ebbed a nauseating squelch.

Everywhere around me, the bodies wretched and contorted and warped into disgusting aberrations of organs and skin. Some were collections of hands and jaws and teeth. Others devolved into winged thralls with their intestines hanging like a jellyfish's tentacles. Some of the bodies grew into the ground, holes appearing in the skin of the person before the pink petal puffed out of them.

Worse still, other corpses swelled in the bodies before slugs covered in sacks crawled out of their skin. As they neared the quarantine line, bullets rained in. Fire plumed and the slugs hissed in agony. They crawled into an electric fence, vaporizing to ash. It was madness. Everything was madness.

In that insanity, I went insane as well.

A darkness in the back of my mind unleashed, its fury endless and its hunger perpetual. This was my reality. This was my home. Who I was would die here. Who I'd become would survive. I surged the will to battle. I wallowed in the sanguine sensation, my hands shaking in my fervor. I dashed into another monster, ready for war. I stomped and struck like lightning. I roared and raged like thunder.

I let loose all inhibitions, turning into an animal. Everything blurred as instinct took over. Blood became my paint and Springfield my canvas. I tore into the living corpses like a butcher chopping into its meat with a cleaver. Blood splattered across my skin, sinking into my armor and boots and gloves. It sunk into me. Anytime reasoning returned, I put points into endurance and let myself go once more.

I chomped into the monsters, devouring them. My armor savoured the flavor of their flesh, sweet as sugar and enticing as water in a desert. I lost all understanding as my fingers became claws, and my mouth curved up into a smile. A haunting laugh droned in my head. A long, maddening snicker that bore into my skull like a tungsten tipped drill. It engulfed my mind with its steady, monotonous rhythm.

It grew in volume, becoming a symphony in the blood and black and horror. The sound didn't fight the sounds of guts slapping the ground or bones breaking. It harmonized with the horror, echoing the dread and the trembling of my hands. It was a coming tide, an unstoppable stampede, a boundless, dark abyss. An endless tide, a writhing mass. It poured over me, becoming my battlecry. In time, I feared that haunting laughter more than the horror's howling.

For the laughter was me.

And somewhere deep within, its voice resonated with me. Something robbed me of my humanity, a seed sprouting in my chest. That hysteria and lunacy carried me through the brutality of the situation. Hours passed, each second an eternity. I gained control of myself, flashing back to reality. I stared down, finding my hand holding a skull by the eye sockets. My other hand clasped into a wet, dripping fist, suffused with blood.

I leaned over a pile of corpses. Bodies splayed out in every direction. Horns, teeth, spikes, claws, and plates impaled my armor across several parts of me. My armor pulled back together, sheets of it ripped and gored apart. Chunks of my skin tore off. My armor smiled, gorging on the horrors around me. I gorged on the bodies with the maw of my helmet like some cannibal.

I fell backwards, landing in the bodies. My armor reached down into them, and I held down vomit at my surroundings. My armor fought me to continue feasting, but I crushed the greed with my will. I scrambled back, my head plopping back onto the pavement after I left the bodies behind. I stared at the clear, open sky. The fog dispersed, and the sun pelted me.

Petals ceased falling, many lying around me. A few of them crawled towards the heap of carcasses at the center of the road near me. As I stared at the heap of bloody bodies, a force in the back of my mind hungered. My eyes widened, and I leaned back. My armor's urges compelled me, not myself. It being a part of me now, I held responsibility for what I did with its desires.

I slammed a fist into the pavement. I wouldn't forget that.

Peering at the fuschia leaves, they crawled towards the pile of pulped bodies and reformed it in seconds. The pink petal bugs kept using the biomass at will, no amount of grinding or mushing enough to stop them. Gazing at my skin, I grimaced at the source of my survival. My armor indulged on the corpses of the creatures after I killed them. Otherwise, the petals reanimated the corpses and flesh into more abominations.

Eating the petals or even the corpses kept me alive until now. Sighing at that reality, I stood up on strong legs, no longer wobbling from fear. I paced up to the pile of eviscerated corpses. Just the thought of eating while near one, let alone eating the actual body disgusted me. In order to live, I did what I had to do, however.

I walked over and ripped the petal bug from the corpse pile, preventing it from reanimating the host. I crushed the creature in my hand before leaning over. I looked away and placed a hand on the pile. My armor did the rest. I peered at the pavement as the bodies drained, screams echoed, and petals crawled. I leaned my head into my palm. I laughed for a moment before my throat burned a little. My eyes followed, and I blinked out a tear.

Other tears followed, and surrounded by evil, I wept. No one alive heard me, but I shook and trembled at what just happened. In time, a cold numbness replaced my grief. It encompassed me, and I welcomed it. It had been a long day, and my capacity for emotion already peaked. Peering around, I pulled my body along, every piece of me wanting rest.

I killed bug after bug, their level much lower than a transformed being. I let my armor feast on the monster's bodies, the pale imitations of humanity torturous and excruciating to look at. My eyes grew heavy, and I checked out my levels. I gained fifty five of them over the whole bloodbath, and I amassed five million ambient mana. I killed most of the monsters before they fully transformed, and that lowered the experience I gained.

At the same time, even being able to kill them amazed me. I piled skill on top of skill, but my unique abilities kept me alive here. In a normal circumstance, the beasts would've just infected me instantly. Getting rid of the bodies required specialized equipment as well, bullets not really working. That fact explained the flamethrowers used by the Force of Iron.

Based on the number of bodies left out here, that faction killed only a few of the monsters. Most of the abominations stayed within this wasteland, probably slaughtering

people elsewhere to fuel more biomass. My armor's absorption combined with my innate resistance to the infection sustained me here.

In other words, I was lucky.

Closing my eyes, I never wanted to be in a chaotic situation again. I lost control in more ways than one here, so I tried taking that control back. Moving to my status, I glanced at my perks and tree bonuses for the first time in a long while. I invested most of my stats into endurance, but a few extra attributes lined up for me. I tried reasoning with a dulled mind.

Endurance acted as a bread and butter stat with my runes. The health and regen fed my sigils, converting into physical might. Being tireless held its own advantages as well, the fight being a great example. Endurance even augmented my willpower, another useful stat, and the health gained synergized with my armor bonuses. Keeping things simple, I invested in endurance until it peaked at 201, a nice, clean whole number.

In my status, thirteen points stared back at me. Torix mentioned level one hundred perks, and so I aimed for them afterward. Not having much mental capacity at that point, I figured strength would be the next best perk for me. I placed the points, and my perk menu popped up. The bonuses blew me away.

[Unbroken(Endurance of 100 or more plus Unstoppable and Unbounded unlocked | Note – Only three level 100 perks may be chosen for three different attributes, so choose wisely.) – You are time's unending march, unbroken and unending. You are a testament to the will of sentients everywhere and to the might of longevity. While others collapse where you walk, you stand tall over their bodies. You stand alone.]

Lifespan multiplier doubled once more. Yet another 1/10th of endurance added to willpower. Another 5 health and stamina awarded per point in endurance. | 20 in total, excluding multipliers | Leveling bonuses for endurance doubled. You no longer require any sleep.]

[Paragon of Will(Willpower of 100 or more plus Uncompromising and Arbiter unlocked | Note – Only three level 100 perks may be chosen for three different attributes, so choose wisely.) – Most live their lives with their potential unfounded. You've walked those limits time and time again. In your journey, you learned that limits are what you make of them, not what you think them to be.]

Doubles internal motivation once more. Yet another 1/10th of willpower is added to intelligence. An additional .1 mana regen rewarded per point of willpower – Blood Magic converts mana regen to health regen. Doubles the leveling bonuses gained from willpower. Doubles current affinities for magic. Increases mythical skill cap by 1 | 2 total.]

Endurance acted as my staple attribute by a wide margin, so choosing it required little thought. Willpower, on the other hand, muddled otherwise clear waters. The bonuses from willpower matched up pretty well with my skills so far, but by selecting it, I cut out either strength or constitution as leveling perks.

No matter which of those attributes I sacrificed, the other attribute left a void behind. At the same time, other, less logical factors weighed on me. Peering down, my mental fatigue drenched me in a deep ocean. It piled as a pressure over every part of my being, a cloak that robbed me of my humanity. I never wanted my humanity torn from me again.

Staring around, monsters still roamed the bloody streets. Others would come, and I enjoyed no time for rest. Worse still, a part of me feared what my armor wanted. It overwhelmed me and my reason in the battle. In a crazy situation where I truly needed my full faculties, I ended up blacking out. If I did that while surrounded by normal people, what would I wake up to?

Or worse still, would I ever wake up again?

Those questions eased my decision, and I finalized the willpower perk. Whatever bonus either constitution or strength offered, my armor already gave something similar with its damage resistance. Hell, my armor was probably better than the constitution perk. My goal centered on not letting my armor overwhelm my mind. That prerogative required my full and immediate attention.

I finalized the perks and attributes, and in a crisp, clear, and cleansing wave, clarity rushed over me. It coursed into me like a palpable release of exhaustion. I blinked through new eyes, as if waking from an amazing night of sleep. No, from many nights of sleep. Hell, *years* even. I hadn't realized it, but I debilitated myself in these fights. My mind dragged on through a fundamental fatigue that I just dealt with.

The moment I finalized the perks, that exhaustion vaporized in an instant. The refreshment gave me a different view of the situation. Instead of being overwhelmed by horror, I found opportunity in each of these minions. I should've been curled in a corner, crying my eyes out. The system let me rise above it all.

In a way, I stood in the eye of a hurricane, the storm disintegrating my surroundings while leaving me unaffected. Lifting my hands, I channeled some augmentation, enough to feel it. It responded with fury, a nice rush to accompany my lucid self. Wanting to ramp it up, I turned and peered around. The situation spiraled out of control in the distance. Getting out of here took priority over messing around, so I silenced the desire to take out the other monsters.

With a quick whip, I sank my temptation like a rock out in the ocean. After appreciating my changes, I opened my status screen for the first time in several weeks. The Obliterator tree and other tree bonuses added up rather nicely to say the least.

Level 160 | Attribute Menu

Strength [44.2] | Constitution [36.3] | Endurance [201] | Dexterity [32.8] | Willpower [105.5] | Intelligence [55.5] | Charisma [36] | Luck [35.1] | Perception [30.5]

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Character Screen

Health – 7,838/7,838 | Health Regen – 1,293/min | Stamina – 1,720/1,720 | Stamina Regeneration – 63/sec | Damage Resistance – 97% | Mental Resistance – 97% | Physical Power – (+)481% | Damage Increase – 5% | Evolution: 5.95 Million/16.00 Million

Aura – Oppression | Current Damage: (8,000 + 25% of your health)/minute within a 150ft radius.

I doubled my health in one go – literally doubled it. My health regen followed suit, which acted as mana too thanks to Blood Magic. I clasped my hands, eager to test my limits, but I remembered my situation. Wielding my fresh levels, I headed towards the barricade. I walked into one of the houses near the road. I sat beside the back window of the kitchen, readying a plan of approach.

Before I got out, the ground rumbled in front of the house. I crept through the home, quiet as I could. Near the front door, I peered through a window. Standing on a destroyed portion of the street, a robed figure walked with calm, composed steps. Each time one of his feet landed on the pavement, the ground quaked. In each boot, he carried an entire stampede. From his back, wings sprouted from his back, one dark and one bright.

The wing of light poured a sun's touch across his vicinity. The umbral wind siphoned the light from around him, casting an eerier shade on his other side. As the feathered limbs widened, they dwarfed his robed body. He flapped them, and a gentle breeze flowed through every nearby home. In the wing's wake, a storm of pink petals flipped through the sky. The majestic display robbed me of reason for a moment.

I stared at the effortless cyclone of fuschia leaves, and the robed figure spread his arms wide. In that moment, he appeared holy, like a reincarnated saint. Schema recognized why.

Elijah Joan, the Fallen Seraph | Level 3,243 – One of the four followers of Yawm, Elijah is a powerful fighter with tremendous healing abilities. It's rumored that he carries a mountain in each of his boots, and the burdens he carries give him his immense weight. While this is unlikely, his constitution is unbelievable, along with his strength.

Little is known about Elijah outside of those factors and his angelic origins. One thing is clear, Elijah is a monster in his own right, and you would do well to avoid him at any and all costs.

As I finished reading the message, my stomach sank. A *follower* of Yawm outleveled Kessiah by over a thousand. I walked in the wake of his shadow, my abilities like a mound under a mountain's shade. Elijah glanced around, his face black under his hood. From his light side, he outstretched a pale hand that was remarkably human. He spoke aloud in a noble, piercing voice,

"I know you are here. You've done well with saving yourself from Yawm's holy wrath. You may join us, and receive his holy blessing. You need only step out into the light."

I moved up to get over the kitchen window, obeying his command. My eyes widening, I stared at my hands. He enchanted his voice or something, and I almost walked right into an unseen trap. I lowered my head, leaning against the wall. Elijah wouldn't call out if he already knew where I was. It was the same story for his 'rewards.' Yawm's version of payment showed itself on the people here.

Elijah continued, his voice beautiful as a crystal in light, "Please, do not be afraid, my child. We will cleanse you. If you have sinned, he will erase that sin from within. Yawm will bring it out, and use it as your power. Do you not wish to be cleansed? Have you gone mad? He may save you from madness as well."

I held my breath, a bead of cold sweat pouring from my forehead. Elijah's steps beat against the ground, one at a time as he moved towards me. He continued, "You will grow in ways you cannot imagine. Yawm will unlock your inner potential. All you must do is embrace your new flesh. Your new body. Your new mind."

At the end of the room, a polished teapot revealed Elijah's pacing form. The fallen seraph pulled the robe off his dark wing, revealing a twisted arm of intestines and long, thin hairs. The limb shivered and pulsed as he Elijah resonated,

"Yawm will show you a truer side of yourself. A side you deserve and must face. He will open you and reveal what is within you to the world. Only then may you overcome it."

My skin crawled as he stepped another step towards my hiding place. He stared off into the distance, tears falling from his eyes,

"We are so fortunate to live in a time where the holy one may help us. Where he may enlighten us. Bring us from the abyssal pit and into an endless light. A scorching light. A flaming light that sears and burns and belittles. Even if you do not believe, the new flesh will consume you and make you new. You'll believe me then. They all do. They all will."

His words dripped like a toxic honey, sweet as candy but deadly as venom. I wanted to stand without thinking. With an explosion of will, I forced the urge down and tightened

my control. I coiled over my mind, letting nothing in or out. I froze in place, in a stasis. Elijah sighed before screeching out like tearing metal,

“I can see you. Come out...Little one.”

Chapter 34: Beneath Your Skin

I froze in place, my heart stopping. His voice compelled me to stand, but my mind roared at me to stay still. He could be lying, so I stayed seated, resisting the temptation of his voice once more. As time passed, the iron grip of my steeled mind loosened up. Sweat poured down my temples and forehead. Every part of my body screamed out, commanding me to stand and listen to him. His voice was a gun on my forehead, his words compelling me to obey.

Narrowing my eyes, I stayed firm. I bit my lip until blood poured into my mouth. The iron taste kept me together. It reminded me of all the blood outside and just what Yawm may do to me if Elijah found me. Even then, my mind's dominance crumbled, one piece at a time. As I resisted, mana flooded over Elijah, some kind of aura covering the entire area.

Elijah announced into the sky,

“If I must come and drag you out, you will be punished instead of rewarded. Now come.”

He sounded like a knowing mother, stern yet gentle. It was like I stared at a cliff, and he told me to jump. Knowing it was wrong didn't change the fact I still wanted to. This demon disguised as an angel promised so much with so little. The tendrils of his voice dug into my eyes and ears. They invaded my mind, tearing me apart as I struggled to stay there.

I faltered, one of my feet pressing into the ground and pushing me up with a slow crawl. With my mouth clamped shut, I screamed in my mind for my leg to stop. It slowed, but I still rose up with a steady crawl. Desperate to escape, I retracted the armor from my leg before taking a deep breath. I sharpened my armored fingertips and dug them deep into my bare thigh. They dug into the meat of my leg, severing tendons and flesh.

The pain passed over with ease, but watching my thigh gush blood sickened me. The muscles in my thigh seized up. With my fingers inches deep, the leg finally stopped pushing me upwards.

Elijah grumbled, “Then I shall grab you myself. A pity considering you'll gain no rewards now.”

He paced over, a walking thunderstorm. Hopelessness crawled over me, a dread that whittled away at my spirit. A part of me held onto any possibility at life, however. As Elijah's hand landed on the doorframe, I closed my eyes. I was done for. As Elijah

peered over me, a shadow encompassed me from all sides. A warm, comfortable presence turned me invisible, my leaking blood and dripping sweat floating off the ground.

Elijah peered down, and he raised a bushy brow at the ground,

“Strange...I thought I sensed a life force here. A breath, a sweat, and a fear. Now there’s nothing.”

His irises opened wide, a handsome man staring down at me with a gentle smile. Across the cheek, the writhing intestines squirmed and moved under his skin. He peered up, shaking his head. “And I wished to save another one. This moment in time has been one disappointment after the next.”

A tear plopped onto my head, floating on my invisible body. Elijah cried over me, the twisted angel staring forward and shaking his head. He turned, and he flapped his wings. A hurricane erupted across everything nearby. The house’s insides shattered and mangled. Every glass popped. The walls wobbled. The door splintered and tables tore into the walls.

Elijah flew out into the air before gliding out into the distance. As he left, I fell down and heaved for breath. I leaned my head back against the wall, my hands and lips trembling. I pulled my hand out of my thigh. It regenerated, and my armor molded back over the wound. I gasped, wanting a way out of this damn place.

Peering down, Torix’s shade covered me from head to toe still. I turned back towards the blockade behind me. I walked towards the back of the house. From the window, I inspected the defenses. Soldiers paced along the lines of the barricade. Elijah terrified them, his flying form a harbinger of destruction. That left them all alert and ready for action.

Compounding their vigilance, the commanders chewed them out when I busted through the blockade. Considering this infection’s rampant spread, they couldn’t afford any mistakes like that. Unfortunately for them, I prepared to pass by again. Running into the misty city had been a calculated risk, one that blew up in my face. Gaining levels took the edge off that decision, but I never wanted another fight like that bloodbath.

Remembering the red and decay, my hands shook but not in fear as I expected. They jittered in anticipation, and my armor quivered in hunger. I raised a brow at myself, expecting a terrified trembling in place of brimming excitement. I enjoyed fighting more than I thought.

Either way, fighting through the Force of Iron was a cakewalk compared to the horrors of Springfield. I closed my eyes, thinking of what my old town was like once. Shaking myself out of that, Torix’s shade hissed into my ear,

“Escape.”

It cloaked me in invisibility, and that eased any escapes I'd make. Taken aback, I pondered the shade's late arrival. If Torix cloaked me earlier, most of the turmoil could've been avoided. Putting that question in the back of my mind, I skulked up as close to the trooper's barricade as possible. I found a thinner part of the barricade within a house's distance from the soldiers. I built momentum in the house before leaping out of the second story window of a suburban home.

The mana heated my arms and legs, and the guards reacted far faster than before. That proved irrelevant compared to my emboldened strength and invisibility. I blistered over a car, hopping clear over it before jumping over and behind a house. Bullets rained in nearby, but the home blocked me from becoming a lead catching net.

After dashing over a few houses, I found my traversal flipped on its head. Before, I hopped fences with some difficulty. I ran around cars and flipped trucks. It took time to get through a suburbia. This time, I jumped over everything. Not needing to change direction or slow down all the time, I sped up to a respectable tempo, some closer objects blurring in my vision.

That was good, as I wanted to get the hell out of there. I sprinted across the terrain like my feet were on fire and the ground was lava. The shade evaporated my trail's marks, stopping any pursuers from following me. As I crashed through a blackberry bramble, I checked my messages.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown – I've told the others of your message. I wish to apologize for my lack of knowledge regarding such a cataclysmic event; this ritual has consumed me. For our safety, Kessiah and I moved the marble plates elsewhere. I've marked the location on your map.

Considering I am already his enemy, I will send this Yawm fellow a message of some sort to derail his efforts. I've planted the seeds of his enmity. I shall now reap what I've sown. Kessiah escaping this mess takes priority, as she never agreed to handle this chaotic cluster of a situation.

As for your homeworld, we shall defend it. I've sent scouts, and they've ascertained the scope of this infestation. I sent you extra shades in case any of them are captured. Schema's speed and power be with you.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 |

Unknown – The situation has changed. I've found reports of other worldly beings with unbelievable levels. You must escape. I've sent several shades to escort you out. Hide with all you have as your life depends upon it.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown – Four of the five shades I've sent have been captured and eradicated. Get out of the area, as that being will find you there. If I come, they will sense my presence. I will only make it worse. Please, escape.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill | Level 1,236 | Unknown – I may only pray to Schema that you are alive and not captured.

I smiled at the messages, my assumptions correct. The old necromancer did what he could for me. Brushing up on my status, our team's base situated itself near the town on the other side of Springfield. Finding a mountain of notifications, I surfed through them. I deleted the useless ones, like level ups or skill ups. I put the better ones to the side for handling other problems.

It reminded me of clearing out an inbox of an email, a little tedious but still productive. A unique message popped out of the bunch.

Yawm's Arrival(Quest of Survival) – Yawm of Flesh has begun an infestation of Earth. This infestation must not be allowed to spread, so no sentients will be allowed to leave until after the quarantine's completion. It's up to you and your species to protect yourselves.

From henceforth, you will receive doubled experience against Yawm's minions, Yawm's followers, and Yawm himself. Based on experience points earned, you will gain a bonus reward after the quest ends. The value of your reward will be determined based on your points earned.

You may turn in these earned points early for a lesser reward to assist with destroying the enemies. There will be six Sentinels placed near Springfield to assist with containment and an Overseer as well. The point system is as follows:

100,000 points for Follower kills. The opportunity to obtain Sentinel rights are given to anyone who slays a Follower of Yawm. Rights are issued with the respective responsibilities.

100,000,000 points for killing Yawm. The opportunity for Overseer rights are given to the killer of Yawm. Rights are issued with the respective responsibilities. Unknown status revoked.

Experience multipliers count toward the points gained. May fortune favor you and your kind.

Current Point Total | 24

I peered at my notifications, trying to figure out when this announcement declared itself. It happened after I handled all of my enemies, but the points rushed in right after. I

wincing at my experience gains, as they didn't receive the same bonus. It counted from here on out, however, so I let the loss go.

In a way, this infestation served as an opportunity wrapped in a horrific package. If I killed hundreds of these monsters, levels would fall from the sky. I no longer had to worry about getting enough experience as an endless pit of it spread out before me. It took the form of old friends and my hometown's corpse, however.

Those thoughts tumbled in my head as I paced out of the forest and onto the grassy, rolling hills North of Springfield. I never explored where Torix set up camp, so everything proved new. The rolling hills sprouted with sparse trees here or there. This place was a series of abandoned pastures, the grass long and wild. Some old timers mentioned pioneers making farms and homes here before the actual midwest was found.

After that, everyone abandoned the area, only staying in Springfield because of the creeks here. Torix's mark planted down in the middle of this desolate series of fields. Getting up to it, the mark planted down on a cluster of woods bunched up at the center of several grassy mounds.

After crossing the fields, I reached the center of the hills. An old cellar from a frontier home lodged into the ground. It laid out there as inconspicuous as a rotting stump in a field. I almost missed it. I opened the door, bits of dirt falling down before I walked inside.

Freshly made earthen steps carved a path into the ground. Long, winding roots supported the tunnel and room at the basement. I stepped down into the underground home. A glowing pool of water lit the center of the large room. The same cyan glow ebbed off the pool as BloodHollow, giving an underwater hue to the marble plates all along the edges of the hill home.

Torix casted dominion mana from one palm to the other, the energy writhing in and out of his massive book. Roots restructured from the plants above, forming walls and rooms of the cavern. Althea hunched over a work desk lining a wall of the room, messing with some ammo from the Force of Iron. She tied three vials together with a cable, mirroring a tribal bola thrown at people's feet.

Kessiah floated in the pool, casting a shadow onto the room's roof. The mana bended away from her, keeping her floating an inch or so above it. As I got into the room, no one noticed me at first. At least that's what I thought. Torix finished his incantation before turning towards me. He walked up with his hands interlocked behind himself, "I see you've found your way out of that predicament."

Torix's eyes flared green, "It is...It's very good to see you again, disciple."

I spread my hands, "Hah, it's good to be back."

Torix walked up and gave me a hug. Althea turned to me, and she smiled. She hopped over before giving me a hug too. As if being held by a bear, she lifted me with a squeeze, "Ah...It's good to see you. Sorry about leaving you like that."

I peered down, and I gasped out, "Did you get them back?"

Althea set me down, letting me breathe. She murmured, "I did, and it wasn't too bad getting here. You, uhm, did a great job getting on those jeep's nerves."

I raised my brow, "More like getting them bloodthirsty."

Althea scratched her cheek, "Whatever. It worked."

Kessiah turned a head to me, and she frowned, "You gained a *lot* of levels while out there. Did you take advantage of the new quarantine?"

My expressions turned cold, "You could call it that, if you wanted to. It was more like a bloodbath."

Kessiah stared back up, looking exasperated, "Yeah, well this is just the beginning. You think you're tired now? Wait until we've cleared everything out and killed Yawm."

Kessiah let out a long sigh, "It might take years. *Years.*"

I peered at Kessiah then back to the others. I spread out my hands, "You're staying to help against Yawm? I thought you wanted to leave?"

Althea's shoulders slumped and Torix's eyes flared red. I messed up. Kessiah made snow angels in the mana water as she simmered, "Apparently, Torix's magic isn't working. I'm trapped, and I can't leave. I'm stuck fighting Yawm with you guys. Great. Just great."

Disappointed she'd stay, I crossed my arms and said, "What happened to warping her out?"

Torix coughed into a hand, "Ahem...I had believed that I couldn't finish the summoning ritual because of your mana signatures. I obviously shouldn't have doubted myself. I believe it was due to Schema's requirements for this 'Quest of Survival.' That and-"

Kessiah leaned up by pushing up with her hands. The pool of glowing water bended under her while she shouted, "You couldn't get it to work because you're washed up. Worn out. Done for, old man."

Torix's fire eyes narrowed, "My ritual has worked hundreds of times before. I've augmented it since our arrival here, and it still doesn't work. I've told you this time and time again, but my ritual isn't the problem. Schema has sealed this world off for some reason, even to illegal means."

Althea peered down, not wanting to be a part of the conversation. I raised my brow, "Is it the quarantine?"

Torix shook his head, "It most certainly is yet isn't. Schema's performed a rather unique operation that I've merely read about in historical texts. The AI rendered this planet locked off from any methods of escaping it, even illegal warping measures from unknowns. In that manner, Schema pinned us here on Earth, forcing us to fight against Yawm."

I rubbed my temples, looking off in a random direction, "But, you're not using Schema's normal transport right? You could just warp out or, I don't know, fly a spaceship, right?"

Torix's eyes dampened, "Schema requires special permissions for unknowns to warp. We must face Yawm or watch this world be consumed and us along with it."

My eyes hardened as flashes of my fights flamed in my mind. I gave him a slow nod, "Huh...We'll have to fight him. Again, huh? That's...That's not good." I closed my eyes, "It is what it is then. We'll do what we have to do then."

Althea peered up at me, "Hey...Uhm, think about it. We're getting extra experience, and a lot of Yawm's soldiers are unknowns. That's quadrupled experience points. That puts us in a great place to level up, you know? Your armor can change too, while Kessiah and Torix are already really strong. They can guide us, so it's not all bad."

Althea tried cheering me up, but her words failed to do so. She didn't understand what we'd be running into soon, and I didn't have the heart to tell her. However, the fact she even tried to bring up my spirits, that brought a reluctant smile to my face. I gave her a sad smile, "We...We can catch up. No big deal, right?"

Althea's eyes brightened, "Exactly. We got your friends too."

Remembering Michael and Kelsey, I frowned, "How are they?"

Torix frowned, "They are stable...But I should warn you, they are both slowly dying. The Force of Iron has inspected the surroundings near the quarantine and anyplace downwind of the infection sights. It is truly unfortunate, but your friends were caught in the initial infection radius."

Steadying myself, I closed my eyes. I opened them at Torix, "So...Can we save them?"

Torix turned to face a wall, tapping his sides with his hands. He let out a long sigh, "I...I honestly don't know. They've been infested with numerous of the, hm, petal bugs, I suppose you can call them that. If it were one, then perhaps we'd have a chance to cure them. As is, they're turning despite the stasis pods and my cooling magic."

Torix placed a hand on my shoulder, "I know it's difficult having all of this sink in at once, but-"

I nudged his hand aside, not out of refusal but to show my strength, "Thank you, but I'm fine. Let's talk about options to save them and what we can do right now. I don't have time to absorb everything that's happening, but I know that I'm not what's important about this situation right now. Getting them back and our current situation is what really matters."

My eyes hardened, "Right now, I'm a body, and I just have to move. That's it."

Althea reached out with a hand, but kept it at a distance, "You sure? It's your hometown and your friends. I can't imagine what that's like." She stared at her hands, poking her fingertips together, "And not just because I don't have friends or a hometown...It's just like, like a lot to take in. For me even. And it hasn't even happened to me. That's not to compare the two things, but uhm...You get what I mean...Hopefully."

I smiled at her, "I do."

Torix gave me a nod, "Hmm, if you're able to persevere, then by all means, do so. The realities are as such: first, the Followers overlevel us immensely. We'll need to kill them before Yawm arrives. Second, this quest dramatically speeds up both of your progressions toward fighting Yawm. Third, after Yawm has awakened, other, powerful sentients will arrive. They may ease our burden regarding the killing of Yawm himself."

Kessiah pulled herself out of the pool, jerking herself up and out with a single hand. She raised both arms overhead and stretched, "What the old sack of dry skin is trying to say is that I'm going to be taking you both out on raids. It's going to be boring for me, but we'll get you both leveled up."

I raised an eyebrow, "Raids, huh?"

Kessiah rolled a hand in circles, "You know, when people go out to kill tons of monsters."

I shrugged, "I've never been on one."

Torix flaming eyes flickered, "Why, I believe that's the only kind of outing you've ever had. Semantics aside, there's many details to discuss. Come, we'll sit there."

Torix pointed at the wall wide desk that Althea sat at. I sat there myself. Before I arrived, Torix summoned curled up roots from nearby grasses, making a surprisingly soft seating. I leaned onto the crafting table, "So, what kind of *raids* are we going out on?"

Althea bounced on her heels while walking over, "Torix and I talked about it. So, like, we'll be sneaking past the Force of Iron's barricade, killing some of those things, then

coming back-" Althea noticed a change in my face, and she deflated, "Unless you don't want to, of course."

I numbed while staring forward, "If it's to survive, then that's what we'll do. What I think or feel isn't a part of the question."

Kessiah leaned back, "What happened to Mister Bloodlust? Sheesh, what a downer."

I frowned, "Kessiah. It's my hometown. I grew up here. It's gone now."

Kessiah walked over and placed a hand onto the wall beside me. She narrowed her eyes, "But like, you have a home, so there's that. Why so sullen about it? You had something to lose, so you could be grateful about that."

I expected to get in her face like before, but before I could Althea walked up to Kessiah. The remnant loomed over our sniper, a head taller than her and wider still. Althea stood up to that and snapped,

"I know you don't want to be here, but back off. I never had a home either, but that doesn't mean I don't understand how hard it must be to watch it crumble. So, er, give the guy a break. He's been through a lot...Er, please."

I glanced around, shocked at Althea's outburst. Kessiah and Torix shared my sentiment, each of them rendered speechless. I gave Althea a nod, "Huh...Thank you."

Althea put her hands on her hips, "Uhm...No problem."

Kessiah tilted her head, and Althea shrank down. Kessiah's brow furrowed before she laughed. The remnant put a hand on Althea's shoulder, and Kessiah relented, "Hah...Ok, ok. I know I can be an ass sometimes. I didn't want to fight here, and-" Kessiah looked away while waving a hand, "I just wanted to go back to my mercenary work. I was hitting a real hot streak before coming here."

Kessiah stepped off, spreading her hands, "But, Torix can't get me out of here, and neither can I. I'll try to make the best of this situation and see where it goes." Kessiah looked at me, "And sorry for always putting pressure on you. Something about you just rubs me the wrong way. I don't know what it is, but I'll try to get a handle on it." Kessiah smirked, "Emphasis on *try*. No guarantees here, little man."

I stated, "I don't expect anything from you at this point."

My scathing words bounced right off Kessiah, and she clapped her hands, "Good. So, I really want to be the one that kills Yawm. Getting rid of my unknown status would open up a lot of doors that have been shut for a long time. Any ideas on how to make that happen?"

An edge lingered in her voice, one of the few times she exposed any vulnerability. I calmed myself down, not biting at the opportunity. We'd be working together for a while, so I might as well establish a decent relationship if I could. I stood up, "Althea and I will level up in the raids. We'll amass our abilities until we become sizable threats."

Torix swung a hand, "And I shall be whittling down the majority of Yawm's forces. My summons and tactical knowledge shall prevent any unwanted run-ins with Yawm's troops in those circumstances. The Followers are particularly important in that regard." Torix gave Kessiah a nod, "If you'd like to, I don't mind you taking Yawm's head. I know the unknown status weighs on you far more heavily than it does me."

Kessiah leaned back, "Oh...Uh, well...Thanks."

I raised a brow, "When's the next raid planned?"

Torix waved his hands, "I'm ascertaining the location of Yawm's Followers as we speak. I'll then create distractions for when you go out on your raids. Just as well, I assumed you'd need some rest when you came back. It was a difficult outing from what I could gather."

I shook my head, "I'll be fine. We can go whenever."

Kessiah rolled her eyes, "Look, tough guy, you don't have to pretend you're made of stone."

I raised my hand, the armor shifting, "I'm not. I'm made of metal."

Kessiah glared at me, but I glared back. She crossed her arms, "Hm...Ok, do whatever you want. I'm going back to the pool."

I shrugged, "Whatever you want. Does anyone know where Michael and Kesley are? I just want to check on them."

Torix tapped the edge of the table, uncomfortable as someone with a rock in their shoe. I frowned, "Are they worse than you let on?"

"We're working towards a solution, but my understanding of human biology is limited, as is my understanding of the petal bugs. For now. They're in that room...In the back."

Hopping up, I walked back into the recesses of the dirt cavern. Torix grew roots to support the walkways, each of them intertwining into elegant arches. At the back was a small, earthen room where the two containment tubes leaned against the wall. Mana crystals powered the pods, keeping them stable. Someone removed the metal plates, exposing all of Kelsey and Michael floating in suspended motion.

For a while, I watched them bob up and down. I paced up and sat on a bed of moss on the opposite end of the room. I leaned onto my knees as I stared at them both. It was a weird feeling. On the one hand, I controlled nothing about the situation. They fought my help off and set themselves up for failure. On the other hand, I might've been able to save them.

I stared down at my armored palms, the runes jagged. Keeping these two alive would take a lot out of me. Finding a cure in time, keeping myself alive, and saving a few townsfolk required every bit of my attention from here on out. If anything, I stretched myself thin as peanut brittle, ready to snap at any time and any moment. To handle what I wanted to handle, I'd need to stretch even more.

Most of that came from how complicated the situation became. I preferred things when they were simple. See bat? Smash bat. See giant hivemind? Smash giant hivemind. Keeping these two alive meant working with a few more variables, so it wouldn't be so straightforward. I peeled back my armor from my face before standing up. I was dwelling on the situation, and that changed nothing.

Anytime I spent too long thinking, I ended up depressing myself. I walked up and tapped the container, sending a ripple through the tube before leaning against it. The stasis pod tugged at my mana as I closed my eyes for a second. I gave it a slight tap with a fist, grimacing at the two old friends.

Michael's eyes hollowed out like a man hanging from a noose. Black veins reached out of the side of his neck, down his arms, and up his abdomen. Kelsey's mouth broke apart, a metamorphosed tentacle crawling out of her mouth. Some skin split in her fingers, and from the gashes, claws reached out. Ice shards splintered their skin in several places, Torix's magic stemming an otherwise unstoppable tide.

I took a deep breath, and I murmured,

"What am I even supposed to do?"

Chapter 35: Haven From Hell

I waited there for a while, observing both of them. The symptoms of the petal bugs infection riddled them from head to toe, and it left me wondering what I could've done to stop it. I considered and rewound what I said and did in the conversation with them. In the end, I came up with no real answers. Despite what happened to them, I still resented them and how they treated me.

However, at no point did I ever hate them. Peering at the both of them, I wondered about Michael's family back in their lodge. They probably all died already. I rubbed my temples as memories of camping trips with Michael rushed in. I didn't remember his mom or sister that clearly, but his father's face lingered in my mind.

The guy was a family man down to his roots. He lacked ambition for standard career paths and whatnot, but the guy always worked hard to give his family a good life. In all honesty, I envied Michael on that front. Knowing that he died left me heavy and listless. A harsh reality set in, and I wallowed in it for a while.

I didn't stay in that dark place. Peering back up at Michael and Kelsey, I held a measure of faith in saving them. Torix's medicinal knowledge and magical skill gave us a serious edge in bringing Michael and Kelsey back, and my armor may save them if I could get it to eat only the insects. Those odds for the situation instilled some hope in me, though I kept that hope measured.

Considering everything that happened, I still lacked confidence moving forward. Getting out of that dark place, I paced into the back hallway. Torix's design gave the underground lair a druidic feel to it, elegant roots composing archways everywhere. Support beams made of gnarled tree roots held each room upright. I passed the doorway to my own room, my name etched with mana overhead along with the title of disciple.

I smiled at that.

Yellow honeysuckle bloomed from the strands of wood, the leaves and flowers blocking the doorway. I pulsed mana into the plantlife, and it moved on its own. Walking inside, the honeysuckle closed behind me. All the sound from outside ceased in an instant. A bed of soft, dark moss nuzzled into the corner of my room, along with a plate of polished steel for a mirror.

When I sat down, the moss was soft as silk. I crossed my arms before leaning down onto my knees. I tapped my head against my knees, the clanking of my armor turning into a dull hum over time. That's when my mind wandered. I dwelled on everything that happened, and hours passed by as I did. Not needing sleep, I processed most of what happened while awake. I still rested there, unmoving yet somehow restless.

A thud echoed in from the door of plants. I raised my head, "Who is it?"

To my surprise, Althea's voice leaked through the brush, "Uhm, it's me. I wanted to talk for a minute."

Wondering what she wanted, I stood and opened the plants with mana. They responded to my touch, unfurling in an elegant flow. Althea stood in a fitted robe, smiling up at me. She hid something behind her back, and I raised a brow, wondering what it was. Her grin being infectious, I smiled back at her, "You look ecstatic. What's up with you?"

She pushed herself up onto her toes, "Nothing. Well, there's something, and uh, I wanted to show it to you. Do you have some time?"

Peering away, a piece of me wanted to be alone. It wanted to crawl into a hole and just lay there forever. I pushed that part of me down before turning back to Althea. I scoffed, "You know what? All I really have now is time. Whatever it is, let's do it."

She pulled a dusty, old game of bingo out from behind her back. She pushed it out to me while brimming with excitement, "It's that game you mentioned forever ago. I found it."

I blinked, blown away. Not only had she remembered the game, she found it too. I raised a brow at the old box, "Huh. Wow. It really is the game." I peered under the box, "There's supposed to be a ball turner thingy. Where is it?"

Althea pulled out a bingo ball spinner, a chunk of wood still attached from where she tore it out of a table. Someone bolted the metal turner to a table, but Althea ripped it out. Leaning back, I laughed for a long while. I kept laughing until I cried. I wiped away a tear while Althea narrowed her eyes at me, a bit peeved,

"I thought you liked the game? What's so funny?"

I picked up the ball turner, "Before Schema's system arrived, the idea of tearing this out of the wood would've been absurd. You never even thought to unbolt it, and that makes perfect sense. I don't know, seeing those ideas clash was funny."

Althea shrugged, "Ok, well, wanna play?"

I flicked the metal turner, balls flinging everywhere, "Hm, you know people only played this when they were bored, right?"

Althea snatched the ball turner from me, "Ok, so it's perfect for us. I know I'm bored."

I pursed my lips, "Huh...Point taken."

We set the game down, and I pulled up the scoresheets, the old crayons, and the other supplies. It took a few minutes of explanation and examples before Althea got the hang of it. Simple as the game was, Althea never really played any games when she was a child. This was her first seeing anything like this, so it took some time to establish the terminology and whatnot.

She got the hang of it after a few minutes, however, and I turned the bingo ball spinner for a few seconds before pulling out a ball. I picked it up and said, "Six G."

Althea raised her hands in anticipation, "Hah! I've got it. What do I do again?"

I pointed at the mark on her sheet, "You mark that."

She slashed across the paper with a crayon, "Ok. What next?"

I twisted the ball roller once more, "We go for another round."

She leaned over the ball roller, "Oh I can't wait."

Somehow, Althea stayed engaged with the game, maintaining her thrill the entire time. It baffled my expectations, but in a refreshing kind of way. As we played, she and I chatted away. For the most part, we kept the conversation light. It revolved around our builds, skills, and certain trees. After a while, Althea peered up from her score sheet and looked me in the eye. She raised an eyebrow,

"Uhm, how are you holding up?"

I frowned, "Hm...Better than I thought I would."

That was kind of a lie. Althea leaned onto a hand with her cheek, "That's good. Er, great really. I thought you'd be more, I don't know...falling apart. You seem fine, at least on the surface."

I rolled the bingo ball roller again, playing because she wanted to. After a ball flung out, I weighed my hands back and forth, "It's Schema's system holding me together. I chose a willpower perk recently, and since then, my mind feels like granite."

She tilted her head at me, "Really? If you ask me, you always came across like that, even before now. You always stuck it out. To me, at least."

I leaned back onto my hands, peering up, "Maybe. I think the system is doing the majority of the legwork though."

Althea furrowed her brow, "I don't know about that. Look at Kessiah. She's gotta have more willpower than you, but she's still way lazier."

I raised a hand, "But what about Torix? That guy's a machine. He never stops working."

Althea tilted her head, "I guess, but I think he works hard even considering how much willpower he has. That's probably why he has such a high level and so many useful skills. He uses his mind as much as he can, but like, Kessiah doesn't. At all...It's frustrating to watch sometimes."

I peered at my sheet, "She's still the strongest among us."

Althea pursed her lips, "Yeah, but I taled to Torix about her being a remnant. They're born with genetic modifications, and that makes them, er, start with a lot levels or something. It's complicated, but think of it like Schema's system is more of a supplement to them."

My eyes widened, "Really?"

Althea shrugged, "Apparently, Kessiah was over level two thousand by the time she was twenty years old. That wasn't from clearing dungeons either. Schema just gave it to her."

I blinked, "Wow...That's a hell of a head start. She's so much stronger than us."

Althea put a lock of hair behind her ear, "But how long will that last, you know? I think both of us will beat her out...In the long run...Maybe the really long run for me."

Remembering the bodies in Springfield, I sighed, "Man, if we survive long enough for that to happen, I'd call us blessed."

Althea pulled her legs up, wrapping her arms around them. She wrestled with an idea in her mind, her face showing several expressions. After half a minute, she murmured, "I, uhm...I wanted to apologize for getting you wrapped up in this Yawm situation. I feel like it's my fault."

I scoffed, "What? Why?"

"It's obvious, isn't it? I landed here, and the Yawm guy sent in reinforcements to come get me. That's why he's here in the first place."

I shook my head, "I don't think so. You may be valuable, but there's no way Yawm would send this many reinforcements to get you alone. Yawm knows about the dimensional tears that happened here, and I think he wants to know what happened. Why? I can't guess just yet, but it has to revolve around my armor."

I put all my weight onto one arm while lifting the other one, "I was called by Etorhma after all, and Yawm's connected to Etorhma some which way. We'll have to figure all of that out by peeling his organization apart. We'll find some clues, and answers will come from them. Either way, you don't owe me an apology. If anything, you joining us really helps us out. It's one less person on their side and one more on ours."

Althea's eyes brightened. She chimed, "Huh...I never thought about it like that."

I picked up the bingo ball, "Is that why you brought me this whole bingo thing?"

Althea blushed, "Of...Of course. That's exactly why."

I rolled my eyes, "Uh huh. You sure you didn't just want to try it out?"

She hid a smile behind her knees, "Ok...Maybe a little."

I met her eyes, "Good. You should do more stuff for you sometimes. If you ask me, you don't owe any of us anything, so it's good you're doing something for yourself for a change. Hell, in my opinion, we shouldn't take you for granted because being taken for

granted sucks." I remembered Michael and Kelsey. I simmered while picking up the bingo ball,

"Trust me, I know all about it...Nine B."

She scratched in a little mark on her sheet before swaying back and forth, "Yeah. You do."

We played another few rounds before Althea tapped her legs with her fingertips. She murmured, "Er, thanks for always saying stuff like that. Sometimes, I'll be thinking a lot, and I'll get in my head about everything. I end up thinking one thing, then I'll think about another and...I end up feeling really down. Talking to you cheers me up."

Her words warmed me, "Really? Me?"

"Yeah."

I tried stopping a grin, and I looked away. No matter my efforts, my smile was irrepressible, rising up to the corner of my eyes. I covered my mouth with a hand, "You're...You're welcome. I'm glad I can pay you back some for doing stuff like this."

Althea leaned her chin onto her knees, a mischievous grin on her lips, "Remember, it's like you said. I did this for me."

From the corner of my eye, I looked at her, "Yeah, but this worked out for me too. I needed something to take the edge off, and this worked like a charm."

Althea tilted her head, "Glad to hear it...Are you going to roll the ball thing?"

I shook my head, blushing a bit after staring at Althea for a while. I tapped the edge of my forehead, "Sorry about that. I got distracted."

Althea flushed, her silvery skin flushing red. She peered away, "Oh."

A tense silence passed between us before I rolled the bingo ball roller with excessive speed, "Oh man, we have *got* to get on with this game, right?"

She scratched her cheek, "Uhm, absolutely. For sure."

A few more rounds passed, and we chatted for a while. The tension eased, and we got back into the swing of the game. In time, I stared down at an empty scoresheet, "Man, luck's not on my side today."

Althea leaned over her slip, "I'm close to another win."

I tilted my head at her, "Huh...What about we make this more interesting?"

She blinked, "How?"

"Hm, if I win, you'll have to help me train for a month."

Althea's face wrinkled in disgust, "Oh, that sounds terrible."

I shrugged, "Yeah, but if you win, you'll get something too."

"Ooh...Like what?"

I tilted my head, "I don't know. What would you want?"

Althea tapped her chin, thinking for a while. Her eyes widened as she swung her arm, "If I win, you have to show me more of your world's *stuff*. Like other games or food."

I reached out a hand, "It's a deal."

A moment passed as she stared at my palm. I motioned it, "You're supposed to shake it. This is my world's stuff."

She stuck out her hand, grabbing mine at the wrong angle. Althea wobbled her hand in different directions before I burst into a laugh. She frowned at me, "What? I shook it like you said."

I smiled, grabbing her hand, "It's like this."

We did a proper handshake, my palm guiding hers on the proper path. She mouthed, "Ooh. That's how."

She held my hand for a while before I raised my brows, "You can let me go now."

Her hand flashed back, and her face flushed again, "Oh...Ok."

We played another few rounds before I gained on her. The cards played out in my favor, and I filled out my scoresheet over the next dozen rounds. Before we knew it, both of our sheets filled out to their utmost extent, and each number called could result in a victory. Althea leaned over her sheet, her eyes wide with fear at the prospect of helping me train for a full month. Me? I had nothing to lose either way, so I stayed relaxed.

Althea's eyes bored a hole through her sheet as I picked up the last bingo ball. I stared at it, and the number filled out the last row of my sheet. All I needed to do was say the number aloud, and I gained Althea as my training assistant for a full month. Feeling good, I took a breath, amped and ready to relish my victory.

Before I said the number aloud, I caught a glimpse of Althea's face. She teemed with an unbridled excitement, an almost childish wonder in the game. She wanted the win, sure,

but more than anything, Althea desired a view of the outside world. If bingo got her this excited, imagine scrabble or some other old, boring-ish board game. The possibilities were endless!

Sarcasm aside, I paused for a second. I stared at her sheet, and I said,

“Nine K.”

She raised her hands, shouting and jumping for joy. I flopped the ball back into the basket before she found out that I lied about the game’s result. I threw my hands up, “Gah, you got me.”

She pointed at me, “Hah. Now you have to show me all kinds of stuff. Like food. And I want it freshly cooked too.” Awareness crossed over her, replacing the childish joy. She coughed into a hand, “Ahem...I-If you want to.”

I gave her a warm smile, “Absolutely.” I pushed myself up, “Thanks for the game. This was fun.”

Althea yawned, “Yeah, same here.”

I raised a brow, “You’re going to need your sleep. We’ve got a long day ahead of us.”

She grabbed the sides of her head, “You’re right. Do you mind cleaning this all up? I’ll do it next time.”

“It’s not a problem at all. Go get some shut eye.”

She stepped up to the honeysuckle doorway. As she left, she grinned, “You, uhm...Sleep well too. Or train. Or whatever you like doing.”

“You too.”

She left the room, leaving warmth as she did. I soaked it in, appreciating her coming here like that. It ended a horrible day with a great evening, and I would’ve just dwelled on what happened for a long while otherwise. Instead, I stretched my arms and legs, rearing and ready to work hard through the night. I cleaned up the bingo game, making certain that every part of it fitted into its appropriate slot.

I carved out a section in the wall before putting the game there. Scared it would collapse or get the game dirty, I spent thirty minutes making a reinforced shelf out of torn parts of my armor. After situating it so that it wouldn’t be harmed, I sat myself down with my legs crossed. I took a breath, getting ready to get a feel for my extra mana reserves.

When I ran here, I used more mana than before, but I kept some in reserve. This time, I aimed to get as much out of my enhanced health regeneration as possible. By getting

an intuitive understanding of the sensation, my usability for my mana would rise by leaps and bounds. Making that happen, I revved my augmentation into action. It flared to life, a blazing orange plume radiating out of each arm.

I kept my eyes closed, honing my mind onto converting as much of my body and blood and bones as I could. Those physical parts of me relented, converting into mana with ease. I kept surging the energies, rotating and getting a feel for them over the next hour. After two hours, I reached the apex of my current ability.

I trembled under it.

The rippling force of the mana left me motivated and starving for action of any kind. I wanted to jump, move, and fight. I needed an outlet, my hands claspings with white knuckled flurry. Leaning down, I tried dampening the energy's flow. It waned down in a slow ebb before surging once more. I leaned back from myself, stunned by the energy fighting me like this.

Redoubling my efforts, I gritted my teeth while willing the energy to stop. It bowed down, but it continued its surge. Grabbing my knees, I clasped my hands with all my strength, roaring at the energy flow to stop. Unable to withstand my howl, the spiraling mana relented. It dwindled and receded, no longer pulling at my body to sustain itself.

As it lessened into a trickle, sweat beaded on my forehead. I gasped for air, the sheer deluge of mana overwhelming my initial attempts at containing it. It fed on my flesh and bones, the mass of energy taking on a life of its own. After a certain amount of mass, the mana could direct itself. After gaining some confidence, the ball of mental thoughts directed itself against me. The sensation reminded me of blacking out while fighting monsters in Springfield.

Leaning back, I wondered if that's what happened to me. Testing the hypothesis, I took a breath, summoning another storm of energy. I rose the trickle up slowly, probing the mana fueling me. The desire to roam rampant and move flowed over me like jumping in a basin of bloodlust and motivation. I smiled at it, thinking of how this supplemented my natural ambitions and desire to improve. Even on its own, that was useful.

Taking another moment, I channeled the energy through myself for a while. It burned through my health regen, slowing my rate of healing. Even more pressing, heat built in my room and on my skin. Eventually, my blood and skin sizzled from the mana overflow. I scoffed as the mana overwhelmed my ability to regenerate. In a violent, decisive jerk, I quelled the mana storm with a mental whip.

This time, I left nothing on the table, so the mana gave in from my first strike. I let myself cool down over the next few minutes, mentally and physically. I cycled this control of mana, wrestling with the mana storms as I called them. It acted like walking a tightrope, and in time, it turned comfortable. A couple of hours later, I rolled my shoulders and stood up tall. Taking a break from mana control, I paced out towards Torix and Kessiah.

Kessiah left the mana pool, going who knows where. Torix established an evil lair in his corner of the central area, creating graphs, charts, and maps showcasing Springfield in its entirety. Up until recently, the ritual chained the poor necromancer down, but without that consuming him, his full abilities unleashed. That manifested with plots, plans, and machinations of all kinds. Thinking those up, Torix paced back and forth while staring at a map.

I walked up and raised a hand to him, “Yo. What are you working on?”

Torix tilted his head at me, “Hm...You’re still awake? You couldn’t sleep, I’ll assume.”

I shook my head, “I don’t need to anymore.”

Torix’s fire eyes flared bright, “You...You chose the *willpower* perk? You of all people?”

I spread my hands, “Uh, yeah. What’s surprising about that?”

Torix peered off, “I...Hm, I expected you to simply invest into endurance, strength, and dexterity like most fighters do. That creates a durable, strong core of attributes to rely on. Why did you side with willpower?”

I put my hands on my hips, “I wanted more of it.”

Torix stared at me like I dumped a bunch of black slush on his maps. Torix murmured, “Hm. That’s a rather simple stratagem, don’t you think?”

I shrugged, “Occam’s razor. Most of the time, the simplest answer is the best one. When I saw the perk, I wanted and needed it. Boom, I selected it.”

Torix pushed up his glasses, “I-I shall refrain from judging you for that reasoning...Ahem, at least as much as I am able to.” Torix stood back up, “Then did you walk out of here as a break for whatever training you’ve devised?”

I pursed my lips, “You could say that.” I gestured to the maps, “What’s all this?”

Torix snapped his view to his charts, and he spread his arms with a dramatic flair, “Ah, this? Why, I’m so glad you asked. You see, this is a series of charts detailing the habits and locations of Yawm’s Followers along with supply routes his force has established. I’ve learned that our enemy is disorganized as Yawm has hidden himself within a world tree of some sort.”

I raised a brow, “Like Yggdrasil?”

Torix tilted his head, “Is that a fictional being or?”

I peered off, "You know, maybe. Eldritch are real, so why not mythical gods? Anyways, Yggdrasil is a god of the world in, er, I think it's the vikings' mythos, whatever that is."

Torix grabbed his chin, "Ah yes, you mentioned them before. They were tribal, bloodthirsty battlers. Schema would shine favor on those clansmen no doubt. Regardless, charting these locations tells me that Yawm's forces splinter apart often and by large distances. This makes eradicating them down to the last woman and child quite simple."

A chill ran down my spine as Torix scoffed, "If Yawm left any children alive, that is."

I frowned as Torix sighed. He shook his head, "Hah...It would seem that few sentients appreciate a bit of dark humor. Regardless, our force is far smaller than Yawm's. However, their forces splinter far more than ours will, and those split pieces can be taken care of promptly. You and Althea shall gain many levels from doing so, and even Kessiah and I will as well."

Torix's eyes flared a bloody red as he raised his hands, "And as with all conquerors, we shall stand on a bridge of their corpses. They will become fuel for our survival, a potent elixir to empower and embolden us...It shall be delightful."

Staring at Torix, he seemed bigger than I remembered him being. Not physically, but his presence as a whole. The more I understood him, the more he reminded me of pictures of space. It was like I gazed at something I couldn't fully comprehend. Not yet, at least. I put my hands on my hips, "Man. You really thought this through, huh?"

Torix cackled before peering at me, "I most certainly have. It's exciting, isn't it?"

Intimidated but full of anticipation, I nodded, "It is."

Torix rubbed his hands together, stepping over towards all of the marks, "Perhaps you'd enjoy an explanation on where, why, when, and how their units move as they do. Having a lesser commander-"

I waved my hands, "Hell no. Please. No."

Torix's hands plopped onto his sides, "Oh...That's a tad bit disappointing. I'd formulated quite a few lectures on just that topic, actually."

I scratched the side of my head, "For me, I was wondering if you knew anything about the runes. I feel like I'm good at them, and I was wondering if there was anything else I could do with them? You know, besides writing them into my armor."

Torix's teaching mode returned in full force, "Ooh, so that's what you desire to know. Well then, the real question you must ask is what *can't* you do with them? They may serve any means and purpose you could desire so long as the creativity and ability for

their creation is present. Here-" Torix reached up a hand, a portal appearing above me. A pile of books spilled out and Torix spread his hands,

"These books will teach you the primary conventions regarding current runic writing philosophies."

A pit in my stomach formed as I held about twenty books in my arms. A bead of cold sweat poured from my brow as I gasped, "So, do I have to read all of this?"

Torix tilted his head, "What? Why, of course you do. These are the initial readings. Seeing as you don't need any sleep, you should take advantage of that opportunity. Besides that, what else will you do with your time?"

I raised my brows, "I don't know...Actually practice stuff instead of reading about it?"

Torix waved away my statement with the brush of his hand, "Scholars fight with the written word, not their fists. Being my disciple, you'll learn this truth one bundle of books at a time."

I turned to my room, my shoulders slumping. Getting there, I sat down and pulled up the thinnest book. Schema converted the language for me, forming systemized text on top of the alien characters. They gave clear, concise translations of the esoteric, alien ideas. Barely touching on the thoughts of the book, I leaned my face into my hands. I let out a deep sigh.

It was going to be a long night.

Chapter 36: Breaking the Rules

I scanned through a few of the books over the next few hours. It took a bit, but I got an idea of what the meta was for rune writing. None of it meshed in with what I understood about the process. Everything in a textbook applied but only in a vacuum, not in actual practice. It was the oddest thing I found about lots of texts. They dished out dense clusters of information, yet somehow, none of it ever applied to whatever I studied.

Even worse, this book mentioned mana channeling as a foolhardy, dangerous venture. Because of that, it gave no advice on the matter. It did warn why doing so was dangerous, however. The main reason culminated from the actual energy radiating through a person's body. A sort of magical friction occurred, some of the ambient power flooding in.

It was a lot like running power through a wire. If I sent too much mana, this magical friction increased. This heated the user's body, eventually boiling their blood and brittling their bones. My channeling proved twice as dangerous, as I not only risked cooking myself. I used my own body to cook myself. It was like getting an oven to turn it

on. In fact, the only reason my sigil markings worked at all was because of my unique circumstances.

My armor augmented my durability, and the metal acted as a great conductor for mana. That lessened the magical friction quite a bit. I also stockpiled regeneration, letting me undo most of the damage I dealt to myself. Even better, the runes acted as an insulator for this energy, stopping it from coursing through my actual body. The mental sensations I experienced came about because of mana overflowing and leaking out of those runes.

That came from my lack of experience. These books supplemented that experience for a normal magician, but they carried no context for my situation. In fact, they made the assumption no one could channel mana into themselves safely, so the books barely mentioned these ideas in any depth. They only rambled a bit about how terrible an idea it was. They never even got to using an actual *soul* for this channeling technique. That was beyond madness, according to the books.

And that was the reason these books served no real purpose for me. They focused a lot on overcoming limitations I simply didn't have. So, instead of listening to a bunch of close minded philosophers, I set up shop and got to work. I channeled mana through a hand, loosening my skin's grip on my armor. A couple violent ruptures later, and I amassed a pile of black metal. This was also likely not recommended by the books either.

But I digress.

Picking up a piece of dark metal, I turned it in my hand. It shined with a matte finish, kind of like a polished magnet. It stayed strut after trying to bend it, the skin actually becoming more robust since I leveled up. Placing my palm on a plate, I shoved down. It gave a bit, but proved harder than cast iron. It still lacked steel's robustness, however. A few evolutions might change that.

Putting a hand over a different plate, I reached out to mold the armor as I did with the stuff all over me. It wobbled, though only by the slightest margin. If anything, it matched a vibration more than a motion. As before, evolving my armor would enhance my control further. With enough mastery, I might even bend different runic inscriptions into the armor after taking it off. That brought a smile to my face.

Explosive spears, sharpened shards, even shining swords, all of that weaponry could come from my skin. With runic inscriptions, I may even detonate those weapons when they impacted monsters. That exceeded my potential at the time, so I kept working within my limits. I amassed a big pile of the metal. Such a tall stack, actually, that it weighed as much as I did. Gawking down at my armor, I discovered that I lacked hunger at all.

Raising a brow, I rubbed my temples. This whole stacking armor with no hunger thing...It kind of defied Newton's law of conservation. Peering at my armor, I wondered what other secrets it held. Not having time to dwell on that, I picked up several good looking slabs of the dark metal before carrying them out of my room. I placed them onto an empty spot on the workbenches Torix set up. Sitting down, I carved runes.

I figured making something out of the plates would be both useful and calming. I started my crafting journey off with the most basic piece of armor I could make – a shield. Using my fist like a hammer, I broke off bits of the shield by slamming my fist into the edges of the plate. In minutes, Torix cast a silencing magic over me, grumbling all the while. I'll admit, I may have been as loud as a bottle of thunder bursting.

Maybe. Just maybe.

Anyways, I encapsulated myself in the calm of crafting. Like a madman, I smashed that plate over and over. Stress relieving and somewhat productive, I created a roughly triangular shape. Using my gauntleted hands, I scraped the edges of the shield, smoothing them out.

It took all I had in me to make that happen. It was enough.

Skill unlocked! Craftsmanship | Level 1 – You are the maker of what you imagine. +1% to ease and precision of crafting.

The skill leveled with time, and each level bumped off a bit of difficulty for molding the metal. Putting both hands over the plate's sides, I grasped and pushed my knee into the middle. I pried it down, caving the middle portion of the plate inward. This created a nice concave shape to the shield. If I placed the back of my palm against it, the points of contact would meld together over a minute or two.

The bonds held strong enough that the result satisfied me. With the shaping of the shield handled, I decided on several sets of runes I'd use for the shield's enchantments. After a bit of brainstorming, I added in the markings for safety, peace, and calm, engraving them in the upper right portion of the shield. Looking at them reminded me of floating underwater with my eyes closed. I could just completely let go and relax. Ah.

After I made those runes, I carved the runes for stability and balance into the upper left side of the shield. Stability and balance came together in perfect harmony like listening to the gush of an ocean's waves or the rumble of heavy rain. Unfortunately, all the patches of runes lacked that same concordance. The two different meanings dampened each other's effects, making the shield dissonant and less effective.

I aimed to change that.

At the bottom of the shield, I chiseled the sigils for unity and love. A little cheesy, sure, but it got the job done. With a heavy pressing of my hand, I sliced long rivets into the

shield between each set of runes. I etched a few runes on these connections, ensuring they made the runes connect. I pulsed mana through it, and golly, the thing worked. Gee willikers.

Skill unlocked! Enchanting | Level 1 – You give life to what you envision. +1% to the effect of enchantments.

The skill unlocked as I completed the last rune. When I finished polishing the shield, I lifted it up and glanced at my handiwork. Rough, choppy, and jagged, the shield beamed out with an amateur shoddiness that radiated in an undeniable fashion. I grinned at the terrible piece of equipment, it being my first work. Setting it aside, my eyes kept returning to it along with a deep sense of satisfaction. Terrible or not, I made it, and it was mine.

I spent so much time in my life running around without owning anything. Even before the system arrived, I slept on a couch with only my boxing gloves to my name. They smelled awful, and the leather fell off all over the place, making a mess. This shield outdid those twenty buck gloves from Amazon. Sparking memories, I used Kelsey's account to buy those gloves. I waved off some unease, keeping myself dialed in.

For that moment, I thought about myself. And making something on my own, it documented a nice shift in my mindset. I may have owned nothing, but in time, I could amass a fortune of my own skin artifacts. I wrinkled my brow at that thought, kind of disgusted. Peering at the glossy sheen of the shield, I smiled.

Nobody would ever know. Heh. My eyes widened at an update in my status.

Enchanted Plate of Skin | Level Requirement: 100 – This shield is a hastily made object with a few basic runes carved into it to enhance its protective qualities. While not nearly as powerful as it could be, the unknown material carries excellent qualities. Being hard as quartz but flexible as polyglass, the metal can sustain severe punishment before shattering.

Effects:

Living Metal: Takes damage in place of the user if hit. The shield may use health or mana to be repaired after taking damage. This effect can occur without the user's consent if mental strength isn't high.

Total Health pool remaining: 1,000/1,000 | Damage Resistance: 90% | Effective Health Added: 300

Mark of Balance: Reduces force of impact on shield by 50%. Doesn't reduce damage, just the effect of force on the user. When the health of the shield reaches zero, this effect is omitted.

I raised my hands in victory, even Schema recognizing my tiny breakthrough. The shield paled in comparison to most artifacts, but it was worth using. The whole process left me refreshed and ready for more. In all honesty, I didn't even know how long I'd been sitting there. It didn't really matter to me either. In my eyes, it was time well spent, and considering the situation, what more could I ask for?

Diving right back in, the shield added little to my actual health pool or anyone's for that matter. Resolving to fix the issues, I paced back to my room and retrieved another plate from the stack of my piled up armor skin. After walking back, I froze in place. Althea worked on the same workbench as me, and she crafted these disgusting green sacks with her hands. She frowned at one, poking it with a finger,

"Gah...These are so gross."

I walked up, "They definitely are. What's wrong with that?"

She laid her head in front of the fleshy, swirling packet of green, "These are super nasty, and I want them to be...I don't know, cuter, I guess?"

I poked one with a finger knuckle. It wobbled, "Huh...What about drawing a smiley face on them?" I winced, "Kind of a morbid thought. "

Althea raised a brow at me, "What's a smiley face?"

I drew one into the inner part of my shield. I turned it to her, "It's like this."

"Ah, that can totally work."

I lifted the shield, "Speaking of work, could you work with this?"

She turned and clamped her fingers onto the shield, "What's it for?"

"A shield. It's barely any extra health for me, so I figured you might be able to use it."

I turned around and walked off before Althea smiled at it, "Woah...Thanks."

I waved, "No problem. I might not have to take an explosion for you next time if you have that."

"Oh haha. Very funny."

I sat back down at the table before brainstorming for a few more minutes. Defensive gear wouldn't do much for me since the spare metal was weaker than the armor on me. Offensive gear opened up more opportunities as a whole. I walked back into my room and carried a pile of my skin in my arms. I set it into the main room with a cacophony of clanking.

Torix kept his eyes on his charts, but he mouthed, "Keep tearing your own skin off like that, and you'll run right through my rations."

I leaned over the pile, "I'll keep that in mind."

I toyed with the different pieces of metal, connecting runic inscriptions on different pieces. The unending tension of the last few weeks melted away as I did. Focusing on creation instead of destruction helped me take my mind off all the stressful aspects of my life too. It even acted as a pleasant mix up from the blood and guts that permeated my fighting.

Meandering with the plates, I found more and more limitations with the skin as it was. An evolution and a few level ups would ease the entire process. After hitting a particularly frustrating kink in the process, I let an armor piece slap the table. Leaning back, I opened my status and looked at the time. After the crafting breaks, I straightened myself out and fully functioned. Taking a breath, I stood and turned to Althea and Torix.

I spread my hands, "I think I'm ready to head out. I want to test some of the stuff I made too."

Torix turned, one fire eye narrow and the other fire eye wide, "Are you certain?"

"Yeah. I think so."

Torix sent a message using his interface with Schema, "Then here is the route you and the others shall follow. Fight enemies here, here, and here at these select times. That shall avoid the normal routes of the Followers, and I'll update you if anything goes awry in the meantime. Considering the defensive posture they've taken, we shouldn't run into any problems."

I read through the long list of data, "Man, you're so thorough."

Torix tilted his nose up without thinking, "Oh, well it's good of you to notice. I do put in an effort to maintain my reputation."

Kessiah burst into the room through the entrance. Having heard us through the wall, Kessiah frowned,

"I thought we'd be trapped here forever. Blugh, it's time to do anything but just lay around. I'm literally bored out of my mind."

We collected all of our relevant equipment. Althea kept a bag of glowing, green grenades under her robe. She carried my crafted shield on her left arm and her usual rifle composed her right arm. If she regenerated that shield, it might be way more useful for her than I first imagined it would be. On the other hand, I carried a bag full of random

trinkets I crafted in the meantime. Kessiah kept nothing on hand, needing nothing besides her enormous number of levels.

We all walked out, Althea and Kessiah popping up with their steps. Mine were heavy but prepared. I understood what I walked into, and a piece of dreaded it. Kessiah walked out with an obelisk in her hand, guiding us out towards Springfield. She skipped a bit between each step, brimming with growing, bubbly excitement. When we reached outside the suburbs, Kessiah turned to us, "You guys ready for a little bit of blood?"

Althea nodded, "Uhm, we have to be, right?"

My nerves raced at thoughts of the deformed monsters. I peered forward with an unblinking gaze, "We do."

Kessiah raised a brow, "You scared, tough guy?"

I stopped my hands from shaking as I gazed at her, "Yeah. I am."

Kessiah smirked, "Huh. I expected more out of you."

I furrowed my brow, grimacing towards my hometown, "Anyone can be brave without fear. Few can show courage in the face of it."

Kessiah raised her hands, "Wow, you got catch phrases now, huh?"

I ignored her, mentally preparing myself for what was to come. Disappointed I didn't take the bait, Kessiah tsked before bursting into a sprint. We bolted behind her, keeping up. Kessiah shouted over the wind in our ears,

"I'm going to keep pretty close to you two, but it'll be up to the both of you to handle these *monsters* on your own."

Althea and I nodded. Kessiah pointed at herself, "Make sure you don't overextend yourself, and maybe try to work together. Your skills mesh well, so don't let that go to waste."

We sprinted through the fields and forests on our way towards Springfield. The whole trip drenched us in an unnerving calm. A cold sweat formed over my forehead, my nerves making me all jittery. Even though my mind accepted all that I had seen when I first entered the quarantine zone, anxiety riddled my chest and hands. As time passed, I gained a better understanding of where my adrenaline came from.

It wasn't fear. It was incitement. I wanted to rip and tear.

Glad that at least some part of me looked forward to this, we reached the edges of the suburbs where the steel legion's blockade lined the infected areas. More deformed

bodies piled in the distance, holes from bullets littering their torsos and skulls. Less panicky than when I first arrived at the barricade, more details popped out to me.

Across every suburban block, the Force of Iron guarded a generator. Two circular pieces of metal spiralled around a blue core that shot out arcs of lightning at regular intervals. Runic markings covered those generators, and antennas stuck out the top of them. These streaks of blue electricity dispersed out into a field that contained the petal bugs. It strengthened the higher up I looked, the field eventually becoming brittle near the ground.

It stopped the spread of the infectors but not the infected. The ground troops handled that part. They relied much more on killing the creatures from a distance than locking them in. So far, it worked well enough. Trucks drove down the road and unloaded shipments of ammo at supply points. Those revamped factories near the warehouse district handled the production, supplying the whole operation. That's why they put themselves in the industrial area to begin with. It was a smart move.

Walking up to the well supplied soldiers, I wished they lacked the foresight for that base. Their abundant resources made piercing the barricade much harder. That being said, Kessiah dwarfed their levels to the point of muting their strengths entirely. With her hands in her pockets, she strode up to the base. She smiled at them, oozing confidence, composure, and dominance. She announced,

"Hello boys and girls. I hope you don't mind us walking into the quarantine zone. Otherwise, I'm going to have to force my way in. You don't want me to force my way in." Kessiah raised her eyebrows, "Unless you want to play for a while."

The soldiers glanced at one another, confusion spreading through their ranks. My blood ran cold because I understood the context behind Kessiah's words. Her threats were like throwing a live grenade at a child with the pin pulled. Everyone here flopped about, unaware of what they held in their hands. The soldier's commanding officer replied with a loudspeaker and spoke back,

"Schema has now ordered us to let anyone enter the zone if they want to. We are not responsible for saving you. Good hunting."

The commanding officer walked out, a woman covered in metal armor. She waved her hand, signalling Althea and I to follow. I grimaced at how easily Kessiah got in. After all the work I put in, I could've just walked in whenever. Kessiah leaned over to me and murmured,

"Don't look so down. They would've tried killing you for the experience. Your level was low, after all."

A bad taste spawned in my mouth before Kessiah gave me a pat on the back. She whispered, "That's what being an unknown is all about – knives in the back and shots to the face. Breathe it in, young buck. You might as well get used to it."

It wouldn't take much longer before the soldier's posed no threat to me, so the unknown status wouldn't matter thereafter. Casually being threatened still rubbed me the wrong way all the same. Staring at Kessiah's back, it made me wonder how many times she suffered from that kind of experience. It must've been countless occasions. Given her being a remnant, Kessiah never lived a life without being hunted.

I couldn't even imagine what that must be like.

The culmination of those experiences explained Kessiah's relentless cynicism. She lived in a world that bit her from all sides. She learned early on to bite back. I happened to be a convenient person to attack or something along those lines because Kessiah didn't give Althea a hard time like she did me. I wondered where the animosity stemmed from, but all I could do was hope for answers in time.

Passing the barricade, haunting howls leaked in from all directions. I centered myself back in the moment. We walked across the barricaded entrance before a girl guard walked out in front of us. She pointed her rifle at some of the infected in the distance,

"Hey. Aim for the cores, don't let them touch you, and try to stay moving. They can overwhelm you if you let them collect into a swarm. Bullets don't work unless you hit the cores, and fire can hold them down for a while. They're tougher than they look, so be mindful."

Kessiah patted her shoulder, "Thanks honey. We'll keep it in mind."

The guard coughed into a hand, "I-I know you probably don't need the tips, but I've seen quite a few people go in there and die already. I figured it might help."

Kessiah tapped where the guard's nose would be if not for her helmet. Kessiah chimed, "You're cute. You know that?"

The female guard trotted off, her embarrassment leaking out even through her metal armor. We walked by before reaching the first line of houses. Fresh blood and bloody flesh scattered everywhere. Monsters roamed. Fires burned. My hands trembled, but my armor roared out in my mind. It wanted food, and it would have it.

I lowered my gaze, mana channeling into my runes. I intended on being awake this time. From my channeling last night, I learned my own mana could overwhelm me if I let it. To stop that, I put a chain on my usage this time, keeping it tidy and maintained. Kessiah turned to me before tilting her head,

“Hm, normally I’d say using mana like that might expose us, but there are quite a few people fighting in the quarantine zone. People from other planets will be coming to help with the quest as well...If we’re lucky. News will have to leak out first, but after that, we’ll be in a good situation. They’ll have some insane energy signatures, so we won’t stick out after that.”

I ramped up the energy into my runes, charging them with the orange energy and coarse lightning. Strength flowed into my limbs before I clamped my fists. I smashed my fists together, “I’ll lead the way.”

Kessiah scoffed, “Go for it little man. I’m sure it’ll be fun.”

I bent down, “Alright. Keep your distance. I’ll be using an aura, and it’ll damage the both of you.”

Althea raised her palms, “So, like, I had no plans on going out there anyways. I’m taking out who I can with potshots for a while. You go take ’em out, chief. I’ll, uhm, sit back and watch.”

After giving her a curt nod, I sprinted forward. Once I reached about a block ahead of them, I ramped up Oppression. It molded at my thoughts, a part of my being. I shifted the aura a little, trying to keep it from stretching its full distance. It dipped down to where I could see, putting a lot of pressure off me. The last thing I wanted was to kill someone struggling to survive out here. Piercing deeper into the town, I figured out that dealing with survivors wasn’t going to be a problem.

We stayed on Torix’s route, avoiding fights while heading to the points of combat the necromancer mentioned. After a few rows of houses, mushrooms and other fungi rooted in the ground. Colored a sickly yellow, the funguses looked like collections of bodies molded together and reformed into plantlife. These biological horrors expanded and swelled as we explored deeper into Springfield.

I gawked in horror as familiar landmarks eroded into mere shadows of their former glory. We passed neighborhoods I remembered from a longtime ago, having passed them on my school bus. Deformed abominations took the place of humans there, the shambling monstrosities overtaking any semblance of humanity. Everyone already died in these residential areas, most of them murdered in violent waves of the newly infested.

The haunting sights didn’t end there. They rained in one after the other. We passed my old elementary school, the building converting into a dungeon since the last time I saw it. Yawm’s wildlife smothered the area, and a few escaped dungeon monsters duked it out with the encroaching fungal beasts. Blood took the place of chattering children. Splattering corpses replaced the sound of closing lockers. Congealing meat replaced the smells of pencils and erasers.

In the courtyard of the school, backpacks circled hopscotch circles and a pile of jump ropes. When the system arrived, children played in the middle of some activity. The monsters ripped a few of the backpacks and knocked over some of those supplies, ripping it all apart. We left the bloody battle after I soaked in a few of the monster's corpses. It had to be done.

Those dilapidated places hurt to see, but the worst sight, by far, was my old boxing gym. Outlast crumbled into a shadow of its previous self, the entire building torn to shreds. Windows broke. Dust settled. Several fungi grew from the walls, and a large human moss pushed the gym's sign aside. It was like the encroaching ecosystem was dismantling my old memories of this place, replacing them with the horrors of Yawm.

Because I asked, we walked into the gym for a while, but no living person lingered here. As we left, I kept my memories of that place close to my chest. Like everything else here, this place turned into a memory. I aimed to keep it fresh and close to home, not let it be turned into this decayed corpse of a place.

Other places left their marks on me, but we kept moving. At first, seeing the decay left me hollowed out like some gutted animal. This infestation destroyed my home. It was like my entire life scrubbed clean, no person, place, or thing lingering from my past. It gave me a feeling of loneliness as we skulked through those abandoned streets, torn houses, and old homes. In time, the desolation spawned something else in me.

A dark, embittering fury.

Yawm would pay for what he did here. He'd pay for what he did to my friends, my home, even my memories of this place. I'd tear his face off and make him wear the dried skin. Peering at my status, I stood no chance of even slowing a follower down, let alone Yawm. Unlike everyone in Springfield, I still lived, so I could change. I'd break down who I was and turn myself into something indomitable. If I needed to, I'd become a monster to kill one.

And that would be easy here where monsters roamed in abundance. Black veins traced the stems and stalks of every shrub, lichen, or tree. Thanks to Oppression, the plants wilted in two minutes while we passed by. We carved out a slice of the growing ecosystem, forging a path here. More of the plants came together in the deeper sections of the city, the roots connecting into dense foliage. No longer did the plants pile up like bodies. Instead, they conjoined up into trees without leaves, some with buds on them.

Once we pierced deep enough, pods covered those trees. Inside them, monstrosities formed. They peered at us with beady eyes through the thin, translucent covers insulating them. Once I reached close enough that a pod got in range of Oppression, a pod's eyes locked in on us. The beasts swelled and pulsed from within their pods. One of the monsters popped out. A wet slush of material landed on the ground before a pair of eyes glanced up at us.

It was perfect, because Torix sent us to handle our first batch of enemies here. Gawking at the beast, I bore holes through it with my eyes, my armor grinning but my own lips forming a scowl. Kessiah meant safety wasn't a concern, and gaining experience took priority. Mana rippled across my skin as I narrowed my eyes.

I'd avenge my home and the people who died here. I'd gore these monsters to pulp. It was time for battle. It was time for war.

Chapter 37: War of Worlds

From the pod's refuse, a body emerged and formed in front of us. Scales and bones condensed into plates that ran across the front of the four legged creature. It gawked with a reptile's eyes, slitted but intelligent. The hulking torso of the creature flowed together like a deadly machine, its movements like music made with muscle and bone.

The beast reminded me of a tiger with no fur, bones placed over it instead. From its neck, a mane of jagged femurs expanded out, and the monster roared at us. The bottom jaw split in half, revealing a throat lined with sharpened teeth. The noble facade of the creature shattered as several other pods exploded, slopping onto the ground with wet slaps beside it.

Unnamed of Yawm – Panthera Variant | Level 250 – These are the newly spawned footsoldiers of Yawm. If they prove themselves, Yawm may name them, granting them their previous sentience. They may then rise through the ranks of his army, being granted great power by accomplishing great deeds.

Though unnamed, each of these troops hold considerable power. They may operate in packs and coordinate with each other. They claim a much higher level of finesse and skill with their movements. Their regenerative capacities are impressive as well along with their sheer tenacity. Combine this with their tendency to attack on sight, and they make for deadly foes.

This specific sample is a panthera variant. Many variants and forms can be found of the unnamed. Be ready for combat when you see one.

I rushed in, my heels tearing into the ground. I shouted, "Let's go, Althea."

A harpoon drilled past my head, piercing into the armored lion's face. The bullet of bone impaled through it, but the creature stayed standing. The beast shook its head as I reached it. I growled out, augmentation overflowing in me like a flood. I fought without any restraints, my full might on display.

My armor grinned, the armor shivering in anticipation of its next meal. The bone lion bit forward, trying to eat me. I whipped a weighted hook against one of its bottom jaws. The blow snapped the bone of the creature and knocked me sideways. I dragged towards its side, out of the way of its incoming bite.

It clapped its teeth beside me, a shockwave ebbing from the clamp. Keeping focused, I charged forward with my right hand dragging below me. As the creature turned its head, my fist snapped up into the roof of its mouth. The teeth of the creature chipped and uprooted as my fist knocked its head upward. The dry, brittle ground cracked beneath my feet. I stayed silent with my next punch, turning on my feet.

My left hand slammed into the top of the armored lion's head, cleaving it down like a guillotine. The skull crumbled under the might of my fist, but the monster's life remained strong. It swiped with its bone covered paw. The claws scraped against my armor as I deflected the blow, but even the offset strike sent me dragging backward.

A green pouch smashed into the bone dragon's face, acid melting its mauled skull. It howled out, stumbling sideways past me. I dashed forward and whipped another strike into its side. My fist punctured the bone like tearing through tissue paper. As I pulled my hand out, several black veins crawled out towards me. They met metal, and my armor sliced into those tendrils with my own dark wires.

Recoiling for safety, the monster stepped back. Two spears sliced its knees, causing the head of the monster to clap the pavement. I ramped up my augmentation runes as its slitted eyes widened at my looming frame. In my gaze, it laid broken, searching for safety. It found none. I stomped the top of its head into the ground, bone crunching underfoot. It jerked away, but I charged towards it.

Another stomp, and I smashed the thing's face once more. Althea tore its back legs out, the creature staring at us with horror, but I gave no sympathy to the monster. Its brethren killed my kind, the beasts composed of melted humans. In us, it found its own monsters. In that way, it wanted mercy it wasn't willing to give.

The monster's bone plates cracked under my fists. With a quick series of bites, my helmet tore through dozens of pounds of the creature, the creature still alive with half its head missing. After a minute of my armor feasting, the unnamed monster perished in a pool of its own blood. The other pod's remains formed into three different creatures when we finished off the bone lion.

One was a hulking, brown boar with dozens of tusks growing from its face. The front paws of the monster curled into bestial hands instead of hooves like its back feet. The same intelligent eyes looked at me like the bone lion's. The other creature hulked out as an enormous yellow insect, like a praying mantis except with a flexible abdomen covered in jagged spikes and three eyes. Vibrant stripes of red interlaced its exoskeleton, and the limbs on its mouth ended with teeth, like stacks of moving enamel.

The mandible mouth made a mockery of a grin when I looked at it, an eerie drool leaking from its mouth. The last creature crawled out as a dozen legged crab with a mouth at the top of its shell. The arms fed towards the top of its head, made for shoving things into the abyss of teeth. All in all, the creatures made for a hellish scene, except for the boar. Its demeanor matched a demi human more than an outright monster.

I tried opening my status to allocate my points from my gained levels, but the beasts surrounded me. The boar charged first, roaring as it did. The crab scuttled behind it. The mantis opened its scythe arms, revealing hundreds of horns under them. One horn shot from under the mantises arms at a time, drilling out like fleshy cables. Their collapse used tactics, unlike their zombie counterparts. They weren't the only ones with a strategy, however.

My runes revved into action while Oppression weighed down on them. Those monsters approached, but off in the distance, the ear shattering echo of Althea's rifle blared. A lance of bone shot through the arms of the mantis, pinning it to the pod tree as it shrieked. The boar reached me, trying to gore me on its tusks.

I stomped forward, the energy in my runes reverberating with destructive force. Its head left a crack in the pavement under my feet as I weaved all my weight into my next blow. My right arm dragged behind me as I turned, my body struggling with all the untamed energy. I pushed more of my own tenacious life energy into the blow, further amplifying the already devastating punch.

As my blow landed, it unloaded kinetic force into the boar's face like a cannon. The tusks shattered. The skull ruptured down the middle. Blood sprayed in all directions like I squished a watermelon full of blood. My armor grinned, a set of spiked teeth forming. It laughed, a haunting echo amidst the decay. The same bloodlust of before crawled in from every direction.

I stomped it out as I stomped the boar's neck. Althea sent a bolt into one of the boar's eyes and out the other, ending its life. Keeping my sanity intact, I ducked backward, dodging a clamping claw from the top mouthed crab. Several snippers crushed towards me, but I curved myself, dodging each of them. They dug into the pavement below me as the crab turned itself and dug its teeth into the boar's corpse.

The cannibal drenched itself in the blood of its comrade, but as it did, I found a weakness. It carried many teeth in its gut, but the teeth shattered against the bones of its brethren. I leapt up towards it, landing inside the crab's mouth. The jaws of the monster closed in, an open maw turning into a closed iron-maiden. The red slit of my armor lit its insides, blood all around me.

And it was the monster's, not my own.

The teeth of the creature cracked and fractured against my armor. With a reformation, I turned my hands into dull mallets. I hammered into the insides of the crab, teeth piling at my feet. The monster's mouth opened when I dug into its insides, the numerous arms above me poking at me in a desperate struggle to get me out.

Spears stopped those claws, tearing and exposing the white flesh of the crab's muscle. I shouted in anger,

“Who’s eating who now?”

The crab’s lashings on my back doubled in effort at my taunting, but the damage sank in already. I turned its insides to outsides. I gripped and ripped everything and anything. The meat grinder of a mouth turned to a pulpy, bloody mass. After a minute of sloshing in it, I kicked out its side. As I crawled out, the monster stopped struggling, only its muscles twitching at random.

Blood dripped from me, but it soaked into my skin. I turned, finding the mantis already having reached Althea. She deflected a blow with her shield before lopping it apart with a few quick slices. I envied that ability of hers, but I also counted my own blessings. I survived jumping into a teeth crab. Turning back to said creature, I crawled back inside the thing. With my armor, I ate my way out, my helmet consuming the meat like a ravenous beast.

One of my arms stabbed out of the crab’s outer shell before another arm opened the hole further. Cracking the shell open, I fell out before standing up. I hit my chest, growling at the crab. I shook off the blood frenzy after, wiping some gunk off of me. I let out a sigh before shutting down Oppression. I turned to the others,

“Ah man, that was gross, but I prefer monsters to deformed people. They feel better to tear apart. By comparison.”

Althea glanced around at the bodies, “I don’t understand how they can sit in your aura. It’s just too painful.”

I rubbed some crab gunk off my armor, “It’s because they have a ton of damage resistance.”

Althea raised an eyebrow, my explanation a bit thin. I spread out my arms, “Think of it like this. Oppression’s base value is very high. When reduced, it’s not that big a deal. It goes from like ten thousand to...five hundred damage a minute. Enemies like this-” I kicked the shell of the crab, “They don’t take much damage from it. It stops them from regenerating more than actually taking them out. It’s still useful, but nothing too crazy.”

Althea pursed her lips, “Cool...So armored enemies give you trouble? Compared to unarmored ones, that is.”

I didn’t know if that was the case yet, but I nodded anyway, “Probably.”

She raised her rifle, “That’s good. My abilities are great versus armored targets. I can fill in the gaps in your offense, so that’s, er, cool.”

I spread out my hands, “Yeah, we make a good team.” I turned and looked around, “Let’s handle our statuses and move on. We should follow the route Torix handed us.” I

wincing as I said, "Standing still is how Elijah almost got me before. We aren't ready for him, not by a longshot."

Kessiah sauntered up, "No, *you're* not...I'll keep you pups safe in the meantime."

Althea smiled at Kessiah, "Thanks."

Kessiah returned the smile, "No problem, hon."

Even though it shouldn't, I bristled at seeing how warm Kessiah was to her. It wasn't like I wanted Althea to suffer or anything, but it felt unfair in a way. Still, I'd rather get the brunt of Kessiah's attitude rather than Althea. Letting it go, I opened my status. I furrowed my brow, only having gained seven levels. My eyes widened in surprise at that.

Schema slowed leveling down to an arbitrary grind. Even with the experience split between two people, we fought overleveled enemies with doubled experience. Getting levels from the risky venture was a given. I mean, normal people fought monsters at their level or lower, according to Torix at least, so it might've taken months for even a single level-up.

Despite that, our blistering pace still seemed slow sometimes. I couldn't even imagine what a normal person went through. I hovered my hand over strength, ready to put a bunch of points into the attribute. Before I did, I leaned back and ran a few calculations. Schema's status let me put points into different attributes before finalization. After messing around with it for a while, I gained a few insights. Endurance gave me about twice as many total points as Strength.

That changed my priorities. I intended on putting my last level one hundred perk into strength or constitution. They both gave very useful bonuses after all. However, while they synergized with my fighting style, those attributes didn't amplify from my trees at all. In particular, the Determinator line created a lopsided benefit to points in endurance.

Each point placed resulted in a cascade of bonuses, giving me more bang for my buck. Endurance boosted willpower which boosted intelligence which boosted luck then finally charisma. The other 'chain' of stats started with constitution that boosted strength which boosted dexterity then perception then ending at charisma again. This made constitution and endurance into these cardinal attributes that everyone should place a few points into at least.

Schema did that probably so that people were incentivised to never be too squishy. In my case, the Determinator trees bolstered my endurance chain by leaps and bounds. For that reason, I wanted to keep investing in endurance, piling the attribute up overtime. The health gained served a dual purpose as well, both tankiness and mana. My runic markings made mana into power. It came together well, syncing up like a puzzle.

So I peered down the endurance chain, finding intelligence peering back at me. Intelligence's benefits came across less clearly than either strength or constitution, but Blood Magic tidied that problem up nicely. Intelligence gave me mana, meaning more health. My armor synergized with health to an absurd extent. The extra resistance, health regen, and total health took my combat effectiveness to another level.

Besides all of that, intelligence granted a lot of intangible benefits. I won't lie either; I really wanted to feel and be smarter. Ever since I entered a school, I always felt a bit duller than most people. I made C's all throughout school, and whether I admitted it or not, that hurt my self esteem. This attribute acted as a way of fixing that issue without me having to confront an uncomfortable reality.

It was a win win.

Scathing personal issues aside, those reasons ended up with me placing my spare points into intelligence. Again, I hesitated to finalize. I snapped my fingers, a eureka moment passing through me. If I kept investing into endurance, the cascading points would give me the intelligence perk overtime. There was no real rush to get the last level 100 perk, so I put my points into endurance and selected finalize.

No rush of mental clarity coursed over me, but endurance condensed my blood and joints. The magical constructs in my body thickened as well, the arcane bonds tightening like coils of steel. The lack of mental impact left me disappointed, but I persisted either way. I'd hold onto my reasoning and follow it through to the end, wherever that left me.

With a little more health than before, I trekked onward into the deeper parts of the city. Althea tailed not far behind, staying outside Oppression's effective range. The plants and other various fungal creatures shriveled, giving enemies less places to hide from us. While irrelevant at first, the deeper parts of this new terrain enveloped the surroundings, choking the life out of anything coming nearby.

The thick tundra of fungal vines, herbs, and weeds altered Springfield into an alien landscape. Yellow and tan capped mushrooms of varying heights collected into dense clusters on the dirt. Stalks of dark yellow crawled and twisted into clusters, creating shrubs above the mushroom laden, grassy ground. Roots from nearby pod trees grew between these patches, along with dead grass. Vines of black crawled up and out of these tall trees, latching and crawling across nearby buildings and power poles.

At this point, the density for forest of fungi made moving forward a slow trudge. We didn't even make it a hundred feet forward before several zombies crawled out of cars, windows, or from out of the ground. The underground zombies carried roots growing out of them, like they were part of a tree's root system. They probably were.

The human bodies molded halfway into the mass of flesh and wood, making me wince. More mental whiplash rattled through me as the corpse of a father and its children

sprinted towards me. They fused half together, and I wanted to run. Not out of fear per say, but more because I disturbed their remains. It was like we were grave robbers, turning the bodies into resources for our gain.

Despite my misgivings, the dead didn't know the difference. They ran at me, and I pulped their remains all the same. After taking out a few deformed families, even Kessiah dealt with some anxiety, her snappy phrases dampening as she fell into a strange silence. Althea tolerated our deformed surroundings the best of us all, actually. Our sniper stayed sharp, her mind accepting this reality without much difficulty.

Without anything to compare this too, Althea accepted the sights as her normal. Knowing how awful this was compared to its former glory, I promised to leave Althea with a different impression of Springfield. Taking me out of that head space, two children leaped towards me with their warped corpses howling. I grabbed them as a harpoon detonated one of their skulls, letting me breath for a second. I collected myself again before I crushed another one into the ground with a punch.

The black blood splattered in every direction as a nameless father dove onto my back. It pressed me down onto the ground, the man's neck split open with teeth. I shot out a few spikes from my back, the father's body skewering. I lifted it up and shoved myself sideways. The monster tumbled before crashing into a car. I dashed and slammed it into the vehicle's door, glass crushing and falling from the bent steel.

My armor chomped forward, devouring the creature. The jagged teeth cleaved through the flesh, severing and absorbing the creature in seconds. It tried crawling away as my armor ate it, but with two quick stomps, I crushed its legs. It couldn't escape as I tore it apart with my helmet's teeth. Althea shouted from a block away,

"Uhm, what are you doing? It looks like you're eating it...I don't know if that's sanitary."

Despite myself, I actually laughed a little. My helmet did the work of eating, and it chewed up another hunk. When it finished, I turned to Althea, "This is how my armor absorbs stuff now. I mean, its not really my preferred method, but I can't evolve my armor any other way. That's something I can't let happen, because we need every edge we can get. This has to be done."

Althea winced, "Huh...Uhm, it's gross."

I flinched at her words, my helmet covering my face. I nodded at her, "I mean...I can't say you're wrong about that."

After a few seconds of contemplation, Althea shot a harpoon through the core of one of Yawm's pawns. As the zombie fell down, Althea shrugged, "It isn't like my power's any better, so we, er, have that in common at least."

She gave me a weak smile, and I returned the gesture. I walked over towards the corpse before using my armor to get the ambient mana from it. With the corpses handled and the plants being destroyed, we trekked forward through the ruins of Springfield once more. I numbed at the destruction and desolation, the abnormal situation becoming a new average. For once, I appreciated the lessening of emotion as it left me less exhausted.

After a while of walking, we all stood at a crossroads between the town and its suburbia. The houses gave way to dilapidated shops and brick buildings as we moved forward. The raided stores emptied out from raiders, full of rotted meat and produce. Jugs of milk blew up in the freezers, more festering pits than freezers at this point. Cars crashed into telephone poles, light posts, and even brick walls.

The fungal invasion smothered all of it, masking the signs of our old society. We'd never have seen it if not for Oppression's radius. It culled and cleared all life, sterilizing the ground as if we salted it. When the aura passed over the cars, no enemies spilled out. The petal insects hobbled over open corpses, but they lacked any means of getting into enclosed spaces.

That gave me some hope that we may find some survivors. The zombies tended to shatter encapsulated areas, however. Whether that was intentional or not, I couldn't say. That habit turned the hobbling petals bugs into a field of death. We found a few people turning while still alive, and it wasn't pretty. Oppression made the painful demise into a merciful death for most of them. We couldn't carry them with us either.

I tried saving a few of them, the horrid surgery more a form of torture than anything helpful. I continued the grim deed despite my lack of success, however. It was the only way to save Michael and Kelsey, so I did what I had to. After a dozen failures, I stopped tearing the living apart. Whether it was right or wrong didn't matter to me at that point.

I couldn't handle the screams of the mutants anymore.

By then, my mind muted. I didn't think anymore. I put one leg in front of the other, and I reacted. I couldn't handle any in depth thoughts at that time. Kessiah gave me a break, and Althea cracked jokes here or there. That eased our journey, but it taxed me all the same. In that droning existence, time passed. Minutes turned into hours. Hours turned into evenings.

The sun crossed overhead, daylight devolving to sunset. In the distance, we found a grocery store. The sound of chewing leaked out of it. Several of the spawns crowded around a few unconverted corpses and some rotting meat. They loved the putrefaction in the freezer isles, the food there spoiled beyond recognition. Everywhere else, the cans and other foods cleared out forever ago.

People left food in the refrigerators since it took people some time to finish the tutorial. The food all rotted by then. The zombies swarmed around those festering hellholes,

their misshapened mouths sunken into the rotting mush. We took advantage of them feasting away. Althea and I skulked in, the rows of empty aisles standing taller than us both.

Some unlooted rows stuck out like the motor supplies section. Pacing by, I picked up two bottles of lighter fluid. I motioned towards Althea. She raised an eyebrow in confusion, but I walked forward anyway. As I got within Oppression's range, I pointed at the zombies. I tossed a bottle of lighter fluid towards them, the bottle landing in the brown filled fridge the spawn's indulged in.

The amber fluid leaked out, butane spilling everywhere. I tossed another bottle. I turned to Althea and whispered,

"Shoot it."

Althea raised her rifle, landing a harpoon dead center of a bottle. The force alone detonated the bottle in a fiery flash. The explosion chained with the other bottle, setting all four spawns on fire. I moved forward at the same time as the detonation, putting the spawns within and Althea out of Oppression's range. They died over the next five minutes from a few harpoons, my aura, and a few well placed punches. Schema even recognized my efforts.

Skill gained! Resourceful | Level 1 – You use whatever is at hand for whatever you need. +1% to damage from environmental objects or traps. +1% to creativity regarding quick planning.

How Schema enhanced my creativity, I couldn't know. Despite that ambiguity, We walked out with a new skill and a few more levels under our belts. Getting out of the store no worse for wear, I shut off Oppression before walking up to Althea. I dragged my hands down my face, "How much more hunting should we do today?"

She glanced around, making sure no other zombies were present. Althea took a breath, "Torix gave us a lot of leeway for the plan, so we can just go until we're exhausted. I'm already tired, so we can stop if you want."

I gave my cheeks a few slaps, "No. I'm alright. Let's keep going."

Kessiah raised a brow at me, her hair a mess, "Between you two, you're the one who looks tired." Kessiah propped her weight onto a hip, "Even though I'm feeling it too, if I'm honest."

I frowned, "I'm fine."

I blinked, my shoulders wanting to slump. Kessiah scoffed, "You're barely reacting anymore."

I took a breath, "I'm just desensitized. I can't react to everything all the time. Come on, we can keep on going."

That's how we spent the rest of the day and even a few hours into the night. Althea transmogrified her eyes, letting her see in the dark. That let us set traps or just brute force our way through our blinded enemies. They relied on sight mostly, so the darkness rendered them helpless. When all was said and done, I gained sixty one levels and Althea gained forty two. It was a goldmine.

It made a night and day difference for both of us as we retraced our steps out the quarantine zone. We found our way out of the barricade with Torix's map and Oppression's cleared path. Kessiah tailed us the entire day, making sure no one or no thing could kill us before we fought back. She actually killed a few monsters, the remnant just ripping them limb from limb with ease.

Despite all of our slaughtering, we never found any sign of a fight having taken place. I hoped and expected some resistance from the humans here, but the monsters engulfed them. It left me embittered, but I kept my head up. I closed in on my next evolution, and I cultivated an enormous pool of endurance. It fed into willpower and intelligence, bolstering those attributes to respectable levels.

Althea rose her strength to absurd heights too. I learned that because Althea and I chatted away about our builds while we all walked. We passed the plains towards our current base doing that, and it rejuvenated me some. Shades cloaked us both, but our outlines gave us both sight of each other. At least enough to work off of.

Althea tapped her chin, "But will strength help my cannon? I really don't think so."

I raised a hand, "But you mentioned an ability that doubles your effective strength already, and you put most of your points today into strength. That makes the strength perk required at this point. Your melee attacks will be devastating, sure, but you'll also be faster. You need to be strong to move fast."

Althea grumbled, "I know, I know, but even if I move fast, that doesn't mean I can handle it. Er, I've always had a ton of strength, and it usually outruns my dexterity. I usually reach a point where I can't control my body anymore. It's like...my mind is too slow to comprehend what I'm doing."

I gawked at her, "Woah...That reminds me of a sticking point I had with constitution. Have you tried putting some points into it yet?"

Althea frowned, "Yeah. It's definitely made me less frail, but the mass is really hard to work with. I'm easing into it, giving myself time to adjust as my damage resistance get higher."

"Ah, that's a great idea."

Althea locked her hands behind herself, “So...What are you working on? Anything for getting some range attacks? They’re convenient, you know.”

I rubbed my temples, “Plans are in the works, let me tell yah. I’m going to use my dominion magic for it, but I want to have augmentation down before I do. I like mastering one thing before moving onto another.”

Althea murmured, “That makes sense...Give me one sec. I got to do something in my status.”

She clicked a screen in front of her before her muscles rippled over her body in a wave. She stared at her hands for a moment before smashing a hand into a nearby tree. The wood exploded outwards like she’d struck it with a grenade. The tree’s trunk bent away from her strike, long wedges split up and down the bark and wood. She turned on her feet, smacking the tree over. It tumbled with a momentous thud.

Althea hardly noticed the tree falling. She keeled over, grabbing her shin, “Ah...I think I broke something. Ooh, ouch.”

After having seen her so much, I had an idea when she was serious. I rolled my eyes, stretching out a hand, “You’re going to be fine.”

She frowned, “Dang. You could at least pretend you’re concerned.”

She grabbed my hand, jerking herself up and off the ground. Her pull lifted her a few feet above the ground, and she smiled, “Yeah...This was a good idea.”

I shrugged, “What can I say? I’m full of them. Speaking of which-“

I opened my own status screen and gave it a look over. It was a pleasant sight for sore eyes. The hard day paid off.

Level 221 | Attribute Menu

Strength [44.2] | Constitution [36.3] | Endurance [384] | Dexterity [32.8] | Willpower [187.8] | Intelligence [80.3] | Charisma [36.7] | Luck [40] | Perception [30.5]

Daniel Hillside, The Harbinger of Cataclysm | Character Screen

**Health – 12,800/12,800 | Health Regen – 2,169/min | Stamina – 7,825/7,825 |
Stamina Regeneration – 89/sec | Damage Resistance – 97% | Mental Resistance – 97% | Physical Power – (+)542% | Damage Increase – 5% | Evolution: 14.96 Million/16.00 Million**

Aura – Oppression | Current Damage: (8,000 + 25% of your health)/minute within a 150ft radius.

Wondering how much of a difference the health made, I walked out in front of Althea. I reached out an arm, "Hey, do mind shooting me through the arm? I want to test something."

Althea raised her rifle to her chest, narrowing her eyes at me, "What? I don't want to shoot you."

I pointed at my arm, "I want to see if all my health has made a difference to the spears."

She raised her brow, but her eyes stayed narrowed, "You can look at your stat sheet and see the difference. What do you need me for?"

I rolled a hand, "You ignore my damage resistance, and that gives me a really good idea of what's going on in reality, not on a statsheet."

She grimaced, "You know, you don't owe me or anything. I don't want payback for the spars."

I waved off her comment, "What? No, this is a favor for me, not payback for you."

She grimaced before turning her rifle to me. She gave me a nod before unloading a shell into my forearm. The shell lodged halfway into my limb, but it got stuck as if it shot through glue. I raised my hand, smiling at it, "Hah! It actually worked."

Althea's jaw dropped before she looked at her cannon, "How did you do that? It should've gone right through you. Is...Is this thing broken?"

I shook my head, "It's my health."

Kessiah gawked at me, "You're crazy."

I pulled the spear out, "So normally I might be mad at you, but Kessiah...You could be right this time."

I watched my forearm regrow. All the leveling perks added up, and the shell's momentum lacked enough inertia to sling me back anymore. Being heavy and dense planted me to the ground. I gave Althea a smile, "Thanks. That was all I needed to know."

Althea sighed, "Dang...I'm going to need a bigger gun."

I jogged forward towards our base, "Maybe try to get the harpoons to shoot out with greater force?"

Althea furrowed her brow as we walked up to the patch of hills disguising our current base. As we did, I stayed hopeful. Despite the enormity of our enemies, Althea and I

carried unique advantages. Althea's piercing and raw strength gave her the ability to hurt anyone no matter how much health they had. On the other hand, my health gave me genuine durability. Unlike most people, I could manage a few mistakes without dying.

The endurance bolstered my mana and my willpower as well. After a few more iterations of the sigils, I'd amass a behemothic strength of my own. Hopefully. That didn't even factor in more evolutions. Our quick rise left me in a better mood after what a slog it devolved into. I walked up to the base before Kessiah flashed across a hill to me.

She gouged out a chunk of dirt as she stopped herself. Placing a hand on my chest, she hunched forward,

"Someone's in there besides Torix. It's strong. Be ready."

Althea and I set ourselves up for a fight as we headed back into the hill base. As we entered, Torix's voice came into focus,

"I take it we'll reap the benefits of your trading as well?"

An electronic voice strong as metal replied, "Yes. Indeed you will. Schema and the Force of Iron will be pleased with your cooperation. May we both prosper."

We reached the bottom of the earthen stairs, roots hanging from the roof. Stepping into the hill home, I gawked at a faceless, robotic humanoid. Its enormous frame cast a shadow over us, and it gazed down like a reaper. Smooth, futuristic, and intimidating, the figure kept a lightly armored skin suit over its body up to the shoulders and arms. There, the scale of its equipment changed.

A giant platform bolted onto the torso of the person, making a flat line of black armor at its head and shoulders. This giant, smooth machinery supported the giant with flaring lights and tubes all over it. They pumped a glowing blue mana, and at the edges of this block, two giant, over-sized arms hung from the sides of it. The arms extended down to the dirt, the automaton's massive knuckles pressing against the ground.

Black cables hung from the back of that platform. Tubes ran through the colossal, hydraulic arms and torso. Several moving bolts locked in at strategic points, giving the arms and shoulders excellent range of motion. On the pitch black plate covering its head, six silver bolts created a hexagonal pattern. The entire living suit sheened a glossy, bright blue. The metal carried a dull gray material tracing its joints.

It stood twice as tall as Torix, dwarfing everyone in the room as a titan. Even from a glance, I could tell it was an absolute entity. It wasn't something any of us could fight. Its presence alone demanded compliance. It had that as Kessiah gave it a bow. Our remnant spoke with reverence, "It's good to see you."

The giant lifted a palm as large as I was, the room filled by its form. It spoke with the same piercing, robotic voice, "At ease, Kessiah. You've done nothing wrong...Yet."

Kessiah winced, but she kept her face low. The faceless armor looked at me, and I shrank underneath its gaze. It turned a hand to me.

"I am the Overseer sent by Schema. It is good to meet you...Harbinger."

Chapter 38: Overseer

I gawked at the enormous presence, "It's...It's good to meet you too, Overseer."

The Behemoth turned to Kessiah, "You and Torix have joined forces again. Interesting. You both have quite the collection of tools at your disposal. Breaking the controlled territories shouldn't be a problem."

Althea unformed her rifle, and she made herself small. She murmured, "Hello, sir. I'm Althea Tolstoy. It's great to meet you."

The Overseer tilted its head at Althea, "We shall see if our meeting is good with time. To Schema, you are an experiment. So is the Harbinger. Whether either of you manifest your potential is the real question."

Torix turned a palm towards the giant, and the necromancer murmured, "Now, that is exactly what I am here for. This deal of ours will enable them to truly shine."

Kessiah crossed her arms, "What plan?"

Torix spread his hands, "You, Daniel, and Althea shall clear out the infected areas. The Force of Iron will then go behind you and move up the quarantine zone past the cleansed regions."

I raised an eyebrow, "We aren't exactly clearing the areas."

Kessiah leaned onto my head, and she sneered, "That aura of yours kills the plants and spores. You can just walk past assigned sections everyday. The Force of Iron could just walk behind us."

I glanced up at her, "Don't you think that's a bit risky to rely on my power like that? I'm pretty low level."

Kessiah rolled her eyes, "Letting Yawm's operations continue has the same risk. Taking them out is the only option. The thing is, you guys are killing any living zombies and I don't know, like 99% of all the infected *stuff*. Considering the Force of Iron wants to get rid of the infected zones, your aura is about as good as it's going to get."

The Overseer turned back towards me, its voice commanding the room, "I will organize the legion's efforts for cleaning up behind your team." The Overseer lifted a massive arm and pointed a finger at us, "You three will act as a vanguard. Torix will support you at a distance. Simple enough?"

I nodded, "Sure. That's not that different from what we had planned anyway...So, what're we getting from the Force of Iron in return?"

The Overseer lowered its hand, "Torix and I discussed an exchange of several goods, including several technologies and books. It should be a suitable compensation for organizing them."

While listening, I identified it.

Overseer | Level 20,000 – An enforcer of the monolith system within sector C-137. Invincible, powerful, but most of all, loyal to Schema. Do not disobey or else face elimination.

The status read with some bias in its voice, but the level alone verified most of what it said bias or not. The Overseer turned towards Torix. The behemoth mouthed like metal,

"All parties agree. Good. We shouldn't waste anymore time here. We shall head to the Force of Iron, and I shall give the administrative rights for this faction to you...For the time being."

Torix gave the Overseer a slight bow, "Thank you. If I might ask, when shall we leave?"

The Overseer raised an enormous hand, "Now."

The giant raised a glowing arm, and arcs of blue lightning shot out of its palm before the giant clicked its fingers. Nothing changed in our room, but signs of a sudden shift ebbed in from outside. A factory hummed in the distance. Drilling machinery, revving engines, and firing guns echoed just outside the dirt walls. As I glanced around, Althea hugged herself and frowned. While I didn't hug myself, it unnerved me how potent the Overseer was.

By comparison, Torix and Kessiah kept a steady composure. I turned towards Torix,

"Where are we now?"

Torix shrugged, "We're in the Force of Iron's base. The Overseer warped us just now."

My eyes widened, "But...How?"

Torix peered at the giant. Torix murmured, "They have many of the same rights and abilities as Schema, as they are his most loyal paragons of destruction."

I turned towards the Overseer, "Were you made by Schema then?"

The Overseer didn't peer my way as he announced, "No. I earned my own strength. I climbed through his system, and I was rewarded for my own accomplishments. Schema did grant me my own cybernetic enhancements." The Overseer raised his hand, energy rippling the air like a rock tossed into a pond,

"They are...Potent."

The Overseer flicked his fingers, and above us, the ground dematerialized in a flash of light. Sun beamed in while I froze in place. Althea murmured, "So, why haven't you killed Yawm? You, uhm, look like you could do it...If you wanted to, that is."

The Overseer waved his hand, "You are not incorrect. I am able but not allowed." Wherever the Overseer's hand crossed, the dirt walls of our base disappeared in a wave of light. Tearing down the entrance to Torix's underground base, the Overseer revealed the inside of a warehouse. Soldiers stared at us, their guns pointed in our direction. The Overseer flicked a finger, the barrels curving up for each and every gun present.

The giant spread his hands, "You all serve these people now. Understood? This is a directive from Schema, and the quests will reflect this change."

The troopers gawked at the Overseer, anything it said like new laws spoken aloud. The Overseer clicked his other hand, creating a hologram of stars above us. Galaxies, nebulae, and quasars swarmed around each of us in real time, as if we drifted through the vast void of space. My eyes opened wide at the beauty and majesty of it all. I kind of whiplashed from all the changing scenery and circumstances, adding to the effect.

I appreciated the pause the Overseer gave us to relax. After a few seconds, the giant raised a hand towards the hologram, "As requested, I shall share what we know of Yawm. I relish in an opportunity to teach a little of Schema's past as well. Try to listen as I won't speak the relevant information twice."

The hologram honed onto a shiny planet that orbited around a red dwarf. It carried scars all across its surface, as if massive patches of glass reflected the nearby star's light. The overseer sighed,

"This was Wohak, a planet that sustained a population of sentient life much like earth."

The Overseer waved its hand, reversing the flow of time in the hologram. Light coalesced from a monumental detonation. A colossal, dark, and writhing shadow molded off the planet, fire raining across its surface in reverse. The Overseer winced, mainly through the tone of its voice,

“Schema’s darkest instruments – Spatial Fortresses. They are disgusting but necessary. Schema could lob a chunk of iron at high enough speeds and simply crack a planet with ease. In that regard, planets are simply molten marbles floating in space. Your marble happens to be covered in dirt. If you send a large block of iron at it, the molten metal that composes the planet will split in all directions.”

The Overseer raised a hand, “Schema avoids doing so as it ruins a planet for millions of years. In reality, how different are the Spatial Fortresses? It’s a question for another day.”

The Overseer opened his hand, zooming in on the planet, “This is where Yawm was born. This is also where he should have died. He left his planet and served Etorhma before coming back to this place. It was only after he had been touched by Etorhma that he began spewing nonsense.”

Closer to the planet’s surface, a writhing, dark mountain came into view, revealing giant beings. Cast in darkness, the dark blobs shifted over a scene of trees and other wildlife. It swallowed hills and lakes, crossing over them and igniting the surface as it passed. It carried no shape or reason, an incoming tidal wave of obliteration. The Overseer closed a hand,

“It’s amazing how close Yawm came to creating what he wanted on Wohak. He converted his home planet into a fringe world, giving him an ample supply of materials for his experiments, most of it not of an animalistic origin. Wohak was a unique world in that regard. It’s primary sentient species, the porytians, originated from plants.”

The view of the hologram closed in on a wooden, hunched thing that walked on all fours. Flowing strips of wood acted as skin, and a thick layer of large, fanning leaves covered its back. Several tubes composed the mouth of the creature as it sucked up some water from a nearby pool. With no eyes and no mouth, the thing felt around with thick, elephant feet with hundreds of roots for toes.

“This is a porytian, the plant species that Yawm hails from. They have several subclasses for their species, this one being a collector. Yawm was a member of the warrior sub race.”

The Overseer twisted his finger, sending the viewpoint of the hologram onto a much different creature. This beast owned the same flowing strips of wood for skin, but it stood upright. It walked on wooden goat legs, three large toes for standing. The long, wiry arms latched onto branches, letting the creature carry itself along a canopy of trees.

Falling from its back was a mane of leaves that looked like hair. The two glowing, green eyes on its face pulsed with green, ambient energy. The mana sent light through several cracks in its body. The Overseer stated,

“This is what Yawm’s subspecies looked like. Lithe and agile, they can use their own hard skin for killing any predators or herbivores trying to kill the collectors of their tribes. They relish in combat as well, making them prime candidates for Schematization.”

The hologram moved outwards, back to a view of the entire galaxy. The Overseer sighed and said,

“Yawm saw the horror of this universe, but in a different light. Imagine what paper must have looked like to him as he went to other worlds?”

I put my hands on my hips, “I think it would be like seeing leather boots or something.”

The Overseer tilted his head, “The porytians view all plantlife as their own, a union and balance of all beings. That comparison falls flat. It is more the same as wearing human skin, or drinking from a human skull.”

I shivered, “That makes a lot more sense then.”

The Overseer turned back to the porytian, “But the horrors they found did not cease there. Paper would be writing on mushed bodies. Furniture and buildings are tethered corpses. Even something as benign as a flower bracelet is a terrifying prospect. This viewpoint is where Yawm’s own warped views began.”

The space hologram disappeared before a picture of two armies clashing came into view, one made of flesh and the other of leaves and wood.

“Yawm believed that his species would never be able to compromise with any other species. They were too different in his eyes. Over the next few hundred years, a hostile species, known as the bracken, attempted taking over Yawm’s homeworld. This further entrenched his polarizing beliefs. During this war, Yawm was the porytians mightiest warrior.”

An image of a single poryte hunched over a pile of torn bodies came into view. The glowing green of the creature’s eyes webbed down its face and onto its chest. The shining lines ran down its shoulders, arms, and back, ending at its hands. Every part of the creature these lines ran over enlarged, turning hard and muscled. Wiry arms turned into muscled trunks.

The emerald viens linked together like a chain, keeping the creature’s upper body heavy and in control. The curved legs looked more like a platform than the primary movers of this poryte. Its branch horns mirrored an elks, but too large and majestic for nature to create. It was a magnificent entity.

The Overseer simmered, “This...This is the image used to strike fear into the porytian’s enemies. This was Yawm before his change. He was their symbol. The porytes won the war, destroying the bracken and enslaving them. Their species wore the bones of the

bracken. They used the bracken's skin as their own parchment. They ground up their teeth, and used the powder as an abrasive."

Althea shook her head, pointing at the old Yawm, "And, uhm, Yawm wanted that to happen?"

The Overseer cast a chilly gaze over Althea. The behemoth said, "Yawm wanted to show other species the horror of what had been done to them. A hundred years of this passed before Etorhma reached out to him. It was then that Yawm realized that there were more differences than merely plants and those of flesh."

An image of Etorhma appeared, causing gasps throughout the room. Kessiah spread her arms, "Don't you think you're telling them a bit too much?"

The Overseer waved her question away, "The Harbinger has been chosen as an avatar of Etorhma. You cannot tell me he has not already seen this entity."

Kessiah's face wrinkled like a raisin, "Daniel is an avatar? Really? *Him?*"

The Overseer turned to the image, "What matters is how different Etorhma is from us mortals. He is an immortal being who can move through space and time. Yawm saw him as a god and demon all in one. This interpretation is no further from the truth than what others have seen. Etorhma is enigmatic in that way."

On the hologram, a wave of white flashed over everything. Etorhma disappeared and the Wohak's surface came back. The Overseer gestured to it,

"Schema assimilated their world and warned them of the eldritch as well. Now Yawm knew of many different beings. He knew that he couldn't kill them all, no matter how strong he became. In the end, he went into hiding as he struggled to find a way to solve the problem he saw with existence as a whole."

The Overseer spread his arms, "Yawm said, 'How can beings, different to their cores, coexist? All differences are erased in wars and death and destruction. From that inescapable truth, there is but one way to prevent hatred and war, and that is through unity.' Yawm's twisted logic is wrong of course, but he saw no other alternative. He would create a singular creature, a singularity of all beings."

The Overseer closed the hologram with the wave of his hand, "Yawm found a way of bonding plants and creatures of flesh. He turned himself into the new abomination he created. His entire world burned and his species was torn asunder by his corrupted vision. Schema allowed this to happen."

One of the Overseer's hands clamped shut, and his voice rose, "And during the very apex of Yawm's power, he assaulted one of the Sentinels with an army of corrupt porytians. They warred for weeks until Yawm slayed Schema's guardian, and the

porytian's hero stole the Sentinel's dimensional slicer. Wielding it, Yawm has traveled between worlds at his own leisure, bending them until they break."

The bolts on the Overseer glowed bright blue, "We will crush him here, before he destroys yet another world to support his own delusions. He has destroyed thirteen world's too many, and we will crush him before he completes his goal."

My heart sank in my chest. I mumbled, "Th-thirteen? Thirteen planets? Like, actual worlds?"

The Overseer deadpanned, "Yes."

I peered down, overwhelmed by that absurdity. Althea chimed, "Uh, how are we supposed to do what thirteen world's couldn't do?"

The Overseer lowered his hand, "Using your unique talents, you will dismantle Yawm's forces before killing him while he lingers alone. Know that Yawm has sweet words, his voice laced in honey. He speaks in convincing riddles and compelling lies. Always remember, Yawm is a misguided fool with a reckless goal. He will stop at nothing to accomplish it, no matter how many worlds he decimates. Yours will be as those before it, should you not stop him."

I ran my hands through my hair, keeping my breathing calm. A long pause pressed onto the room as if an anvil weighed us all down. Torix appeared confident still, his will unshakeable. That made sense. The lich already resolved to duke it out with Yawm regardless of the situation. Althea remained brave as well, fighting Yawm being her only way of escaping his experiments. She'd be turned inside out if Yawm got a hold of her again.

For me, my reasoning was the simplest of all. This was my home planet, and I wasn't about to watch humanity die without a fight. Unlike the three of us, Kessiah lacked any real reason to fight to the death, and the remnant was all too aware of that fact. She took a few steps back, leaning against a wall. It soaked in, and her hands trembled. Her breathing scattered into short bursts, turning sharp and rapid like she breathed in broken glass.

Kessiah blinked, "I'm...I'm stuck here. And...And I'm fighting something like that?"

The Overseer's stare might as well have been a hammer crashing against her cheek. The titan said like stone, "Yes. You will fight or you will die."

Kessiah blinked, her voice rising, "But...but you sealed this planet off. How are we going to get reinforcements?"

The Overseer announced, "You won't."

An awkward tension spread across the room as Kessiah gazed around in shock. She fumbled out her words, "There's no dungeons we can level with here. There's no craftsman or tech hubs or system analysts. We can't find any ancient secrets or hidden treasures either. We...We're being sent off to die? And for what, exactly? So you can *pretend*

you tried to stop Yawm? You...You can't do this."

The Overseer tilted his head, "I can. I must. I have."

Kessiah raised her hands to the Overseer, "None of my contacts or friends are going to come here knowing they won't be able to leave, even through 'illegal' means. I was fine with fighting Yawm before because I thought it might be an uphill battle, but this...We don't stand a chance in hell of winning. We're all going to die here."

The Overseer remained unmoving, "You cannot decide that. This is the will of Schema, and each of you shall enact it...Unflinchingly."

Kessiah unhinged, her voice rising, "We're trapped in a wasteland. A dirtball with no technology, magic, engineering-" She turned to Torix. She shouted, "What the hell is this? This was supposed to be a nice side adventure. I was supposed to just see runes, take a few pictures, and sell them for cash. I wasn't supposed to be trapped in a primitive world and forced to die."

Kessiah stomped over, but Torix could only peer away and murmur, "I...I'm sorry. I couldn't have imagined it would end up-"

Kessiah lifted the lich, and she reared her hand back. She howled out, "I'm going to die alone here, and it's your fault. It's all because you lied about what was going on. It's because you-" Kessiah turned away, and she bit through her lip and tongue. Blood dripped out, dropping onto the freshly teleported dirt.

The red dollops channeled from the ground, siphoning around Kessiah. The remnant's face gnarled into a twisted visage of rage,

"I just got everything back together in my life after you came in and tore it all down. This was supposed to be a break from all the mercenary work, and now-" Kessiah seethed, "You can't do this to me. You *can't*. Not again. Not this time."

I winced as her voice radiated in the Force of Iron's garage. Kessiah's wrath oozed from her, a palpable aura. Torix shook his head, "I'm sorry, but there's nothing that can be done. Forces outside my control have trapped us here, and I aim to make the best of this situation. Perhaps you should as well."

Kessiah shook Torix as she stated, "Outside your control? You saw the ritual. You knew something could go wrong, but that's not how you explained the situation to me."

You...You just can't leave things be. You always have to put your hands and fingers on everything and warp it however you like. You like to be a puppet master with all the strings."

Kessiah's hands tore Torix robe as she grimaced at the lich. She seethed, "And it's all because you know better, right? You always know everything, so everything always works out just fine and dandy. Hah, yeah, just like when we first met. Just like right now, huh?"

Torix's eyes flared green, and he peered away. Kessiah spit as she spoke, "I...I wanna kill you. I want to end you and your little lich body. Gah."

Torix winced before sighing, "Hah...If you kill me, I can't repay you for my mistakes, now can I? My death dooms you as well. Regardless of your current feelings, you need all of us to assist you in this effort. Control yourself."

Kessiah heaved a few deep breaths. She threaded the line between rage and reason. Kessiah shook in place, not from holding Torix up but from fury. She turned away, nodding her head in disgust. She turned to Torix and smoldered out,

"Oh, you'd better pull me out of this, or else I'll show you a dozen different ways you can die despite that phylactery of yours."

Althea murmured, "Uhm, you know, Torix is in the same situation as us. I-I don't know-"

Kessiah tilted her head to Althea. Kessiah radiated, "Oh, you think so, huh? He's a *lich*, honey. If he dies, his soul will be sent to his phylactery god knows where. If *we* die, that's it. We're done. It's over."

Kessiah glowered at Torix. She fumed, "He's risking us, but not himself. That's how he always does things."

Kessiah's words fell down on me like icy water. I numbed all over, wincing as Kessiah's anger over her situation made sense. Torix's eyes flared red, but the lich stayed silent. Kessiah hurled Torix through the dirt wall of our just warped base. Torix's equipment, charts, and graphs crashed into the air before the lich's frail body hit the edge of the garage's wall. The lich wasn't as decrepit as I imagined, however.

The metal wall stretched before popping in a violent rupture. Torix tumbled on the dirt just outside the warehouse before he pushed himself up. Brushing himself off, Torix simmered, "Is your anger out, or perhaps you'd rather breed further animosity between us? And just as well, I didn't lie to you about what occurred here. I was merely unaware of what would happen in the future. Excuse me for not being an all knowing oracle as you presume me to be."

Torix pointed at his chest, "I never told you to think I had all the answers. I never told you to believe my words as law. You have a brain too, Kessiah, whether you believe you do or not. So yes, your *highness*, I'm oh so sorry I've made mistakes, but unlike some people, I do all that I can to prevent them."

Torix looked down at Kessiah, "And I have done everything in my power to assist your escape from here. Accusing me of otherwise is far worse an insult than merely tossing me around."

Kessiah closed her eyes as her form shifted, the air condensing around her in a wave. She howled out, and the air pressure shifted. A wave passed over us, knocking people back and against the wall. The howl loomed across the landscape, a brutal, hateful cry. Kessiah walked over to a car, and she squeezed her hands into the steel, the metal crumbling.

After taking a few breaths she lashed out in frustration. Kessiah lifted the jeep and heaved it at another wall of the garage. The enormous collision left my ears ringing. The jeep tumbled into the distance, banging on hard dirt and harder pavement. Kessiah stomped out, her feet piercing concrete with each earth-shattering impact. She leaped away, getting distance between everyone and her.

I let out a held breath, not really remembering when I stopped breathing. Everyone else in the room did the same as Torix hopped over the large hole in the wall. The lich interlocked his hands behind himself and turned to us, "Hm, I must say, that went far better than I anticipated. She's not nearly as angry as I would've expected. She may even help us later if we're lucky."

My jaw slackened as I mouthed, "That...That was *good*?"

Torix put a hand on my shoulder, "As some of your literature has stated: hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. In this case, she's a remnant as well, so you may double that phrase's magnitude."

The Overseer turned to Torix. The giant said, "You believe she will assist you?"

Torix paced back and forth, "For now, yes. She is the strongest of us. We will need her assistance, else we will most certainly struggle against Yawm's Followers, let alone the cretin himself."

The Overseer peered where Kessiah left. The massive figure's tone lightened, "Did you trap her here on purpose? Perhaps you actually anticipated the quarantine?"

I frowned, wondering that myself. Torix stuck his nose up, "I'd never use underhanded methods like that. How could I anticipate a seal being placed here like that? It seems less like a method of killing Yawm and more a way of ensuring this planet's death."

The Overseer turned its hulking frame to Torix, "Schema's motives aside, this wouldn't be the first time you've predicted unlikely outcomes."

Torix's eyes flickered, "And it most certainly shall not be the last either, but this isn't one of those cases. Unfortunately, Kessiah has many reasons to doubt me on that account, but I aim to regain her trust."

Althea walked up to the Overseer, "Uhm, hello Overseer, sir. Would you mind if I ask a question?"

The Overseer opened a palm towards her, "What would you like to know?"

Althea murmured, "You were really angry about Yawm. It sounded personal, so I was just wondering if something was wrong...Er, that's all."

A silence lingered before the Overseer sighed. It hissed out with the sounds of steam and metal. The Overseer raised a hand, "Do you remember the bracken? The species that Yawm and his kind enslaved?"

Althea scratched her cheek, "Er, yeah. I do."

The Overseer pointed at himself, "I was one of their slaves. This is the first time Schema has let me actively work against Yawm. The other Overseers have failed to stop him. I will not."

I took a step back, stunned at his honesty. Even Torix's eyes flared white with surprise. The Overseer brushed us off, "I won't speak of those times further, but I will act in accordance with them. That means being the intermediary between you and the Force of Iron."

The Overseer turned away, "I've spent more time than I should here already. Speaking of history catches me at times. Even further, history has a way of ensnaring people in its web, whether through its repetition or its curiosities."

The Overseer stepped forward, and we passed through the warehouse as a group. The Overseer pointed a single finger at the gated doorway. Several tiny spikes of lightning arced from the giant's fingertips, making the door pop off its hinges and open. We all walked through the doorway before Althea murmured, "Overseer, I was wondering why you have emotions. Anytime I've spoken with Sentinels, they seem more...Robotic, I guess."

The Overseer opened a red status screen, typing on it, "Overseers are given full control of their conscience. Schema tried making Sentinels and Overseers completely driven by AI interfaces before. They were never as successful as a sentient mind. It was mostly due to risk management. The AIs take no risks, meaning they sacrificed many worlds to the eldritch without due cause."

Althea glanced forward, "Oh...Thanks for the answer."

The Overseer closed his red screen, "And it will be the final one before we meet again."

We walked in front of the Force of Iron. The warehouse amped up the security, and I spotted it all through the massive whole Kessiah left behind. The soldiers installed several turrets at the top of the building. New guards walked around other warehouses, and the troops even put up some barbed wire along the windows of the building, though it wouldn't do them any good.

We walked out of our building and towards a different one. As we approached, several of the armor clad soldiers aimed their rifles at us. Once they identified the levels of our party, those soldiers lowered their aim and threw themselves into a frenzy. Several even ran away when they saw the extra question marks beside the Overseer's name.

I didn't blame them.

Before any stragglers got too far, the Overseer raised his hand, and everyone stopped in place. As the titan lowered his hand, the force was allowed to move again but none of them did. They stayed frozen in place, terrified of the giant walking with a group of high leveled unknowns. We walked into a warehouse clad with flags and radio towers. It was the command center for this faction.

The Overseer faced his hand forward with his fingers pressed together. He opened his hand, and the walls separating us from the commanding office unfolded like wet tissue paper. Torix didn't even flinch, and I managed to stop myself from showing my amazement. Althea didn't quite restrain hers, her eyes still popping open with surprise.

To me, the Overseer's absurd telekinesis fell right in line with my expectations for him. At the end of this newly created hallway, a man specced out in a different, fancier model of armor leaned over a map of Springfield. He didn't have a helmet on, letting us see his face. With gray hair and a grayer beard, he looked like an old sea captain put onto land against his will. Carrying a look of utter confusion, he just stared at the five of us.

The Overseer reached a hand up to him,

"Hello, Sergeant Whitley. This group of four unknowns will assist your section of the force with containing the infected area. They will clear out invaded sectors, and your troops will lock in the containment field behind them. Do you understand?"

Sergeant Whitley shot up into a salute before shouting, "Sir, yes, sir."

The Overseer loomed, "As long as you understand. Don't disappoint me, but more importantly, don't fail Schema." The Overseer turned to us, "Good luck to you all. You will need it."

The Overseer typed out some coordinates into his red status, and his commands generated a portal. It showed a world of fire and brimstone, and the juggernaut trotted in without a care in the world. As the tear in space-time clashed shut, we all stayed there for a bit. Everything happened so suddenly, air rushing past my ears to fill the void he left behind. That air reflected his aura, as if a void in power existed.

Everyone stood still like statues, stunned by everything that happened. The first to speak was actually me. I scratched the back of my head,

“Hey. Whitley. I, er, want to say sorry about the other day. I wanted to find my friends. It makes sense why you guys contained them, so thank you for doing that.”

Sergeant Whitley stepped out of his salute and shouted like a drill sergeant,

“You crippled several of my best recruits. We’ve had to re-break several limbs and have them healed back properly. You totaled several vehicles, you nearly killed three different people, and we had to replace nearly a dozen sets of armor.”

Whitley turned to Althea. He shouted at her, “And you...You disgusting maggot-”

I stepped up and nudged my palm on his chest. Whitley fumbled back, and I sneered at him, “Don’t talk to her like that. You can say that about me, but not about her. Got it?”

Whitley met my eye, and we glared at each other. He broke first, and I gave him a slow nod as I simmered, “It’s good you understand.”

Whitley turned and redoubled his efforts, “My point is that changing the commanding officer like this...It’s going to result in more confusion than good. I understand that... *Thing* was strong, but does it understand our situation? I doubt it.”

Torix stepped up, his hands interlocked behind himself, “Excuse me, Whitley was it? I do believe you and I haven’t been acquainted. I’m Torix Worm-“

Whitley thundered, “You’re already called a worm? Superb. That makes your new nickname easier.”

Torix tilted his head, his eyes flaring red, “It is the name of my family, one of a reputable heritage. We managed the graveyards of many centuries worth of the dead. They acted as an excellent learning ground for my own necromancy. Now, unless you want me to do the same for you, perhaps you should watch your words more wisely, hm?”

Unaware of the situation, Whitley walked up and poked the necromancer’s chest. Whitley shouted in his face, “You listen to me worm-”

Torix raised his hand and snapped his fingers. An invisible force crushed Whitley’s neck. The veins on Whitley’s neck bulged as his face purpled. His legs flailed against

the ground as Whitley tried stopping the strangulation. The sergeant writhed in the air as Torix looked up at him. The lich spoke with a casual ease,

“Actually, you shall be the one who listens to me. I attempted politeness, but you wished to be used as an example. Well-” Torix swiped a finger sideways. Whitley crashed through the window of his office into a series of other makeshift offices in a large warehouse. Kiosks lined up with quests and assignments while people helped organize the flow of data from the terminals.

Torix took casual steps through the doorway into that room. The lich peered at everyone present. The officers and organizers gawked at the lich, their jaws slack. The necromancer pointed at Whitley, the sergeant’s struggling intensifying. Torix spread his hands,

“Ah yes, I believe I have your attention. Simply superb.” Torix flicked his other hand. Whitley’s right arm bent backwards, causing a gasp of agony from the military man. Torix snapped his other fingers, and Whitley’s convulsing form enveloped in silence. The sergeant still screamed, but no one heard him – not even himself.

Torix turned and looked at everyone, “Do you see your commanding officer?”

Everyone nodded, their eyes glazed over like animals of prey. Torix flicked another finger, sending Whitley’s knee bending the wrong way. Torix spoke with a cordial finality,

“This is what happens to those who speak to me with rudeness. Need I reiterate? Likely not, but I shall regardless.”

With another flick, Whitley’s other arm and leg twisted like pretzels. The crack of bone and crumpling of steel stayed silent. Whitley struggled against the compressive forces around him, but Torix swaggered about without a care in the world. The lich tapped the edge of his robe, and Whitley collapsed down, his form unmoving and unconscious.

The soldiers watched the pseudo execution, all the eyes of the legion pinned to their commanding officer. Bent and broken, Whitley at least lived. I frowned at Torix, and all of a sudden, it made sense why Alfred left the guy. Torix owned surprising benevolence, but the lich also carried a grating cruelty. That’s how he learned and became a philosopher, a scholar, but also a necromancer and lich.

He must’ve calmed down over time, but in Torix’s heyday, the guy might’ve been a complete monster. It disturbed me, but at the same time, he never directed that at any of us. Torix made firm lines between his enemies and friends, and that calmed my nerves. Some, anyways. For Torix’s anger, I preferred standing where the grass was greener. After watching Whitley, I intended on keeping myself there.

Torix stomped one foot, Whitley's limbs reforming back to their normal proportions. Torix peered over the soldiers, and the lich boomed, "This will happen to anyone who belittles me, ignores me, or treats me and my compatriots unfairly. If you should follow me with sincerity, however, then I shall return the gesture. I will bestow my vast knowledge of the arcane arts, tactical warfare, and even philosophy to those willing to listen."

Torix walked between Althea and I. Torix gestured to us, "These two are prime examples of that, and you may ask them if you don't believe me. Now-" Torix walked forward and stepped onto a cloud of mana, "Get me an empty room and the next officer in the chain of command. We will work out a deal while you make sure my compatriots are comfortable."

The crowd of troops burst into activity, each of them obeying Torix as if their life depended on it. It probably did. One trooper walked up, his hands shaking inside his armor. He stuttered,

"Uhm...Uh...We can get you Seargent Briggs. He's the next highest member, sir."

Torix gave the soldier a nod, "Then let's go meet him."

Torix walked off with the scared trooper guiding him. The rest of our group stood in the middle of the room. After another awkward pause, Althea coughed into a hand, "Ok...So...I'm just gonna go."

Althea ran off, leaving me surrounded. In the distance, a soldier clasped his rifle. I put my hands on my hips,

"So, none of you know me, I'm sure. I'm Daniel. Let's...Let's hope we don't ever have to see that happen again...Am I right?"

An unarmored scientist vomited his lunch, and I sighed. This was going to be a long day.

Chapter 39: The Steel Legion

We ended up getting our room and everything handled for us by the steel legion. After seeing how whipped into shape they were, it more like the legion of lackeys. I guess Torix scared the living shit out of them though. That and having two people over a thousand levels above your commanding officer tends to make that happen.

It was strange seeing how they operated compared with what I imagined they would. The steel legion wasn't a group of conquerors. They were a system that assimilates, much like Schema without the force behind them. They offered an efficient organizing element that was hard to not take, especially considering the alternative.

They sent a small force of only a few thousand towards new planets. This force would then spread out by offering a recruitment plan that involved ironing out disobedience. They then gave out armor, guns, and other resources towards the members of a planet. They would create a large military force that would proliferate.

That's what was interesting about them. They would use the previous knowledge of the planet for their rebuilding efforts. Of course they offered the basic enhancements for advanced technology, but they kept most of the previous tech intact. It had something to do with the utilization of planetary resources and such.

Made sense to me. It's hard to create a density bomb out of something like unobtainium. I mean shit, it's unobtainable after all.

Shitty ass puns aside, if I hadn't spawned in BloodHollow, I would've joined them for sure. You get protection, order, and some sort of stability compared with the utter chaos of the new world. Not a bad deal if you ask me. I didn't really get that kind of a choice though.

Anyways, the legion ended up letting us use the nearby warehouse as our own little hideaway. Honestly, working in the nearby area didn't feel that different when compared with normal. Everything, from the marble walls to the dirt floor was the same. The only difference was the red tin roof overhead.

That's where I worked for a few days. In fact, it took a few weeks before the legion organized everything. It turned out that old Whitley was one of the most important logistic officers for the legion on earth. That meant a much slower supply chain until someone learned how to operate everything.

Over the course of those three weeks, I studied the runic language. I carved dozens of different combinations onto my armor, trying out all kinds of effects. Quickness, hardness, even friction enhancing enchantments, I tried them all.

It took quite a while, but I made a few adjustments towards my armor. One of the most useful ones was the ten symbols etched onto my finger tips. Tiny as they were, they let me stick to walls and other surfaces. With boundless storm active, I could accomplish insane maneuvers near anything sturdy and stable.

I'd also accomplished carving two phrases into my palms. Each phrase had been a carved into a circle. They conveyed the fear of being helpless, the hatred of being used, and the weight of many burdens. At their center was the single symbol for the feeling of being overwhelmed. I figured these symbols would help with what I wanted to learn next.

I walked up towards Torix's new office thing. He'd made his own room in the warehouse, turning it into a place for his experiments. It was much like a doctor's office, with tables and benches with tools spread over them. Hunched over an operating table,

Torix dissected one of the petal insects. Beside him was a jar full of them, each squirming for release.

As I walked up, Torix roared before slamming the scalpel through the creature. He leaned over the creature, sulking as I stepped near him,

“Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“No. Please, give me a reason to stop researching these insufferable creatures. They make no sense. No biology or rhyme or reason either. Just an amalgam of flesh and plant fibers.”

I shrugged, “Yeah, sounds like something Yawm would make. Anyways, I was hoping you could teach me some dominion magic while we’ve got some spare time.”

Torix perked up, standing straight up as he pulled out his ancient tome. The pages glowed with a swing of his hand, “I’d love the distraction, no matter how slight it may be. Did you have any particular thing you wanted to learn about the field?”

I weighed my hands back and forth, like measuring two different things in each hand, “Hmm, mainly telekinesis and maybe something to pin people down. I figure getting someone to stop moving would be pretty damn awesome for me.”

“Indeed it is. Then telekinesis and gravity wells are an excellent start. Telekinesis is much simpler and easier than gravity wells, so we shall start there.”

He raised a hand, spawning a blob of black, writhing mana, “This is the dominion form of mana. Can you summon it yet?”

“Sort of.” I raised a hand, and after a bit of struggling, a black ball formed above my fingers. The tendrils of black were gated by the spirals of red, just like last time.

I said, “Not too terrible if I say so myself.”

Torix frowned, “Unfortunately, you aren’t the only one who has a say in the matter. That mana of yours is incomplete. It is only forming due to your unusually high affinity. That isn’t true dominion magic.”

Torix pressed his fingers together before pulling them apart. As he did so, a blob of black formed again, “This is true dominion magic. Think back to when you first discovered augmentation magic.”

I facepalmed, “Of course. I got to embody what the feeling of dominion is.”

The ball of mana above Torix dissipated. He grinned, "That's my apostle. You work on your summoning in the corner of the room as I work on discovering this..." He waved his arms over the petal insect, "Enigma."

I walked over to the corner of the room, sitting on a metal chair. The metal creaked a bit under my weight, but it held up. I lifted my hand, forming the same mana as before. Thoughts of control and domination filled my mind. I wanted to save Michael and Kelsey. I wanted to make this world my own.

Except, I didn't really. It wasn't in me to be honest. No matter how much I tried making the thoughts form, they never had any substance behind them. In the back of my mind, I didn't blame anyone but myself. As I realized that, the red bands built in density, preventing the mana from overflowing. I was holding my own magic back.

Struggling with it didn't make a difference. Trying to think a different way isn't that hard. Trying to feel a different way is much harder. Unfortunately for me, these feelings were deep in my bones. I understood exactly whose fault it was that my friends died. It was my own.

At this point, a red ball formed around the dominion energy. It made even interacting with it impossible. Even after an hour of trying to get this shit to work, the mana just wasn't having it. It was when I was ready to give up and try something else that the foreboding voice entered my mind like a distant echo,

"You must embrace your hunger. Release the chains you carry."

I frowned, glancing back at Torix. He hunched over the table, mumbling about how idiotic the insect was and whatnot. Turning back to the ball of mana, I thought back,

"It's you again. Torix thought you were some manifestation of my inner turmoil. I call bullshit."

"Interesting isn't it? Despite his vast wells of knowledge, Torix is still ignorant of my origin. That ignorance may well be his undoing."

I turned back towards Torix, my mouth opening as I was about to tell Torix about the voice again. The ominous voice roared in my mind,

"No. Do not speak of me again."

"And why the fuck not?"

"I will not help you with obtaining dominion of your own magic. These red gates will never relinquish on their own. I may teach you how to destroy them. You may choose to reveal me after I have taught you. Does that deal sate your appetite?"

I frowned, "Alright then, voice thing in my head. What do I need to do?"

"I told you. Embrace your hunger."

I rolled my eyes, "Alright, maybe a little more detail?"

"Remember when you first fought the spawns of Yawm? You unlocked a portion of your mind you had locked away. Simply open those doors once more, and you will be able to use dominion magic as simply as breathing."

I sighed before thinking back. The zombies were coming in from everywhere, and it was like the entire world had gone insane. Instead of trying to make sense of it, I just wanted to go insane with it. After thinking on it for a bit, I guessed embracing my bloodlust or hunger wasn't that far from the truth of the matter.

So I figured if I did it once, I could do it again. I steadied my breathing and leaned onto a nearby table. I grit my teeth and clamped my fists. I thought about Baldag-Ruhl trying to use me as a shell. I thought about Torix controlling me with his weird charisma voice. It was infuriating. I hated being swung around like a ragdoll.

I wanted them to all just stop. The voice murmured in my head,

"That is not what you thought about when you were surrounded. You didn't want more control. You relinquished it to your own bloodlust. You embraced the primal."

I sighed again before relaxing. I sat down before glancing around the room. I pondered about what I wanted. What did I want? It was a good question.

I wanted to control what I would and wouldn't do for one. I wanted to be able to have friends I could trust and a home to go back to. Since Schema took Earth, I didn't think it was possible anymore. Deep down, I already knew there wasn't any going back.

There in the pits of that despair, I found something. It was a dark, malevolent feeling. It didn't want to build. It wanted to destroy. That sinister emotion wanted to break everything that took away all the chances I had. I'd never have a family. I'd never have friends. Every day would be another fight for survival until I died.

There was an crazy part of me that enjoyed the idea of that. That part wanted to just let the simple cycle of escalation take over. It was like a way out of being used. I could just use everyone around me in turn.

They could become my stepping stones, my way up and out of this hole I'm in. I could use them as protection, growing until I could then use them as they used me.

As those thoughts filled my mind, the red bands lessened until they disappeared. The madness swam through my mind like a torrent, begging for battle and starving for

slaughter. The dominion magic swelled in my palm, flooding out of my hand and onto the floor. The rune in my palm created an even greater outpour, swarming the room with the energy.

Skill unlocked! Dominion(lvl 1) – Why fight with one when you may fight with many? +1% increased ease of converting mana into DU(dominion energy)

The mana sent ripples through the concrete, bending the stone. The tables near me bent then snapped under the bending force. The energy resonated until one of the metallic instruments near me snapped, the metal squealing.

“Excellent work Daniel. I never expected so much potential in you. Your own affinity outweighs my own.”

Torix placed his hand on my shoulder, snapping me from my sudden stupor. The madness retreated, returning me to normal. Even though I didn’t understand it, I couldn’t deny how useful it was. It gave me tools I wouldn’t have otherwise. It made truly difficult things quite simple. Not just mana either. I could carry out carnage like that without remorse or guilt.

It scared me a little, but revealing it to Torix seemed like a bad idea. Why exactly? I couldn’t pin an exact reason down. My gut was telling me not to. So far, it hadn’t told me wrong up till now.

Torix pulled me out of the corner as he raised an arm, “Oh how much you’ll be able to accomplish. With that much mana, this world will bend with a wave of your finger.”

Just like you wanted me to? The thought flashed in my mind before Torix continued,

“Telekinesis should be a paltry task considering how much mana you summoned. For that style of magic, you need only give that mana a sort of will. Envision a change you want, then force the world to obey with the will of your mind. It’s quite satisfying.”

I nodded, “Alright. What about the gravity wells stuff?”

“For that, you must think of the universe like a giant, stretched piece of rubber. A gravity well is like a rock placed on the sheet. It creates a depression that pulls other forces into it. You must imagine creating an indentation in that sheet, forcing a pull in the area.”

“Oh fuck. That sounds hard. Like, super hard.”

“It is very, very difficult. You should get it within a few years though. Nothing that several thousand hours of practice can’t fix.”

I winced at the prospect. Gaining levels would be a far better way of progressing than that shit. Mixing both of those processes would be better anyway. I nodded my head,

“Sounds like a plan. I think I’ll go see if I can’t get a handle on the dominion magic first though. Leveling it would help patch up a few holes in my build.”

Torix released my shoulder, “Good, good...Ah yes, there’s something I wanted to bring up with you while you’re here Daniel.”

I raised an eyebrow before he continued, “The time I used my charisma on you. I didn’t mean to create tension between us or create paranoia in you. I wanted you to move on from the death of your friends. I wasted centuries trying to find my own son. I didn’t want you making the same mistake.”

He spread his arms and let them slap against his sides, “If I knew you’d work through it so quickly on your own, I’d never have even tried. You likely are struggling with trusting anything I’ve said up till this point, questioning my every word.”

It was like he was reading my mind as he continued, “But I just want to make it clear what I thought of the situation. You don’t have to fear me. Even if I am your master, you are still my student. I want you to grow, not to become some sort of slave for me. I’ve got plenty of those already.”

I pursed my lips for a moment. He seemed sincere, almost vulnerable. After making sure I wasn’t seeing things, I murmured, “Hmmm...Okay. Thanks for talking about it. To be honest, you basically read my mind.”

He brushed off the accusation with a wave of his hand, “Your willpower and resistance to mental magic is very high already. You’d know if I planted something in your mind, I assure you.”

Now I would, but what about before I reached this level of resistance and willpower? I shook the doubts from my mind before saying, “Hell yeah. Well I’m off to figure some of this magic shit out.”

Those doubts had built up in my mind over time. I didn’t like dwelling on them, since they made me question everything anyone said. It had a way of pulling me away from the only friends I had left, so I silenced that doubt. I’d trust Torix and company for now, thought I wouldn’t be as gullible as when I first met them.

With that handled, I walked over towards my personal room and focused on dominion magic. The hardest part of the process was being able to summon that madness. My entire fighting style revolves around focus. I countered and crushed my opponents, overwhelming them with striking. This other stuff required relaxing my mind, which made the entire process unintuitive.

Still, I managed to get some sort of grasp on it. Over time, summoning it turned from an arduous process and into a sort of switch. When that feeling really clicked, a skill notification popped up,

Skill gained! Primal Frenzy(lvl 1) – People are like coins with several faces. You learn to master your mind, allowing for frenzy. +1% to ease of changing into frenzy mode. 1% less control lost.

That made the mode a bit more useful for sure. The lack of control made it dangerous and risky. Most of the time, I'd be better off without using it. It was my way of gaining control of dominion magic though, which would prove more than useful. I figured it was worth the risk.

Surrounded by walls of sheet metal, I sat cross legged as I struggled to wield the new toys I had. I just unlocked the frenzy mode, the feeling of carnage pumping through my blood. I wanted to feast and kill and consume. A knocking ebbed on my door before a steel legion grunt opened it and said,

"We've finished setting up operation containment. The others are ready if..."

I turned to him before standing up. I walked over, snapping myself out of my frenzy, "Thanks for letting me know. I'll head on up."

As I walked away from him, the grunt pressed his back against the wall and slid downwards. He mouthed under his breath,

"Monster."

I ignored him as I walked into a nearby hallway. After pacing for a bit, I reached into the central room. The crushed walls that the overseer left were patched up already, though the hodgepodge of tin they used to fix it looked super shitty. Althea, Torix, and Kessiah were all talking around the room as I paced up,

"Yo guys. What's up?"

Kessiah cracked her neck, "We're finally about to come out and fuck Yawm up. One piece of his kingdom at a time."

Althea and I nodded before Torix spoke with mana enhancing the sound of his voice,

"Daniel, Althea, and Kessiah will be charging forward. You all will travel behind them with the mounted machines, pulling the containment backwards. Your orders are clear. Do not try and fight the minions of Yawm. That is the job of these three. Understood?"

The troops saluted Torix, their loyalty ironclad with absolute fear. Torix turned to us,

"Hope you'll be able to fight what Yawm's created. Good luck."

The three of us walked out towards a gigantic garage door. Kessiah pulled it up, the garage door banging against the roof with a deafening echo. The three of us sprinted forwards. Now everything was in order. We would finally fight.

In my mind, it was time to break Yawm. One bone at a time.

Chapter 40: Yawm's Domain

With a dash, the three of us didn't waste anytime getting towards the quarantined zone. Kessiah couldn't really take a soft step. Her sheer weight forced her to stomp into the ground, tearing roots and stones apart.

Althea leapt through trees, using her ever changing limbs as grappling hooks. She swung as fast as we ran, laughing at the sudden surge of strength. I used a little bit of augmentation to keep up with both of them. Branches snapped when I passed by them as did any rocks or briar brambles. The forest was more of a playground than a struggle.

Since we could cut through the forest, we left the legion behind us. They'd no doubt catch up and use our entry point in the barricade for follow up. When we reached the barricade, Kessiah didn't have to scare the shit out of the guards anymore. They all already knew who we were by now. That meant they knew to move out of the way.

We passed by, the three of us jumping over the barricade with ease while Althea flipped and laughed. She was relishing the new, sudden surge of strength. When we reached the first house, she rushed through a window, tearing the wood apart. She smashed through two walls before exploding out of the front door.

Her health was down over an eight as I shouted,

"Try not to kill yourself."

Kessiah jumped off the wall of a house,

"Why don't you try it then big boy?"

I rolled my eyes before charging the runes on my hands. The rush energy flowed up my limbs before I sprinted straight into the wall of a house. A detonation of dust followed me into a kitchen before I ripped through a countertop made of granite. Another wall crumbled as I passed through to a den. A couch dragged with me before splintering in half as I passed by.

I spread out my arms as I rushed into the last wall of the building. The door and both walls collapsed before I rushed out. As I crushed forward, the building wobbled before falling sideways. Althea and I had left it with little to keep it standing. Unlike Althea, my

health regen more than outpaced any damage the shock of the impacts could do to me. Compared with her, I was invincible.

I crashed into an empty car before ripping the metal apart. The glass splintered against my armor, and the steel bent like tin foil against it. Like I was kicking a door down, I stepped forward and heel stomped the car, knocking it backwards. It flew backwards before flipping. I turned and grinned at Althea,

“See? I didn’t even take any damage.”

Standing on a roof, Althea frowned and kicked a chimney apart. Kessiah turned to me, “Not bad. I’ll show what I can do though.”

She leapt off the house, flying high into the air. After a full five seconds of falling, she crashed into the middle of the road. A crater formed under her weight before she ran and squeezed the top and bottom of a truck. The metal squealed and the glass shattered as she lifted the truck with ease. She stepped forward before using her own weight to toss the red four door truck.

The car flew like a metal bullet, going far faster than I imagined it would. The ground under Kessiah’s feet tore apart at the force of her toss. When the car crashed into the house, the walls smashed inwards. The car’s momentum kept it going until it flew out the other side of the building, before crashing into another house. The impact was loud enough to crack your teeth.

The first house looked like a bomb had detonated the middle of it. The car carved it out, leaving little left besides the sides of the house. The other house held up better, but Jesus Christ she fucked that first house up. It was crazy.

Kessiah glanced at the ground, “Man, this shit is soft as putty. It’s like trying to throw something while balancing on a surfboard in the ocean. Can’t get any balance.”

The difference in the way she looked at the world was telling. Pavement was like to putty to her. I’d noticed something similar too. Wood wasn’t near as hard. Neither was steel. It wasn’t anything like putty though. It was ridiculous. Utterly insane.

Althea just started giggling at the sheer might of Kessiah. After a moment, I followed suit. Each of us let out a long winded laugh before Althea even started snorting a bit. As she snorted, I couldn’t help but laugh harder. That made her laugh harder, making her snort even more. The cycle continued for a bit.

I laughed till a tear or two fell from my eye. It’d been so long since I’d laughed like that. I didn’t realize just how much I needed it. As we finished, Kessiah had joined in a little before we walked up together. Kessiah crossed her arms,

“Now what’s so funny?”

Althea wiped a tear, "I just forgot how much stronger you were than us. It's easy to forget when you're so petty."

Kessiah's eyes narrowed, "I'm not petty."

I rolled my eyes, "We all are. Come on. Let's go fuck some zombies up. Enough messing around."

Althea nodded her head, "I swear I'm not petty."

I rushed out in front of the others before turning on oppression. I shouted back, "It's not one of those things you can argue. Saying that you aren't petty is being petty. If you agree with Althea, then you are petty. You lose either way."

She raised an eyebrow, "It's like a trap with words then."

I nodded, "Another good example is if I say you argue too much. Either you accept the statement or you tell me it's not true. The problem is, you're arguing with me if you deny what I said."

Althea pressurized her biotic rifle. She raised it, "And that proves the point of her arguing too much."

I grinned as they contemplated what I said. It was a little play on words I'd read in a children's book. It was funny how much these two powerful, deadly aliens were stumped by such a simple trick. We walked like that, with light, easy chatter between us that was as natural as breathing. It wasn't until a zombie came running out that we were serious.

The thing ran on two arms with its feet turned into two large mandibles. It squealed at us before Althea shot a bolt through one of its feet. I spotted a manhole cover a few feet away. I ran forward and slammed my fist into the edge of it. The cover popped up, flipping like a giant coin.

Whipping backwards, I grabbed the edge of plate of metal and swung it around behind me. I was like a discus thrower in the olympics. The manhole cover shot through the air before dragging the spawn backwards and into a nearby brick wall. The metal plate sliced it in two clean halves before it died.

I turned backwards before shooting out a high five. Kessiah shouted back, "What are you doing?"

"High fiving. Just pretend like we're doing it together."

Althea raised her hand before we did an air five. Some people just get stuff like that I suppose. Anyways, we continued chatting as more zombies came in. After a while, we all sort of gained a more focused approach.

Kessiah said we would be taking the town back in ten block long chunks. We would walk down ten blocks, then move a block down. We'd walk another ten blocks and repeat this process ten times. As we finished out blocks, the legion would follow behind us with the mounted force fields. It wasn't a bad way of doing things.

So by the time we finished our chunk of the city, I glanced at my status screen. I'd gained twelve levels, though progress was slowing down by quite a bit now. I wasn't getting enormous amounts of bonus experience anymore.

I hadn't even noticed, but the limiter on experience was dropped post level 100. As long as you killed monsters above level 100, you gained at least some experience. Still a fuckload less, but it was enough that you could grind out quite a few levels over your own base level. Made it so that newer players could fight enough to find a new fighting style.

None of us needed to worry about that shit now though. We already had our styles fleshed out. The main problem for me was my upcoming evolution and how I'd forgotten all about my genesis of potential tree. It was easy as fuck to do. Gaining 250 tree points took a long damn time to collect, and allocating the points after you gained them was a huge waste of time.

It was far better to just put them into the tree in chunks of 250. I'd already gotten that many points and then some though with all my new skills related to runes though. So much had been going on, I was almost embarrassed about how I'd forgotten something so basic.

I mean, genesis of potential would be giving some awesome bonuses for sure. If I'd had enough points before first running into the infected zone, I might have had an easier time with Elijah. I didn't know and I couldn't tell regardless.

What I could do was change myself going forward. Laziness like that could get me killed or worse. If I was ever going to kill Yawm, I needed to get back on the grind again. Skill trees would be an essential part of that grind. It was straight up idiotic to neglect them. I wouldn't let it happen again.

At least I'd been focusing on gaining skills for the past few weeks though. Instead of just wasting my time, I pulled up a damn respectable total of 568 points in various skills. The majority of it was in the magic and runes skills I'd gained. Quite a few were in older skills though, like boundless storm.

With that in mind, I put all my points into genesis of potential before the upgrade message came up at 250 then 500.

You are one of the chosen among your species. You represent the latent potential for greatness within humanity. +1 extra level 100 leveling perk in total(4 max). Choose wisely.

The light you have will become a paragon of your race, the decider of the fate of worlds. + 2 extra leveling perks in total(5 max). Choose wisely.

I stayed silent as we kept walking forward. On the inside though, I was screaming. This was like opening a closed door. So far, my bonuses were strong but kept me in line with what was normal among the galaxy. This bonus, when combined with the obliterator and determinator trees, set me apart. I could do the unthinkable now. It was like there was nothing outside my grasp.

For the first time, I could see a way out of this endless cycle of being alone. Hell, if I was the strongest dude ever, then I wouldn't have to worry about other people using me. I would be able to tell if someone was planting ideas in my mind or using an enchanted voodoo bullshit voice on me.

I wouldn't have to doubt all that bullshit. It would sort itself out along the way. Whoever was near me, they would rely on me and I'd choose to help them. Right now, I didn't have a choice. In the future, I would.

The voice in my head interrupted my thoughts,

"Yes, embrace the hunger."

I frowned and thought back, "No. It's not hunger you fucker. It's my own choice. Hunger is a need. I don't need to do this, but I want to. You don't get to have a say in what I do. I get to decide how I move forward."

"Is it your choice though-"

"Yes, it is my choice. I don't know what you are, but I don't need to know. I'm not doubting myself anymore. I'm not going to sit in limbo. It isn't like me. I decide where I will go and how I'm going to get there. Just because you think I'm a tool for other people doesn't make it so."

As we reached the next block, the voice whispered, "You will come to need me. When that time comes, I will still be here."

"I don't need a goddamn thing from anybody. I'm not a monster or a man or this harbinger of cataclysm either. I'm goddamn Daniel Hillside. I am who I choose to be. No one else will make that choice for me."

The voice tried speaking again, but I shut it out. I wasn't about to listen to some disembodied voice. Fuck that. I forged my own path to get me here. I'd keep forging my own path to get wherever I wanted to go.

Even if I had to drag myself there, one blood soaked step at a time.

