

The New World

#Chapter 41: 50

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Chapter 41: Closing the Gap

The first step to killing him would be getting a few things out of the way. First off, I needed very little mana before my next evolution of my armor. Second off, I needed more levels for the new leveling perks I had. That meant one thing.

I had to beg these two to protect me when I went under.

I walked up towards Kessiah and Althea before I glanced around while leaning forward, "Guys, er, gals, there's something I need to tell you."

They leaned forward as I whispered, "My armor's about to evolve. I get fucked up when that happens. Mind protecting me during the process?"

Althea nodded before Kessiah busted out laughing. After she finished chuckling, Kessiah put her hands on her hips, "The little baby needs help during his nap."

I waved her off, "Oh, sorry. I forgot you've never had an evolution that evolves your current strength. You wouldn't understand. No biggie."

Kessiah narrowed her eyes, "Alright, alright. I get the idea."

I shrugged with an impish grin, "Sorry about the jab. Anyways, It shouldn't even take ten more zombies before the evolution takes place. Be ready for me to drop onto the ground, hopefully not screaming at the top of my lungs."

They nodded before we entered our next set of houses. By the time we reached the last block, a message appeared,

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

My armor reached out to press the yes button, but I smashed the greedy little fuck with my will. It slid backwards like a hand touching fire. I reached out and pressed yes myself.

The pain came again, but this time I was ready. My pain resistance had reached 96, meaning I was damn near numb. My willpower was nearly 200. I wouldn't be shaken I

told myself. Even if the pain was like an ocean, then I would be the planet that ocean rests on.

And the pain came like an ocean. Like I was in a rain of sulfur, the armor cut and sliced into my body. I couldn't even imagine the full extent of the pain without my high resistance. It wasn't something I could understand. Just the act of comprehending an agony like that might break someone's mind. Still, I doubt it would break mine. My willpower made it tough stuff.

It needed to be. Blood squirted from between the joints in my armor. It was like tiny blades were stabbing deep into my bones. The armor splintered my skeleton, filling hollow parts of my bones like the filling of a tooth. Just imagine a root canal in every bone in your body. That's what it was like. Even the tiny bit I actually felt was difficult to stand.

I could take it though. I stepped forward, grunting as I struggled. Althea frowned as she shouted,

"You alright Daniel?"

"Obviously fucking not."

I took another step forward.

"Uh, ok then. Can you keep fighting?"

I took another shaking step, my armor creaking as I moved. I snarled, "No, not right now...I'm just trying to not let this shit leave me stuck in my tracks like last time. I'm going to have to do this again. I can't be crippled by it every time."

"Hmm...Okay."

She fired a harpoon towards a nearby zombie coming towards me. With another quick reload, she pinned both its feet into the ground. With monstrously over sized arm, she slung a green bag at the zombie.

The explosion covered it in acid. As it melted, the jaw slid off and its teeth clattered against the pavement. It amazed me how numb I was to all this gross shit by now. You really could get used to anything I suppose.

Anyways, a few minutes passed before my armor finally stopped evolving.

IV Harbinger of Cataclysm(Skin, Legendary Unique) – Skin that can absorb rift energy(Ambient Mana) for evolutions. These evolutions may add other special effects. Cannot be removed, only altered. This skin is regenerated with health. 0/256,000,000 Mana left till next evolution.

A Harbinger's Might – Increases Damage reduction cap by 2.5% | Current Max: 97.5%

Bones of Eldritch and the Unknown – Additional 20% increase to total health |
Current Total Health: 120%

The Rushing Calamity – Gives unique ability IV Oppression | Current Damage:
(10,000 + 30% of health/min) within a maximum of a 175ft/53~m radius. Affected by
physical damage reduction.

An Eternal Force – 3% of health added towards health regen per minute | Current
regen added before multipliers: 3% of 13627 = 408.8 Unyielding bonus = 817.6
Determinator Tree bonus = 1635 hp/minute bonus.

Forger of Souls – Soulforged Runes reduce total mana cost of spells by 10% | Current
mana cost: 90%

Loathed, Abhorred, and Hated – Decreases Charisma by 25% | Current Total
Charisma: 75%

– *You will learn to embrace your hunger, given time.*

It was excellent set of bonuses now, each of them impactful in their own way. They all came together to make me unbelievably durable. The only problem was the debuff towards charisma and the the last line of the screen. It looked like my armor wasn't too happy about my change in attitude. Too bad I wasn't about to let it have its way. This was my mind and my body, not his.

Closing the screen, I shook myself a few times before charging my runes again. Much more energy rushed in than just a few seconds prior. The last bonus of the armor became clear. If I used less and less mana during my runic conversions, then I could put more and more mana into them. That meant more strength and agility from the bonuses.

That became clear after just a few steps. I mean, rushes of power were rare by now. When your level one, that first point in strength or whatever is a rush. When your over level 200, a point in strength is a drop in the bucket. This shift though, I could still call it enough of a difference that it was a rush.

And boy did it feel good. I clamped my fists, missing the surges in strength of my earlier days. It's crazy what you'll take for granted, constant increases in strength being one of them. I guess I had gotten quite a bit more tanky, but that's hard to feel.

Being tough isn't like being strong. When you're strong, you can do things you couldn't do before, like bend steel. Being tough was more about shit you didn't notice, like *not* taking damage. Althea's harpoons had been the only thing that could hurt me

before. Now, maybe that arcane guy from forever ago could mess me up, but who knows.

A gurgling sound ebbed beside me, snapping me out of my stats induced trance. A deformed zombie smashed its arm against my face, breaking its arm. It hit me again with its other arm, the bone snapping like a stick. I grinned, my armor moving like water at my command. I stepped towards the zombie as it bit at my arm.

The monster's teeth broke against my armor. I pushed it off before charging the runes on my shin. With a stomp, the heathen's head caved in, along with the ground beneath it. I picked up the corpse before my armor injected dozens of needles into the corpse, absorbing it in seconds. It left a hollowed husk behind in my hand.

I tossed it aside before cracking my neck. I rolled my shoulders before running back in front of the Althea and Kessiah. Althea sighed,

"Why did you let the zombie bite you?"

Not wanting to say I was distracted, I fumbled my words, "Uh...To test how tough I am now. The zombies can't really hurt me anymore. Maybe a horde could, but not just one. Had to check."

Surprised, Althea's eyes darted back and forth, "Oh...Sorry for asking."

I shrugged, "Can't blame you. Now let's fuck some zombies up."

We went through more and more of the blocks, turning a once arduous task into a smooth process. I would charge ahead, my aura making the zombies run towards me. As they ran, Althea would snipe a few before I crushed the rest. Kessiah kept a lookout for anything we couldn't handle. Considering how ridiculous Althea and I were for our level, that meant nothing for now.

We didn't chat anymore after a few hours. The slaughter smoothed out like clockwork. Smash, crush, crumble, we tore entire towns apart looking for those zombies. By the time we reached our tenth set of ten blocks, we were finishing each zone within an hour instead of three.

Althea and I both became so much stronger during the process as well. I kept investing into endurance, giving me more health and regen. That let me feed my runes more and more. Althea ended up showing off a bit of her ridiculous strength when a cluster of the zombies swelled up from the ground beneath her and Kessiah.

She reformed her arms into elongated blades, shearing the mass of bodies beneath her. By the time she finished slaughtering them, they weren't even whole. It was like a chunky, meat smoothie. In other words, fucking gross.

After letting my armor drink up that nasty ass soup, I ended up finding a dungeon core in pit. I let my armor hide it before anyone else noticed. An extra attribute point wasn't ever a bad thing after all.

During all of that, the willpower perk helped me keep my mind calm. It helped the entire day in fact. Sights of abominable horror didn't even make me flinch anymore. I could stomach the most heart wrenching scenes, despite how debilitating they were. The resolve that willpower gave me was invaluable in the face of the new Springfield. No doubt it would be invaluable in the face of this new world as well.

Regardless, as the sun set, we headed back towards the barricade of the steel legion. They set up a sort of base of operations near us. It was mostly tents, but they kept the cold out and the warm in. Althea needed sleep, and her aim had degraded over the course of the day, despite her increased levels.

I wasn't even slightly exhausted. The willpower perk kept me alert and aware, like I'd just woken up from a power nap. That meant I could focus and keep going forever. Seeing Althea doze off as we walked made the difference clear.

She eventually fell onto the ground, passed out cold. I carried her back towards the camp before setting her back into her bed. I kept my hormones in check this time, not letting my mind wander during the process. Letting my dick think for me was an easy way to get killed or worse.

Walking out of the tent, I pulled my helmet off my face. Moving my armor was like moving a hand or a limb. It was as easy as breathing by now. I walked up towards one of the nearby workbenches set up by the legion. Several scientists and other workers toiled on projects and others drank a few beers together. This was their downtime after a hard day. Good for them.

I ignored their chatter and laughter while I focused on my runic inscriptions. Getting a better combination of them would result in more power for less mana. That was the end goal. Still, even if I tried ignoring them, I couldn't help but listen into a few far off conversations. Mainly when they mentioned my name.

One such conversation was taking place around a fireplace about fifty feet away. I can't blame them for thinking I was out of earshot. I would've too, but the leveling perk for perception let me hear them.

One whispered, "Did you see that, uh, what is he called?"

"I think he was a harbinger of calamity."

"Yeah, I guess. I saw his level this morning. 221, which is insane right?"

"Yeah. I don't know what kind of alien he is, but he's a strong one."

“That’s the thing. I saw him taking one of them other aliens into one of their tents. You wouldn’t even believe it, but he was level fucking 273. I swear to god.”

Several of them bust out, laughing loud and long. The whispering one continued, “Oh you laugh now. Just wait. He won’t even be in the 200’s for long. Neither will that friend of his.”

Another one spoke up without even keeping his voice down, “Yeah, alright Fred. Sure. Next thing you know he’ll be over level one thousand and brush his teeth with a toothbrush made out of a spine.”

“You don’t believe me, why don’t you go and check, eh?”

“I got better things to do in my free time. Besides, he’s the harbinger of cataclysm, not calamity. You can’t even get his name right. How the fuck can you know his level then?”

“You’ll see. I’m off to bed. I already know tomorrow’s going to be even harder than today considering how much faster they’re going to be.”

“Hope you can tell the difference between a dream and reality then, Fred.”

I silenced their conversation, refocusing onto my task. Curiosity was an easy way to get distracted, if not the easiest. Keeping focus despite those distractions was what made this training hard. Still, that made me level my skills faster since I had to try harder than normal.

After about five hours of that, I needed a break, so I walked out of the base. I sat inside an abandoned car, the car lowering as I sat inside. It was time to examine my stats again. Of course I’d dumped all my status points into endurance, besides for the last few levels. The three of us had been focusing on clearing so quickly that I didn’t have time to invest my stats.

Now I did. I put all my extra points into endurance, ending up with a clean 540 points in the stat. An absurd amount by anyone’s standards, even Kessiah’s no doubt. When I finished investing my points, the perk screen popped up. I had finally gained over a 100 intelligence.

[All-Knowing(Intelligence of 100 or more. Note – Only three level 100 perks are currently left. Choose wisely.) – Your mind is a trap that never releases its prey. Emotional tolerance further doubled. 5 extra mana per point in intelligence(20 before multipliers). +4 total mana per level. Another tenth of intelligence added to luck. Doubles increased critical thinking and memory per level. Photographic memory acquired. Increases mythical skill cap by 1(3).]

I actually didn't have the perk point required. I put every bit of my attributes into endurance. I did have the dungeon core from earlier though, so I absorbed it before selecting the perk.

My flesh turned to steel. The arcane bonds in my flesh were dense and tightly knit as chainmail. This came with a sudden, sharp clarity. Fuzzy memories became crystal clear, and other memories from my childhood appeared from hiding. I could calculate numbers with ease, and my reasoning snapped like a whip, fast and forceful.

I opened my menu screens. They didn't disappoint.

Level 273
Attribute Totals
Strength – Increases carrying weight, maximum speed, and physical power 44.2
Constitution – Increases hardness, density, and weight of your body 36.3
Endurance – Increases regeneration of stamina, health, and their totals 540

Dexterity – Increases ease of movement, flexibility, and reflexes 32.8
Willpower – Increases internal motivation, mana regen, and Mental Res 258
Intelligence – Increases memory, critical thinking, and total mana pool 101.4
Charisma – Increases likeability, persuasion, and decreases prices at shops 29.3
Luck – Increases money found, odds in your favor, and chance of rare events 54.4
Perception – Increases comprehension, the five senses, and awareness 30.5

Daniel

Hillside Totals
Regen 19,188/19,188
Bufs/Debufs 3631.2/min
Oppression Damage- 10,000+30%hp/min
Stamina 9905/9905
117/sec
Elemental Res – 97.5%
Harbinger of Cataclysm 2,340,489/256,000,0000/per min
Plasma Res – 97.5%
Phys Dam Reduction – 97.5%
Rad Res – 97.5%
Phys Dam Bonus – 595%
Mental Res – 97.5%

I forgot how intelligence fed into luck. That actually added a bit of extra health I hadn't thought about. With my evolution and my leveling perk out of the way, I was where I thought I'd end up in my current build. I was tremendously difficult to take down, regardless of what attacked me. My offensive potential wasn't amazing, but it would grind someone down over time.

All in all, it was effective considering how early I was in the leveling game. I could probably give Torix a run for his money in durability, and eventually I would surpass Kessiah in that regard. At this rate, it wouldn't even take that long. I had become a tank, someone capable of dishing out damage and with no easy way of taking me down.

Still, there were several things I needed. I needed something to stop enemies from running away, and a ranged attack. Anything after that was just gravy.

So with my layout handled, I put my skill points into genesis of potential. As I pressed the button, a knocking on the window of the car scared the shit out of me. It was Kessiah, and she opened up the door before shutting it closed. She grinned,

“Hey there. We need to talk.”

Chapter The Story So Far: First Edition

This is a reference Chapter in case you guys forgot some of the bonuses that Daniel has received. I didn't list the bonuses out. Instead, I gave concise bits of text explaining the important stuff. This is kind of like a TLDR for a list, and is a broad overview, not at all super detail oriented.

I also give insight into each of the bonuses if you're interested in my analysis. This will hopefully make a lot of the mechanics easier to understand. For my older readers, it's been months since they've seen some of this stuff too, so this is to help them keep current with anything going on in the story. Hope you folks enjoy.

If not...Well damn. I tried.

What's His Armor Doing Now? Each evolution of the armor is set up to add a new bonus, build on the existing bonuses, and make his charisma lower. The newest bonus he obtained this time was Forger of Souls. Other notable increase were in the damage reduction since it's multiplicative, and in An Eternal Force, which increased by 50% from its previous value.

These bonuses have extreme synergy with endurance. Due to his bonus in Determinator,(50% bonus endurance) each attribute he puts into endurance is effectively 1.5 points in the stat. He also receives bonus health from his armor, further enhancing this effect.

That is further bolstered by his abnormally high damage resistance. Then you have to include his extra hp sources from arcane blood(converts his mana into health and makes him use hp like mana). He also turns some of that health into health regen via An Eternal Force. Hp has become a stat that will give the most returns for the least investment.

What's Going Down with the Skill Trees? Daniel is currently working on the tree called The Genesis of Potential. He has unlocked two of the tiers of the tree, giving him 2 additional level 100 perks. This allows him to level faster than normal. Other notable increases from before are his determinator bonuses(double regen stats, 50% bonus willpower and endurance) and his obliterator bonus(4 more skill points every five levels. This effectively gives him 2 skill points per level.)

There are other trees at work behind the scenes, but they will be brought up during other recap chapters. Don't want to make this chapter 10+ pages.

The Perk System is Complicated as Fuck. Please Halp.

No problem good sir. Glad too. Here's what's important.

Daniel effectively has extra leveling perks due to his abnormal regen stats(Determinator doubles them.) This gives him a lot of extra oomph to several intangibles, such as strudying the runes as you've no doubt noticed. His effectiveness, reading comprehension, etc. have all increased as the story progressed. This is because of several of these extra leveling perks.

Due to The Genesis of Potential tree, he will be granted several extra level 100 perks as well. These further double his leveling bonuses granted from the leveling perks, along with granting several powerful intangible bonuses as well. For example, the willpower perk makes it so that he no longer loses mental acuity due to a lack of rest.

I cannot stress how important these intangible bonuses are, even if they don't show up on the status screen. I try to make them evident, overly so at times. Other times I stress them too little. I'll find a balance in time.

How Are his Skills Developing? I Mean There's Like 4 Gajillion of Them Now. I can give you guys the list of over 100 skills he has gained over the course of the novel in order of how he gained them. That tells you nothing though, as few will read through the blob of text and numbers, and even fewer will get anything from said blob.

What's important is that Daniel has acheived a very high level of physical mastery due to his mythical skill, boundless storm. He is now working on forging and utilizing the runes so that he can diversify his attacks. He figures that having a few extra methods of attack or crowd controlling the enemy is a good idea. I tend to agree.

He worked for years on his fighting before ever entering the system, however. That made his progression in the physical stats rapid. The magics will be slower by comparison, besides for the growth of his augmentation magic since it comes naturally to him. It won't take 1000 pages for him to be able to use dominion magic, but expect some struggle there.

It would be out of place for Daniel to breeze past the magics with ease. It's not his territory, so he's having to take his time. It will be worth the payoff. Trust me.

What Makes Him Different From Other People Then Exactly? Let me break it down with a list.

??Strengths:

1. His armor makes him durable and gives him reliable damage with oppression.
2. Arcane blood gives him more health and mana than normal.

3. Boundless Storm makes him able to outskill opponents with more experience and speed.

4. He has extra leveling perks, giving him a variety of added bonuses.

5. He gains more attributes per level than a normal guy.

Weaknesses:

??1. His Charisma is artificially lowered from his armor. The leveling perk largely negates this.

2. He does not have an effective ranged attack, outside of oppression's aura.

3. He struggles versus heavily armored foes, since they cut oppression's damage by a lot.

Most of these weaknesses will fade with time, besides for his lowered charisma.

Let's Just Be Honest Here. I Wanna Know Just How OP Daniel is Then? Good question. Some of my readers say he's completely broken. Other's have told me that he hasn't gotten any stronger since he left BloodHollow. For a nice analysis on the issue, I can break it down strength by strength.

Some people believe oppression is broken. Oppression is affected by physical damage reduction, which makes it far less effective than it first appears. To fight Moloth, one of Torix's favorite spawns, Daniel would have to kite him for over an hour while staying within a hundred feet of him. That effectively makes cheesing with the power impossible.

It's still no doubt a powerful skill, but it requires certain conditions to shine. Against Althea for example, it is extremely effective. She doesn't have almost any damage resistance, meaning she takes the full brunt of oppression's damage. Without her eldritch passive, she'd die in seconds. It still renders her immobile out of sheer pain.

Daniel's durability on the other hand is second to none. In time, no one will be able to outtank him. That's an awesome utility to have, letting him draw aggro and fight without having to worry about constantly dying.

Mythical Storm is also really good, though few reader's agree with my sentiment. My argument is that Daniel is like a master swordsmen with a dull sword. Sure, the sword my not be the most effective weapon till he sharpens is, but he wields it to the utmost of effectiveness. Once he sharpens that blade though, his skill will really shine.

The attributes and leveling perks will give him a solid edge over his competition as well, especially over time. All these bonuses amount to a very strong bruiser. If he can

master dominion magic, his runes, level a ton, and maybe add a few other bonuses, he can become something akin to what Yawm is now – a juggernaut that eats worlds.

Until he reaches that point though, watching him learn, grow, and become a true Harbinger of Cataclysm is the fun part, right? Hope you guys enjoyed the Breakdown, and if you guys like this, I'll write more of these in the future, though not too often.

As a final note, I will also be including reminders of what certain stuff does at the end of new chapters. EG, if I mention The Genesis of Potential tree, I'll put a little note at the end of the chapter explaining how he got it and what it does. I don't want you guys swimming in the dark afterall.

Chapter 42: A leap of Faith

I glanced around, the sudden closeness made everything awkward. The car bent deeper into the very limits of its suspension, but at least the tires didn't pop. Kessiah glanced out the window,

"So here's the thing..." She turned back to me, "I think there's something wrong with Torix."

I raised an eyebrow, pulling my helmet off my face, "What do you think? He has seemed a bit, I don't know, brutal I guess."

She leaned onto one of her arms, restless like nowhere was comfortable, "I don't know. I'm not good at stuff like this, but he's different now. When he crushed what-his-face...Uh, Whatley?"

"Whitley."

"Yeah, that guy. That wasn't like him. It's almost like there's something really bothering him, and he isn't talking about it. I tried talking to Althea about it, but that's like talking to a wall."

I rolled my eyes, "She just doesn't like talking much. Either that or she's nervous. Back to Torix."

Kessiah nodded, "Yeah yeah." She crossed her arms, "I think the pressure's getting to him."

"What? Pressure?"

"Yeah. I know Torix. He wasn't a risk taker at all. That bag of bones has been alive for a long time. I outleveled him, and I just kind of fuck around is all. He must have taken things slow. Like, really slow."

I nodded, "So now he's in a high pressure situation, somewhere he's uncomfortable. If you think about it, he did end up struggling with the ritual to get us transported off world."

Kessiah sighed, "Yeah, he told you guys that was because of Schema's new quest. That's true now, but him being late and slow didn't have anything to do with the quest of survival. He was just messing up stuff."

I turned towards Kessiah, "Anything we can do to take some of the pressure off?"

She scratched the back of her head, "Uh, if you could help with the runes that would be awesome. He really enjoys the dominion magic too. Just having someone to talk to about everything would help him a lot."

Kessiah put a hand on my shoulder as she said, "I'm sorry I'm having to ask this of you. You're already pretty damn busy with all your other...stuff I guess."

I noticed the hand on my shoulder a bit too much. It made me think of things I shouldn't, so I killed off a few wandering thoughts. Kessiah let me go, giving me space to think as she continued,

"He needs help, and I can't give it to him. I get bored, and even if I try not to sound like it, he picks up on it pretty quickly. Althea's nothing like him. She's into tech."

I shrugged, "I'll give it a shot. I can do it when everyone else is sleeping anyways, since I don't have to."

Kessiah grinned before hugging me to her. She let me go, opening the car door,

"Thanks Dan Dan. I'll see yah around. Try not to spend too much time in cars during night. Can't imagine that's too healthy."

I grinned back, "Eh, sometimes it's good to think."

Kessiah bounced away, a nice pop to her steps. The melancholy melted, and now she was back to her old self. It surprised me how much faith she had in me to help Torix, but she knew him better than I did. I decided to put the same kind of faith in her, for now at least.

With everything handled, I stepped out of the car and paced around the camp. I Torix set up shop nearby, in a normal suburban house off to the side. I knocked on the door,

"Yo, can I come in?"

No voice replied, so I stepped inside. Unlike most of the nearby houses, this place was nearly untouched. A comfortable, warm air flowed inside the building. Several portraits,

trinkets, and paintings hung on the walls of the two story house. The walls were brown, tan, and other subdued colors. The whole place was soft, from the fluffy carpet floors to the toys spread on the ground.

As I walked deeper into the place, the staircase towards the basement was left open. Where else would an evil necromancer set up shop then in the basement of a building after all? Once I reached the bottom, the cinderblock walls gave off an earthy smell. The smooth concrete floors were dry, just like the air I was breathing in.

Torix leaned against a desk, papers spread out across the entire expanse. The desk was slanted, and he was rolling a marble up the desk before letting it roll back down to his finger. It made the same sound, over and over. After hearing it a few times, the sound blended into the background of the room, like it was meant to be there.

I paced down the steps, Torix ignoring me as I entered. I reached behind him before leaning against a nearby wall,

“You alright?”

Torix snapped out of it, his head shooting up. He turned towards me, then back at the desk,

“Oh. Daniel. I’m sorry about this. You shouldn’t see your master in such a distasteful, lazy light.”

“Everyone needs to loaf around sometimes. Anyways, I was hoping you could elaborate on dominion magic some. If you’re not too busy that is.”

Torix sighed, “I would love too, but I’m busy helping organize the mess I made when I killed Whitley. It was blunder of mine, like many others that you’ve no doubt noticed.”

I rolled my eyes, “Everyone makes mistakes.”

Torix spread his hands out wide, staring at the wall, “Yes, of course they do, but should a master make so many in front of his student? I think not.”

Torix slapped the marble, sending it clattering onto the floor nearby, “It’s absurd. You’ve seen me fail more than you’ve seen me succeed. How can you possibly learn from me when I can’t accomplish any task at any turn.”

I sighed, “Eh, I wouldn’t think about it too much.”

Torix leaned into his hand, covering his face, “It’s all I can think about. We are so close to destruction that I can taste it. If I were to sleep, I would dream only in nightmares. This isn’t the time nor the place for mishaps and screwups. I am ruining our chances of killing Yawm.”

I bit my lip before he pressed his hands against the sides of his head and continued, "When I trained Alfred in the ways of the dark arts, I only made one mistake during the entire process. That one mistake was enough for him to leave me. I took one unnecessary life, and he abandoned me from his own. I was crushed."

Torix sighed, "Sorry for letting you know this all...I've been rather stressed as of late."

After a joyless laugh, I patted his shoulder, "Yeah, I noticed."

Torix nodded before turning to me. His fire eyes flickered, "Do you know what I was thinking when I met you?"

I cupped my chin in a hand, "Uhh...I don't know. It seemed like you were deciding on whether or not to kill me."

Torix shook his head, "No, not at all. I was thinking that this was a chance at redemption. I could pass on my legacy, teaching you all I know so that I may pass on without worry. I painted this picture of an immortal, invincible magician that knew everything."

"You did a damn good job, I think."

A puff of laughter escaped Torix, "But you have seen the cracks in painting. I'm not invincible. I make mistakes, and I'm struggling with handling the situation at hand. I was supposed to be the ideal master. Now, you can't even trust me. What kind of master puts so much stress on his student, that he begins hearing voices? I mean it is absurd!"

I tapped Torix's shoulder, "You know I shut that voice up. When I did so, I found resolve. I found my own way of doing things. You didn't teach me where to walk Torix. You taught me to walk on my own."

I let him go and spread my arms wide, "Everyone fails, Torix. I mean everyone, but it's not about how hard you fall man. It's about how many times you get back up. If anything, show me an example of never giving up or some cheesy bullshit like that. You got it in you."

Torix laughed, a tiny grin sliding onto his face. He nodded, "You may be right, Daniel."

I tapped my chest, "Hell yeah I am. Let's get your ass out of this dungeon. I got some magic to learn, and you're the only one who can teach it to me."

The tiny grin turned into a full fledged smile as Torix stood, "I suppose I can find some time to help you. You are my disciple after all."

We walked up the steps of the basement, chatting about the intricacies of dominion magic. We walked outside, finding the open yard. Torix created a table out of black

liquid. I walked in front of it before pressing my weight down on it. It held, though ripples were sent through the expanse. It was weird. It didn't feel like it was supporting my weight. It was pushing back instead.

Torix reached up a hand. With a bit of glowing mana, he created glowing lines as he lectured. The short, dense orations were followed by me scrambling to apply the concepts towards my own dominion magic. There was a glaring problem though. Without the voice's intervention, I couldn't create dominion magic.

Of course I could learn the concepts behind the magic. The photographic memory from the intelligence perk helped as well. This made learning much easier, but breaking the barrier into applying my newfound knowledge was an enigma. Torix said I would gain a fluid control of my affinity with time. I already knew that wasn't true though. I needed a change in mentality.

I wouldn't revert back to using the voice though. It was like I was compromising on who I was for strength. Fuck compromises. Fuck letting something else control me. I would get a handle on the dominion magic, even if I had to kill myself doing it.

Before I could though, Torix turned the lesson back towards augmentation. He taught me new runic combinations, each of them wild and different. They didn't suit me quite like my own incantations, but they were like new tools on my table. I could use certain combinations of runes for adding to my own original inscriptions.

That enabled quite a bit of improvement on my current formula. It was at that point that I asked Torix if there was any common breakthroughs I could use for gaining tree points. He knew of many for dominion magic and his chosen fields, but he didn't know much for my specific style of fighting.

I'd have better luck asking Kessiah probably, but that didn't make my time with Torix pointless. Far from it. By the time the sun was up, I developed a whole new runic set for my forearms, shins, and palms. They still didn't pass Torix's own standards, but they were a start. When I had to leave, I was ready to try out my new toys.

As I started walking off, Torix snapped his fingers which destroyed the black table and markings that floated in the air. He turned to me,

"Thank you for this...break from all the tedium of these past days. I needed it, more than I knew."

I waved his thanks away, "Don't mention it. Just make sure to repay the favor later."

I figured making him feel like he would pay me back may make him feel better. It was weird. It turned out that even if you're an immortal lich, you still have feelings and problems. In the end, I guess most everyone was like everybody else. We were all just trying to get by.

And I wasn't outside of that conundrum either. I walked back towards Kessiah and Althea. I walked back up towards our tent before tapping Althea's tent flap thing. I didn't know what to call it.

Anyways, Althea grumbled from inside,

"Who is it?"

"Daniel. You ready to rip some zombies apart?"

After a long yawn, she replied, "Did you even sleep?"

"No. Now come on. We don't have time to waste."

Leaving her tent, I walked towards one of the workbenches near the center of the camp. The entire place was buzzing with life. Troops carried supplies. Others scarfed down their breakfasts with tired eyes and heavy heels. One drill sergeant went back and forth to each tent, shouting each member awake.

Off in the distance, Kessiah walked up with her hair all frazzled. She looked like she'd slept in the back of a car instead of a bed. When she reached up to me, she snapped,

"You know, I usually have Torix make me a bed before I go to sleep everyday. Thanks a lot for taking my bed maker."

I laughed before smiling, "My pleasure."

She grinned back before Althea stumbled up to us. She looked groggy today, like fighting for so long had taken its toll on her. Kessiah slapped her back as she said,

"Yo miss missy. Cheer up. You have a day of bloodletting ahead of you."

Althea sighed, "Yeah. I know."

I raised an eyebrow, "Would you rather do something else or?"

"It's not that. I'm just not used to this yet. It's going to take some time to adjust to this much...killing."

Kessiah gave her a noogie with her hand, "Get used to it toots. You ready Dan Dan?"

I nodded. She pointed off towards another section of the city,

"Let's go fuck them up."

We ran towards the next set of ten blocks, ready for another day of slaughter. It only took minutes before we resumed our formation, me in front with the both of them at the back. Smoother than a knife slitting a throat, we went about our business. The blood and guts and bodies would've piled high behind us if not for my armor.

Fortunately, we didn't have to deal with the rot of corpses. Pretty much all the life in Springfield was already done for. The only things we bothered dealing with was the aftermath, and aftermath there was.

Scenes of bloodshed and horror, like cars rammed into half formed zombies, littered the areas. It almost made me thankful how few people made it past the tutorial. Otherwise we'd be fighting thousands and thousands more zombies than we already were.

The sun was a little past midday by the time we finished our quota of a ten block square. According to the legion, we had about forty of the little bite sized segments left. Not wanting to waste any more time, the three of us kept going after our quota. We figured why not. None of us were tired yet, so there wasn't really a reason to stop.

The steel legion struggled to keep up though. They thought we couldn't clear them so quickly at our level. In fact, they estimated our total clear time would be around two years instead of less than two months. Every bit of their supply chain struggled with trying to keep up, from moving the barrier machine to moving the camp. Torix was their savior in that regard.

He used several summons for helping move and carry various supplies. He ordered them, giving succinct, concise commands that made everything run smoother. Without his intervention, I doubt the legion could've maintained the feverish pace we kept up. Fortunately for us, they did.

It was in the afternoon when we neared a set of restaurants. At that point, I cut off oppression. We discovered early on that any place with food was swarming with the spawns. Oppression would aggro packs of them. Kessiah had to help out Althea last time since around thirty sprinted at her. She took some of the exp, which was the real reason we were murdering so many of these fucks. Kessiah wasn't going to gain levels from these lowly spawns anyways.

As we neared the first of the series of restaurants, there were already several dead spawns. The bodies were burned, leaving behind charred bones. The entire restaurant was like that. We passed by another two restaurants before there was the sound of clattering pans and gunfire.

Curious as cats, the three of us snuck together to investigate. There was a shitty chinese buffet, tables turned over in every direction. Every ornament was designed to look expensive, but was actually cheap as hell. All along the walls and floor was dried blood, just like everywhere else. There was new blood though. We found the source at the back of corner of the restaurant.

There was a group of survivors fighting back. Two guys were standing at the front with two girls behind them. Another girl was sitting behind an overturned table nearby.

The guys had crude shields made of stone barriers. They would slam them into the zombies, causing them to stumble away. While they fumbled, the girls would unload a clip into them over a second or two. The hidden girl would then dash in, slice the exposed insect core before retreating back to safety.

In all honesty, they weren't the cleanest looking group, but what they lacked in finesse, they made up for with practicality. They were nothing like us. Althea and I just crushed the zombies now, overwhelming them with raw power. We sacrificed safety for speed most of the time. These people chose to take their time.

The gunners were standing with their backs against a wall. The two guys out front both had extra shield rocks beside them incase one of theirs snapped. Each of them wore fitted clothing, almost tight. It made it so that the spawns couldn't grab them as easily. No heavy armor here, just plain, brown leather. Enough to stop teeth and nails, but not much else.

It let them kite backwards most of the time, but now they were stuck in a hole. They didn't have anyway of getting out, and there was about fifteen or so zombies running out of the back of the restaurant still. Althea shot a hole through one of the zombie's heads before I darted into through a window.

Glass clattered against the ground before I charged through several tables. Another spear shot past my head, stabbing through another fleshy abomination's core. Right before a pack of the zombies crashed into the shields guys, I tackled straight into the spawns.

Like a wrecking ball, I kept my arms wide as I slammed the monsters straight into the concrete wall. My momentum and the weight of the zombies combined caved it in. Before they could recover, I pulled my fist back and roared as I crushed a zombies spine with a heavy fist. I grabbed the cord of bone, wrenching it out with the ribs still attached.

I chomped into the core of the creature, killing it at that moment. One of the zombies pulled itself from the wall and dashed towards the shield guys. I tore the spine in my hands in half before stabbing the ribs into the running zombie.

The bones sliced into the monster, pinning it against the wall. I kept turning, my feet sliding on the floor. I let my hand swing around as I grabbed the skull of another chasing zombie. I pulled it off its feet as I spun, slamming the head of the creature right into the head of the pinned zombie. Brains and blood and bone exploded as the skulls crumbled in my hand.

With a quick thrust of my arm, I pierced the freshly slammed body, pulling out the insect core. I devoured it before a spray of bullets shot straight into my face. They didn't do much, so I ignored them as I turned back towards the horde.

Althea already killed two more zombies, though she was reloading now. I charged forward, ducking low. The first zombie to reach me was thin and tall, like a stretched out tube of meat. The petal bug had landed on its head. When it reached me, I shot my arm upwards.

My fingers wrapped around its head like metal claws. They dug into its skin as I pulled it up and off the ground. I pulled my other arm back, whipping my other arm forward. The slender man followed. I turned my torso, dragging the monster's head into the ground.

Like a balloon full of blood, the monster's skull popped against the ground as I crushed it. Another spawn came towards me. From my lunged position, I pressed my heels into the ground. My fist built momentum before I drilled an uppercut straight through the monster, pulling the core out of it.

A mist and rain of organs and blood rained down before I jerked my arm back. The body fell to the ground before I bit into the core. The zombies slowed down after that. It made me guess at just how sentient they were. I couldn't help but wonder if they could feel fear.

If I could, I'd make them. I charged forward with another hail of bullets unloading onto my back. I roared,

"Stop firing at me or else I'll kill you too, you dumb fucks."

The clanking of two dropped guns landed on the ground. The last zombie came up towards me. The skull of a woman had split in half, teeth reaching out of each side of her opened head. Her legs had reformed into a four legged platform. Her arms were like whips.

They wrapped around me before pulling me towards her. When I was within her range, my armor grinned with a sinister crimson leaking from between the armor's teeth. As if sensing my lack of fear, the fleshy whips around me loosened, but the thing's fate was already sealed.

I chomped into it, tearing it apart as my armor absorbed the creature. The monster shook, struggling to shake me off. I held tightly to it as it struggled. It tried stabbing me, pulling itself off, even vomiting onto me. It couldn't get away as I consumed it from top to bottom. Blood squirted in every direction, making the floors slick with red.

The creature stopped its struggle before I lifted it outward. My armor shot needles into it, absorbing its remaining corpse. I walked back and forth between the bodies. I repeated

the process on body parts and the larger pools of blood as well. By the time I finished, the building looked much like it had before.

Althea and Kessiah walked in behind me before the group of five looked at me. Their hands and legs shook. Their pale faces were gaunt, like they were suddenly sick. I glanced back and forth at them before noticing two faces I'd seen before.

It was insane seeing the both of them here. I suppose after we met and left in BloodHollow, they cleaned up their acts. I must have inspired them to go so far as to take advantage of the double exp from the area. I didn't really know.

I spread my arms,

"David, Stacy, it's good to see some familiar faces around here."

Chapter 43: The Rest of Humanity

They stood still, not making a move. I pulled my helmet off my face. I grinned, "Come on guys. Calm down. I saved your asses again after all."

I put my hands on my hip before a dagger appeared right in front of my eye. It was fast, fast as Althea. I couldn't dodge, but I shut my eye. The glass dagger didn't even sink an inch deep before it snapped.

I jerked my hand outwards, gripping around the wrist of my attacker. It was the assassin chick who was finishing off the other zombie cores. With my free hand, I pulled out the bit of glass from my eye before flicking it away. It clattered on the tile floor as I turned towards her face.

What looked back was pure fear, the kind of look you give when you know you done fucked it up. I frowned,

"Don't do that again, uh-" I glanced upwards and identified her,

Sarah Smith(lvl 188) – A member of the town's scouting party, Sarah Smith is the highest level and most experienced member. When Yawm first came to Earth, he entered BloodHollow and proliferated rapidly afterwards. The sentinels defending nearby priority dungeons abandoned their posts to assist the legion with containing the infestation.

This allowed Springfield to stage an evacuation. Most of the residents were left behind, but a few of the more skilled fighters escaped. They've organized a defense force in retaliation against the coming horde. The difference is that these members refuse to fall in line with the steel legion.

They believe that the steel legion is using the infection as an excuse to stage an invasion of Earth. For this group of independent fighters, Sarah Smith is considered their most valuable asset and the spear head of the entire operation they organized.

Being one of the only members capable of killing even the lowest level of zombie, she and her party were tasked with clearing out portions of town to gather supplies. During the process, the group of five developed strategies and tactics for handling the Spawns of Yawm.

She focuses entirely on assassination. She hides and waits for the right moment to strike before attacking. Her damage is very high and comes in bursts. Your defenses are far too high for her, so you have nothing to worry.

I held her up there for a minute while I read her status. It was large compared with most of the ones I'd seen up till now. Sarah started groaning about her wrist, so I tossed her onto the ground.

She turned back at me, not moving still. I rolled my eyes,

"The fuck is wrong with you people. Was I really that scary? I mean come on. Get over it and move on. We don't have time for you guys to gawk and stare all day."

Stacy was at the back of the group, decked out in military fatigues. She whimpered,

"You're...Daniel?"

I threw up my hands, "No fucking duh. I'm already tired of this. I save your asses and this is what you do. Piss your pants?"

David tossed his shield to the side of him, the rock shaking on the floor. He stepped forward,

"Hey there. I'm uhh...It's good to see you?"

I reached out a hand, "Likewise."

We shook our hands before he scratched the back of his head,

"We're sorry about being scared. You just ate one of the zombies. They're supposed to do that to us, not the other way around."

I shrugged, "Eh, I'm supposed to be some harbinger of destruction nonsense anyway. Might as well reap the benefits right?"

A small laugh escaped David,

“Yeah, I guess so...You’re still Daniel then.”

I nodded before the other shield guy threw his stone shield to the ground. The girls in the back lowered their guns before I raised my arms,

“Hellalujah. You guys can move. It’s a miracle.”

The group laughed a little, the tension ebbing out of the situation. David smiled,

“Well, it’s crazy seeing you here. Who’re your friends?”

I gestured an arm towards Kessiah and Althea,

“This is Kessiah, and this is Althea. Try not to say anything snappy. They both bite.”

Kessiah hit my shoulder. I laughed as I slid sideways. The sound of it was loud enough to scare the others though. The other shield bro beside David had a deer in headlights sort of look to him again.

Kessiah ignored it before walking up and reaching out a hand to David. Her fingers wrapped all the way around the back of his hand. It must have been like shaking hands with a giant.

Kessiah smiled, “Good to meet yah David. I came by to help Daniel clean this mess up.”

He just glanced up at her, stunned. The others seemed overwhelmed as well. Kessiah brandished her white hair, making it flow out to the side. With canines jutting from her grin, she put her hands on her hips,

“I know, I know. Take your time basking in my radiance. It’s a lot to take in.”

I pushed her aside,

“Yeah, that’s about enough time. They may get a sunburn if they sit here any longer. Either that or skin cancer.”

Kessiah frowned before Althea chimed,

“Good to meet you all. Now let’s go Daniel. We saved them already. We don’t have time to waste.”

I pointed at her, “Good point.” I glanced back at the group. “I think I have a few things that could help you guys.”

I walked over towards Kessiah. She carried a satchel along her back full of random supplies. Mainly food, but there was other stuff as well. I took out a few sharpened bits

of my armor. I made quite a few extra pieces of this stuff by now. These guys could get a lot out of it, especially considering how Sarah just broke her weapon on my face.

I tossed a few daggers and a small shield and sword at their feet. David walked up and lunged onto a knee as he inspected a few pieces of the armor. He grinned,

“Hell yeah. This will help us tons. I mean, tons of tons.” He glanced up at me, “Thanks Daniel.”

“No problem. Anyways, we’re going to clear out the rest of this area. If you head that way-” I pointed towards where we just came from, “Then you won’t find any spawns. If you come near us while we’re clearing out the area, we may kill you. I’d recommend just waiting over that way for like...ten minutes.”

Sarah squinted her eyes,

“Ten minutes?”

I bent over and flicked her in the forehead. Her head flew back before I turned back towards David, “Yeah. Ten minutes.”

Stacy shouted, “Why’d you flick her, asshole?”

“Cause she stabbed me, dumbfuck.”

Stacy squinted her eyes too before I waved them off as I turned around. I walked off,

“Good luck then. I hope this helps.”

David shot a pointed glare at Sarah and Stacy before he grinned at me, “Yeah, it does. Thanks for the save too. Can’t remember if I ever thanked you.”

We walked out of the store, heading towards the rest of the strip of stores. Off in the distance though, I could hear them talking.

Stacy snapped, “What a conceited asshole.”

Sarah said, “Yeah. I really didn’t like that guy.”

Althea turned towards me,

“Why are they complaining? You just saved their lives.”

I shrugged, “Some people don’t care what awesome ass present you give them on their birthday. All they care about is the wrapping paper and bowtie on top.”

Althea looked confused, but Kessiah put an arm around her shoulder, “He’s saying that some people want you to save them a certain way more than they want to be saved. It’s just how some people are.”

Althea rolled her eyes, “That makes no sense.”

I shrugged, “Who knows. Maybe that’s why they joined the defense force instead of the legion. They want to be saved a certain way.”

Althea sighed, “Man, that’s dumb as fuck.”

We continued on before I checked out my status. I’d gained 21 levels while we cleared out the infestation earlier. The overall speed of my level gains had plateaued. I could rationalize that though. More exp needed per level and less exp per enemy meant slower leveling in general.

It was enough points to matter though. Which stat to decide on next was the real question. I figured getting into the constitution-strength-dexterity chain would be good. I didn’t know which to invest into first though. Unlike with endurance, I didn’t get a massive 50% bonus towards these stats. I got 10% at most, meaning it would take a lot longer to develop them.

So long that investing into each stat individually would be a better, in my mind at least. I only needed the level 100 perks out of the stats I chose though. After that I would probably just invest in endurance until I found a reason not to.

The stats I wanted most were strength and constitution. Strength would be invaluable since it acted as a multiplier for my augmentation magic. The stronger I was at my base level, the more of an impact the runic energy would have. That meant strength would be a must. Constitution was a trickier subject.

The weight and density would be nice, but I already had capped physical damage reduction. When I remembered Elijah though, my thoughts changed. The ground quaked beneath each of his steps. When he swung his wings, they created tempests that could send people flying. I didn’t care about flying, but damn did I want to quake the ground under each step.

It would make me much harder to knock around, which would be a serious problem in the future. Anytime Kessiah hit me, the difference between us was obvious. She wouldn’t even budge, and I would literally drag my feet on the ground just to get steady. I needed constitution even if I didn’t want it. Besides, it would spill over into strength, which was my next investment choice.

So I dumped all my points into constitution. My body grew from within my armor. The skin I’d become so comfortable in strangled me for a moment before the armor split.

Several sharp cracks later, I heaved for a few breaths before my armor regrew, filling in those cracks. The sudden increase in size was obvious.

I caught up with Althea and Kessiah as I glanced at my status screens.

Level 294
Attribute Totals
Strength – Increases carrying weight, maximum speed, and physical power54.5
Constitution – Increases hardness, density, and weight of your body82.5
Endurance – Increases regeneration of stamina, health, and their totals540
Dexterity – Increases ease of movement, flexibility, and reflexes35
Willpower – Increases internal motivation, mana regen, and Mental Res258
Intelligence – Increases memory, critical thinking, and total mana pool101.4
Charisma – Increases likeability, persuasion, and decreases prices at shops29.3
Luck – Increases money found, odds in your favor, and chance of rare events54.4
Perception – Increases comprehension, the five senses, and awareness31

Daniel

Hillside Totals
Regen19,938/19,938
Bufs/Debufs131.2/min
Oppression Damage- 10,000+30%hp/min
Stamina12,117/12,117
158.4/sec
Elemental Res – 97.5%
Harbinger of Cataclysm17,362,985/256,000,000/per min
Plasma Res – 97.5%
Phys Dam Reduction – 97.5%
Rad Res – 97.5%
Phys Dam Bonus – 814%
Mental Res – 97.5%

My stats were leveling slowly but surely. Now I just needed my leveling perks, to finish the genesis of potential tree, and gain a fuckload of levels. I'd be damn near invincible then. Getting there would be the problem.

So we reached towards a few more of the stores. The dense hordes made progress slower than normal, but the extra weight helped me. At one point, a zombie leapt from off a roof towards me. I ripped a car door off and slung it at the thing. It pierced into the core of the creature, crushing it. Stuff like that required an amazing amount of bulk. Otherwise I would sling myself instead of the car door.

That being said, we cleared the few restaurants, letting those fuckers behind us get what they needed. I didn't enjoy helping them, but having regrets like with Michael and Kelsey was a bad idea. I figured taking a few minutes to help them wasn't a big deal in the grand scheme of things.

Regardless, we kept crossing deeper into the town before we reached the second part of Yawm's sanctum. The fungus became prevalent again, and instead of fighting spawns, we fought grikes and unnamed ones. It was a refreshing change of pace considering we'd killed so many zombies over the last few days.

The sun was setting as we cleared out the next set of ten blocks. We were beside an interstate bridge, nothing really near us besides a few streets and lights. I gained another 5 levels, putting me just shy of my necessary constitution for the leveling perk.

It was a nostalgic place for me. The large, slanted walls of concrete rose above us on both sides. It wasn't the biggest bridge, just large enough for a small, two lane street to slide under it. Graffiti littered the concrete beams and walls like little dots of color in all the tan rock. It was like a wind tunnel under there, the cool breeze refreshing after such a hard day.

I'd already shut off oppression, and I was walking with the others as we chat about the day. Under the orange glow of the tall streetlamps, Kessiah put her arm out in front of us. We stopped as Althea turned towards Kessiah and said,

"What's wrong?"

Kessiah narrowed her eyes, "Someone's watching us."

At the other side of the bridge, a collection of mana coalesced into a figure. Hunched shoulders, humped back, and a flowing red cape behind him, a single pale eye stared at us from under his hood. Sheets of gray armor covered his deformed figure.

On his right side was an enlarged arm, thick as fridge. He lacked a left arm, but his cape flowed towards its absence. The red, faded fabric contorted into sharpened fingers, like a three fingered hand. Just enough fingers to hold, but not enough for anything precise. I doubt he intended to use it for knitting anyways.

A gray beard reached halfway down his chest, crumpled and frayed. It looked more like a broken, steel cable than hair. On his right hand, he held a simple, rusted piece of metal. It was more like a hunk of rusted iron than a sword even. From his chest, he boomed out his voice like an old man with fire still in his chest,

"Who goes there?"

Kessiah stepped in front of us,

"Noone. Why don't we mind our businesses and just leave."

It was the first time I'd seen Kessiah even think of being defensive.

The man replied,

"I cannot. This is my duty. I protect my master's haven. You all seem lost, running through here."

Kessiah shook her head, "We know where we're going. In fact, we were just about to leave."

The man dragged his sword across the ground, sparks shooting off the pavement. An aura surrounded the sword, like it could cleave through someone's soul. He said,

“You’ve harmed my master’s haven. While I respect you, I cannot let you leave unharmed. This is my duty. I will give you the honor of fighting a battle before your death. It is far better than what the other followers would do for you. Be grateful.”

A bead of sweat fell off the chin of Kessiah. She bit her lip, “Can we just, I don’t know, do something else besides fight to the death. I’m kind of out of it by now.”

Althea whispered, “How did he sneak up on us like this?”

Kessiah elbowed her, “How the fuck am I supposed to know? Otherwise he wouldn’t have fucking snuck up on us.”

A little laugh escaped me before the man pointed his sword at us and boomed,

“I see battle excites you, even in the face of death. What is your name, little lamb.”

“Why do you need to know my name?”

“I am blind. I may only see through my ears and other senses. Now tell me your name.”

“It’s uh, Michael.”

“Then you and the other one, step aside. The greatest of you, that remnant, shall fight me. You two may fight against two of my disciples. We shall see who wins.”

A ragged gasp escaped Althea as the old man continued, “Do not fret, children. If you defeat my disciples, then you will become one of my own.”

I rolled my eyes, “Let’s just kill each other already.”

The man took another step forward, entering my range for checking out his status.

Dakhma Wike, Wielder of Blood and Bane(lvl 3144) – One of Yawm’s four followers, Dakhma is a slave who rose to the position of knight under Yawm’s order. He is a symbol of Yawm’s supposed meritocracy, since he started at the absolute lowest rung of their society. Even lower than a spawn.

With a vast pool of experience, he uses his living cape and enormous right arm to outmaneuver and cut his opponents to pieces. Little is known about Dakhma, but one thing is clear, you would do well to avoid him at any and all costs.

I whispered, “We’re fucked.”

Kessiah grit her teeth and snapped, “We’ll have to see. Maybe he isn’t so tough…”

His disciples coalesced beside him, both of them in gray sheets of armor like Dakhma. I still had no fucking clue how they did that. Both of them wore long cloaks and hoods like the other named ones. The thinner of the two carried a sword soaked in a sheen of green like a sword of jade. The other had a cloak with a rougher, more torn appearance.

Mightus Tyko(lvl 438) – A disciple of Dakhma. Found as a slave working in the mines of a small, torrential planet, Mightus used the takeover of Yawm as a way to propel himself out of his drudgery. Despite his lack of proficiency for strength oriented combat, Mightus has compensated by taking advantage of several racial qualities.

As an amphibious creature, he coats his skin with mucus. With the help of Yawm's cult, he has created a sword that uses his own mucus mixed with several compounds to create poison. This makes him very dangerous for squishier combatants.

After analyzing your build, you would make an excellent match against him.

Galt Morn(lvl 346) – A disciple of Dakhma. He is a member of a golemic race, meaning his skin is covered in stone. While not as hard as most conventional armors, it offers solid protection against most light attacks.

This is because his race lived on a planet with a thin atmosphere. The intense waves of radiation fed the animals that could sustain the punishment. The others would die. His race found that a thin coating of stone kept them alive and well. They often eat stones to help grind up the tough fibers of plants native to their home world.

You're a fair match, though the fight will be a tough one.

Althea whispered, "That Mightus guy will probably kill me. I can take Galt."

I whispered, "Jump back. I'll charge forward. I'll be trying to hold mightus down."

My runes charged with energy before building until the energy shot out large arcs of lightning. My fists hummed with power and my armor grinned with me. I spread my arms,

"Come on then."

Dakhma's cape whipped around him before crushing deep into the pavement. The three fingers gripped into the stone before sending Dakhma flying in a sideways circle. Like a cyclone, he spun through the air with wind blowing Althea backwards.

When his sword collided with Kessiah's arm, a sound like a skyscraper collapsing busted my eardrums. A car window in the distance shattered. The force of the impact crushed the ground beneath Kessiah, but she grinned. She didn't block the sword. She caught it with her hand.

With a quick whip of her wrist and arm, she pulled Dakhma into the ground. Dakhma's living cape caught him, letting him rotate mid air and kick Kessiah. Kessiah shot backwards, slamming through a pillar of concrete and landing on the wall behind it.

The bridge wobbled above us, chunks of rock falling off as Althea shot backwards. She was over level 260 by now, with a lot of her stats put into strength. She may have even gotten another leveling perk. I didn't know for sure.

What she did gain was far more finesse with her powers. One of her arms reformed in seconds as she jumped up towards the top of the bridge. Mimicking the cape of Dakhma, the three fingered limb stabbed into the concrete above before she fired several shots at Galt.

I dashed backwards from Kessiah and Dakhma's tumbling. It was like the world crumbled anytime they punched or kicked. Just being near it was nerve wracking, like watching a tornado coming towards you.

As I distanced myself from them, a blip of shadow blurred beside me. Without hesitation, I activated oppression. A howl of pain let out near me. Turning towards it, I dashed at the sound like a demon running out of hell.

Mightus was tumbling on the pavement, his robe getting torn as I charged towards him. Right as I neared him, he turned towards me with his blade shooting towards the left side of my neck. I shrugged my left shoulder, his blade catching on my armor.

I shot out a quick jab with my left hand, but he ducked below the strike. He pulled his sword from my armor and whipped around in a circle. His blade built in momentum, but instead of letting him finish his fancy footwork, I charged him.

I tackled into him, sending us both rolling onto the ground. When we stopped, he was on top of me. He grabbed his sword and drove it down towards my neck. Growing my armor, several black spired of armor shot out and guided the sword towards the side of my neck. The saber dug a foot deep into the concrete before Mightus raised his hand.

When his fist came down onto my face, my armor cracked open into a set of teeth. They clamped down onto his hand. Mightus howled, his voice high and gurgling. He grabbed the embedded sword and pulled, letting him jerk out his arm from my armor's jaws.

Streaks of blue blood leaked from his forearm. Long, jagged cuts traced up and down the exposed forearm. I turned myself back onto my feet before he sprinted towards me. When we met, he ducked under my jab and slid past me. Running away, he pulled out his sword and darted towards Althea.

My runes charged as I sprinted forward. The rocky skinned Galt had his legs pinned into the pavement. Althea was firing out multiple harpoons into his chest as he struggled to dodge her bolts. Mightus leapt towards her like a panther pouncing.

Althea dislodged herself from the concrete, firing two bolts midair. Mightus controlled himself in the air, spiraling in unnatural ways. The bolts nicked him as they passed, but they didn't pierce. It made me wonder what was under that caped hood.

I couldn't watch anymore though. Galt had pulled the harpoons out of his feet. He shouted at me with a raspy voice, "Why not have a real fight?"

I grinned before sprinting towards him. With a wide right uppercut, he tried hitting my gut. He was fast, but not as fast as Kessiah. I sidestepped towards his right side. With his back facing me, I snapped a vicious left hook into his jaw.

The pavement crushed under my foot with a clean connection. The rockface chipped as Malt lost his balance. He stumbled as I lunged forward. I stomped my heel and drilled a right hook into his side. Rock chipped off my hand, powdered like sand. Using the momentum off my last punch, I swung my right hand for another quick strike onto his chin.

Teeth fell out of his mouth along with his busted face. He whipped his left arm out towards me, but I leaned back. The wind of his fist brushed against my face before I pulled back towards him right after his swing.

I pushed off my back foot, slamming a left straight into his nose. The rock crumbled further as he fumbled further back. I kept steps measured, keeping just close enough to attack but far enough away to prevent retaliation. Each time he almost fell, I would angle my hits to keep him on his feet.

He was stronger and faster than me no doubt about it, but I could reliably grind his skin to powder like this. He wouldn't be able to take the punishment forever. Compared with me, Galt was an awkward, flat footed fighter. I pressed my advantage as his swings grew wider and wilder. It made him all the easier to deconstruct.

He swung a left hook towards me. I ducked under it and slammed a right straight into his stomach. He tried lifting his knee into my chin, but I stepped towards his right while dragging my left hand. The fist slammed into his again, stunning him. Red blood spit out of his mouth before I tagged another right hook into his body, then a left overhand into his opened jaw.

The bones keeping his face together snapped and popped as my fist dug in. He fought like he had never even considered technique. At least Mightus made the fight chaotic and interesting. This was like a wolf picking apart a deer with no horns. It was only a matter of time.

That was until he fell backwards. I darted towards him, but he threw his cloak at me. The fabric covered my eyes, blinding me for a second or two. Once I got the cloak off, a fist slammed into my armored face.

The metal covering my face sunk inwards as my body was sent tumbling backwards. All the extra strength and speed he had came together at once. Everything in sight tumbled, like the world was flipped upside down over and over. I landed against the concrete barrier before everything turned gray with the powdered mist.

He dashed towards me, the gray cloud flying outwards when his fist smashed me deeper into the concrete. My chestplate dented inwards before he slammed his fist into me again. My armor dented inwards again. A barrage of blows ushered out like a hurricane from hell.

He didn't stop and throw me out like in the movies. Galt kept smashing until he ran out of stamina. At that point, he fell towards his knees. Heaving for breath, the dust cleared.

I couldn't see what my body looked like, but I could tell many bones were broken. I pushed my crushed body out of the wall. One of my feet bent the wrong way, same with my left arm. The bottom jaw of my armor was jutting sideways. Blood spilled all around me, slick and thick. A bone jut from my right arm. In the end, however, I was still alive.

As Galt recovered his stamina, he watched my foot snap back into place. He watched my jaw and left shoulder realign back into socket. He watched the bone of my right arm disappear back into my flesh again. My armor grinned with me.

Galt stood with shaky legs, "Who are you?"

I leaned forward, one foot in front of the other. The energy of my runes recharged, glowing a vibrant orange. The lightning grew in intensity as I glanced at him,

"The eater of monsters."

Chapter 44: The Might of a Follower

I dashed towards Galt once more. With his stamina and mana drained, he took punishing blow after punishing blow. I quit dodging and planted my feet so that I could crush my fists through his skin. After a minute of beating him to death, he finally fell while drowning from the blood leaking out of his ruptured lungs.

Gaining 7 levels in one go, I turned towards Althea. Mightus chased her as she leapt and sprinted away, firing bolt after bolt. Sweat poured off Althea, yet Mightus looked refreshed. He was a hunter, cornering his prey. I wouldn't let him finish what he started.

I dashed forward, the ground cracking underfoot. I closed in before shutting off oppression. It would rip Althea apart, so it wasn't worth the risk. As I neared them, Althea tripped over a stone. Mightus sliced his sword across her neck, lopping her head off.

As her head spun through the air, blood squirted from her neck. Mightus turned towards me and bowed his head. He pointed his sword towards me,

“Then you will be my brother in arms.”

I rolled my eyes as I ran towards him and her. He raised an eyebrow at me before Althea’s headless body wrapped around him. With her unusual strength, she crushed him like a snake. Blood leaked from his mouth as he gurgled,

“How?”

I reached them before whipping a slicing hook towards his jaw. He flew sideways, Althea holding on like a bear trap. Several teeth clattered on the ground before I charged towards them both once more. I raised my fist like a guillotine and cracked his skull against the pavement. Slamming strike after slamming strike, his life left his body as Althea’s head regenerated.

Soaked in blue blood, Althea slowly stood up and reformed. Despite gaining 20 levels in one go, she wasn’t pleased. Slinging the gunk off her arms, she said,

“Goddamn this is disgusting.”

I clapped my hands hard in front of her, the metal gauntlets ringing,

“Come on. Focus. Put your points where you need them and let’s go help Kessiah.”

“Ah...Of course. Sorry.”

I opened my screen, putting a single point into constitution before the perk option came up for constitution.

[Behemoth(Constitution of 100 or more. Note – Two more level 100 perks left. Choose wisely.) – Your shadow shall blot out the sun. Doubles height, weight, and density bonuses from constitution, and doubles the leveling bonuses of the leveling perk. Gain an additional 5 health per point in constitution, and 2 extra hp per level. Another 1/10th of constitution added towards strength(3/10ths conversion). Power oriented melee skills scale with constitution.]

I selected the perk then poured my points into strength. Right as I had nearly emptied out my attribute points, the strength perk appeared.

[Apocalyptic(Strength of 100 or more. Note – One more level 100 perk left. Choose wisely.) – You cannot bend. You can only break. Doubles physical damage bonus per level. Adds 5 more health per point in strength. 2% total bonus towards physical damage for every 1% of health missing. Another 1/10th of

strength added towards dexterity(3/10ths conversion). Maim chance converted into break chance.]

After selecting the perk, I put all the rest of my points into endurance. I'd handle my next leveling perk at another time. When I finalized my decisions, my chest ruptured. The constriction took me to my knees, like someone struck your stomach and stole your breath. I couldn't breath before my armor ruptured on all sides.

Blood gushed into my chest and out of my armor. The skin I relied on had turned against me, choking me before my expansion tore it apart. Fortunately, it didn't last long. As my wounds and armor healed, I gripped my hand. When I clasped hard, a monstrous, overwhelming power came back.

I doubled my strength in an instant. My body was that of a titan. I stepped forward, my limbs freed by my sudden shift in strength. For a few moments, I was intoxicated by the rush of rush in my limbs. Every part of me ebbed a steady, colossal might. It was like changing bodies with a giant. Everything around me seemed smaller, like I grew a foot taller. Maybe I did, I don't know.

What I did know was that Kessiah was getting her ass whooped. I shouted, "Come on Althea. let's go."

She fumbled, "Uh, I don't know what to put my points into."

I snarled, "We don't have time for hesitation. Get your head out of your ass."

As my senses adjusted to my new body, the raspy, old voice of Dakhma came into focus.

"It is strange that a remnant would fight against Yawm. You're kind never held flesh as sacred. The only difference between your kind and Yawm was that you used science to bend your bodies. Yawm uses his own power instead."

Kessiah couldn't reply, her arms and legs a blurred fury of movement. Sparks flew off the flowing sword of Dakhma as his blade clanked against Kessiah's skin. I shot into a sprint, seeing her health bar dwindle. Kessiah's blood splattered in every direction by now as Dakhma continued his interrogation,

"I imagined your kind would join Yawm in freeing the living from Schema's little game. You are enslaved and hated by Schema. Your kind, who is his creator, has been banished to forever wander the stars with no home. Yawm offered you all a home, and yet you refused."

Dakhma movements blended so smoothly and so perfectly, they couldn't be called anything but beautiful. Every twist and turn merged into his next strike, like a never

ending dance. Instead of beating his opponents down, he showed his superiority in skill and finesse without ever needing to crush them.

Anytime Kessiah gained a clear shot, he would spin and turn and torque out of the way. Every dodge would lead straight into another counter attack, making retaliation impossible. I neared them as Dakhma mouthed,

“You called my master’s light madness. You would rather wallow in darkness than open your eyes. You have chosen to be blind, despite being born with the gift of sight. How I envy your opportunity. I wished I could have been given what you were given. But no-“

His cape wrapped around Kessiah’s waist, slinging her back and forth onto the ground. Craters formed under each strike with cataclysmic booms echoing around us. He tossed her, sending her flying through another pillar of the bridge.

The concrete wall crushed at the force of her impact. The ground rippled with an earthquake radiating from the ground. Like a reaper, Dakhma paced towards her,

“Unlike you, I was born a slave.”

Kessiah coughed up a pound of blood from her throat. Dakhma didn’t even look tired or damaged. It didn’t just look like he was a higher level. He was a better fighter too. Kessiah couldn’t hold a candle to him.

Even worse still, Althea was fumbling with her status screen instead of firing at him. She needed to learn when to act. Kessiah shook as she raised her head and spit her words like venom,

“You don’t know a damn thing about me.”

Dakhma dashed towards her,

“I know enough.”

With a surge of orange lightning, I charged straight into Dakhma. I couldn’t stop his attack, but I sent him off course just enough to miss Kessiah. When we landed on the ground a hundred feet away, my armor caved in like crushing a can underfoot. Waterfalls of blood pumped from between the cracks in my armor. The ground around me oscillated.

It was a force unlike any I’d ever known. Nothing even came close. It was like swallowing a grenade and letting it detonate in your stomach. No, it was like standing and staring at a tsunami tall as a mountain, knowing you will die.

Yet, I lived. I survived as he pulled his sword from my shattered chest. From under the hood, Dakhma’s scarred lips frowned. He sighed before deflecting a bolt from behind

him. I couldn't move. Everything blurred together like reality had become a soupy mess. That was probably my face getting in my eyes at that point though.

Still, I tried moving out of the way. I couldn't tell what was going on, but I still didn't want to lay here and die. Instead of finishing me off, Dakhma grinned,

"You are a true fighter. Admirable. Yawm would love a fighter like you in our ranks."

Dakhma turned towards Kessiah before deflecting another harpoon. He paced towards Kessiah, slapping Althea's spears away with ease. With so many pillars crushed though, the bridge above us caved inwards before collapsing. A wave of dust plumed upwards, masking us in a wave of noise and dust.

Before the powder settled, a pair of thin arms pulled me from the rubble. A second later, the scenery shifted once more. A soft something held me off the ground. It was a pleasing cool, almost cold. Two more swooshy sounds ebbed around my dark, fading sight before a familiar face glanced down at me.

With a proud smile, Torix whispered,

"You've done well. You may have even saved Kessiah's life."

I grinned back,

"Yeah, I'm pretty fucking cool."

My words didn't come out smooth. They were choppy, with a bit of choking in them. Blood sloshed in my throat a bit as I spoke too. Still, I think Torix got the message. Minutes later, my body was back. The bones snapped into place. The skin reconnected. The tears in the armor suturing back as if it were alive.

It was after all. With a few snaps and pops into place, I was good as new and ready for more. Kessiah was laying on another table of mana. Her recovery was nothing like mine. It was going to be a lot longer before she recovered.

Althea had a few scrapes, but that meant nothing to her. She may have had wounds worse than mine if she was still showing signs of damage. Either that or her regeneration couldn't be bothered with more cosmetic wounds. I couldn't tell.

It was interesting seeing how drained she was compared with me. She fell asleep on the black bed beneath her within seconds of healing. Torix pointed at her,

"Take her to her tent when you are able."

I glanced around, noticing the kevlar cloth surrounding us. I sat up, taking a few breaths to orient myself. When I stood, the ground gave a little under my steps. It was odd, but not altogether unpleasing.

After a few steps forward, I could use my legs without them wobbling. I shook out the stiffness of myself. It was weird moving now. The shift in strength and the destruction of my body made me feel like I was moving a freshly healed wound.

It didn't take long before my brain accepted my new self as its carrier though. The whiplash faded as I paced over towards Althea. I picked her up, princess carry style before walking back towards her tent.

As I walked through the camp, everyone seemed smaller. It's strange how the mind will do that to you. It would rather assume everything else changed rather than yourself.

Anyways, I could hold Althea in one arm comfortably now. She was so much smaller than me. I opened the tent before setting her onto her hammock. I walked outside of it before checking out my stats.

I gained quite a few skill levels and levels after all the fighting. 32 levels to be exact. The two leveling perks made a massive difference, especially for my physical damage bonus. That was through the roof now.

Level 32
Attribute Totals
Strength – Increases carrying weight, maximum speed, and physical power 100.1
Constitution – Increases hardness, density, and weight of your body 100.1
Endurance – Increases regeneration of stamina, health, and their totals 567
Dexterity – Increases ease of movement, flexibility, and reflexes 54
Willpower – Increases internal motivation, mana regen, and Mental Res 270
Intelligence – Increases memory, critical thinking, and total mana pool 101.4
Charisma – Increases likeability, persuasion, and decreases prices at shops 29.3
Luck – Increases money found, odds in your favor, and chance of rare events 54.5
Perception – Increases comprehension, the five senses, and awareness 34.8

Daniel Hillside Totals
Regen 22,196/22,196
4547/min
Oppression Damage- 10,000+30%hp/min
Stamina 12,789/12,789
160/sec
Elemental Res – 97.5%
Harbinger of Cataclysm 26,872,985/256,000,0000/per min
Plasma Res – 97.5%
Phys Dam Reduction – 97.5%
Rad Res – 97.5%
Phys Dam Bonus – 1681%
Mental Res – 97.5%

Now that I had my bases covered, there was the question of which leveling perk to take next. I mean strength and constitution were obvious. Constitution ended up giving me some health too, which made it more than worth it. From here on, I didn't really know what the other leveling perks would do though.

I figured asking Torix when he had time would be a good call. Until then, I would just put all my points into good old endurance. It hadn't steered me wrong yet. That being said, each point in endurance was mattering less and less. When you have so much health already, you need a massive increase for it to matter.

Two leveling perks hadn't even given me a 10% increase in health. The only thing making a difference now was points in the stat and levels. A thousand more levels and I would be a beast. To be honest, I wasn't very enthusiastic about that fact.

Still, I lived through a blow meant to finish off Kessiah. Dakhma was over 3000 levels above me. Tough to complain about surviving something like that. If I could take a beating from him, then lesser foes would be like nothing in comparison. I figured it's better to count my blessings instead of bitching.

Before closing my status, I put all my tree points into genesis of potential. I was pretty close to unlocking the next tier of bonuses at 750 points. Focusing my efforts on a bit of runes and forging would pass the time and get me some skill points as well, so that's what I did. Plus it was good to unwind after such an intense fight.

Hours passed like minutes while I focused. I never liked studying, yet I relished in working with all the runes. I didn't have to think my way through it. It was more like trial and error with a decent idea of my general direction. Made the process a lot more fun, especially compared with learning for several hours. That made my mind feel like jello in comparison.

The sun came up after a few hours, but I figured there wasn't really a reason to stop piddling. Without a need for sleep, I kept on working. By the time I was ready for a break, I'd made three different swords.

One would brandish fire when you unsheathed it, but it wouldn't any other time. The last one would stretch out wind from the edge of the blade. Of course the wind wasn't as powerful as the blade, but it could do substantial damage if aimed for the eyes or as a nasty surprise. The other sword was a failure. The runes didn't come together enough to make jack shit.

Oh well. It happened to the best of us.

I was deep in my focus during this time. So much so, that when a firm hand clasped on my shoulder, I almost lost my shit. Turning around, Kessiah was staring at me with a new scar tracing down her cheek. She grinned,

"Yo, I just want to say thanks for the save. I was dead if you didn't tank that for me."

I set my new sword down as my armor peeled back, exposing my face. Kessiah let me go as I turned to her.

“Eh, no problem. Thanks for not letting Dakhma fuck us up either.”

She raised an eyebrow, “You look a lot taller...Your only a few inches shorter than me now.”

I hardly reached her chin before. Now I reached just above her nose. The difference was startling in comparison. Kessiah glanced around before pointing somewhere in the distance, “Mind if we talk for a minute?”

I shrugged, “Eh, why not. I need a break anyways.”

We paced out of the camp before I noticed a sentinel stationed nearby. He was tall as the houses beside him, and was probably there to let people evacuate if we were found out. Torix probably told the overseer about Dakhma’s interference.

Having a sentinel guarding us helped keep everyone calm. If our camp and Yawm’s were countries, then that sentinel would be a nuclear deterrent. Yawm was an even bigger nuke than our own. Hell, I couldn’t even think about how we’d figure out a way of clearing out any more of Springfield.

These questions died down as Kessiah closed a car door beside me. Apparently empty car chats were a thing now, so I walked around the car, sitting in the passenger seat. The car’s frame and tires bent under the stress of both us, but it still held us up. I leaned back as Kessiah tapped a window,

“What are these for?”

“To get around. The wheels would turn and get you places.”

“I guess this is pre-space flight technology.”

“Yeh, it’s shitty compared with a spaceship...So what did you want to talk about?”

She put her hands on the wheel, turning it,

“Well, I was wondering if you could explain how you survived that hit from Dakhma. You should be dead.”

I opened my character screen, “Take a look and find out.”

She gasped, “What? 20,000 health before level 300...wow. Gotta admit, I’m impressed.”

I weighed my hands back and forth, “It’s mainly from trees and some other bonuses.”

She nodded. A few awkward seconds passed before she turned to me in a sudden rush, “Look, I want to know how you got so strong as such a low level.”

I leaned back into the car door, “Hmm...My armor, my trees, and my build are what makes me strong. I guess I focused on using what I had, and it all came together overtime?”

She frowned, “That doesn’t tell me jack shit.”

I rolled my eyes, “Alright, you want me to be honest with you?”

“Well duh.”

“You don’t use your strength well. Like, at all.”

She leaned back and crossed her arms, “Really now...What makes you say that?”

I raised a hand, counting on my fingers, “For starters, I’m better at hand to hand combat than you.”

“I could whoop your ass ten times over.”

“But only because your level is higher. If it wasn’t, you wouldn’t be able to beat me.”

Her brow furrowed as I continued, “As I was saying, you can’t fight as well as me. Sure, I’ve had a few years of experience with boxing and I’ve really pushed myself since Schema took over. You should still be able to beat me, easily in fact, when it comes to raw skill. You can’t.”

I shrugged, glancing out the window, “I don’t know why exactly. Maybe I’m super talented. I don’t think that’s it though. I think that maybe, just maybe, you got lazy somewhere down the line. That sort of who-cares-I’m-a-high-level mentality is stopping you from progressing.”

Kessiah turned to face outside with me. She tapped her forearm with a finger for a few seconds, deep in contemplation. After a moment, she uncrossed her arms,

“Ok maybe. Is there anything else?”

I weighed my hands back and forth, “Well, the way you fight isn’t well rounded. You don’t have any range or ways to stop enemies from moving. Enemies like Dakhma will crush you with the way you are.”

I put a palm towards her, “Not saying my way of fighting is perfect either, but you’ve had plenty of time to fix that shit. You decided not to fix it or decided it wasn’t a weakness, I don’t know. It showed itself loud and clear back there though. That’s why you got your ass handed to you.”

Kessiah snapped, “Thanks for reminding me, dipshit.”

I sighed, "You asked, and I answered. You can take it how you want too."

She sighed back, "Sorry. I just haven't lost a fight in a while. A really long while." She cupped her chin. "It might have been before Torix and I had a falling out. Crazy times back then."

I leaned forward a little, curious as a kid. She flicked my nose, making me lean back. She grinned all of the sudden, "Ha ha! You wanna know about that, don't you?"

I frowned, "I could be I a little curious."

Kessiah relaxed a little, "I suppose you earned a little piece of why. Here's how it went down. Torix had just lost his son. He was devastated and was about to go searching for him. Honestly, I was glad he had. You already noticed, but Torix is a homebody. He never leaves his lair. It makes things stale."

"You make it sound like you enjoy traveling."

"I do. I am a remnant after all. We sort of just live on ships that go across the universe. Dakhma mentioned it, but the remnants were a single species before we began splicing our genes. With a bit of telomerization, we can live forever too. It's pretty awesome, if it wasn't for Schema."

She tapped her lip chin, glancing at the roof of the car, "I remember back when I was a kid, I'd run through the tight hallways in my parent's ship. They'd always scream at me to stop running. I think I did it more for their attention than anything else. Let's not derail the discussion too much though."

She situated herself so that she was facing me, "Anyways, I told Torix that he really needed to do was change himself. He thought that his mistake with training Alfred was what made the poor guy leave. I said it was because he was forcing himself on the kid too much. What kind of kid wants to be a undead necromancer when they're so young?"

"I know I didn't."

"Exactly what I'm saying. So Torix went on a rant about how he wanted his son to live up to his potential and all that. I argued that it was Alfred's life and that he could do what he wanted. Torix said and I quote, 'You want him to rot just as you are, never using his own powers and amounting to anything more than a wandering leech.'"

I grimaced as she continued, "Obviously, I was hurt by that...but looking back, he was right in a lot of ways. Maybe not about his son, but he was right about me. Being a remnant, my genes were made for power. I was born with battle in my blood. I never had to fight to be strong."

Kessiah stared at me, "That's why when I look at you and how hard you fight...I can't help but feel weak in comparison. I'm stronger in body, but weaker in mind, if that makes any sense."

I nodded, listening as she spoke. It can be hard to not talk with anyone about anything. Sometimes, an open ear is all someone needs. She glanced away and shook her hands,

"Ah fuck, I'm rambling now. You must be bored. Sorry about this."

I shrugged, "Naw, it's interesting. I didn't know much about you and Torix, so it's nice to hear about this stuff." I grinned, "Even if it is a bit of a tangent."

She hit my shoulder, "Yeah yeah, whatever." She leaned back before stretching her arms out in front of her. "Thanks for listening. I feel way better about all this stuff. My mind's clear or something like that."

I tapped her shoulder, "Don't worry about it. Anytime you need a car-versation, I'll be ready and waiting."

Kessiah rolled her eyes before opening the car door, "That was pretty lame."

"Eh, everyone's lame sometimes."

She stepped out of the car, the cool wind outside refreshing us both. I stood outside myself before she smiled wide,

"You ready for Torix's new plan for clearing out Springfield?"

I raised an eyebrow, "What kind of bullshit did he scrape together?"

She clapped her hands together, "Something exciting."

Chapter 45: Adaptation

We left towards Torix, Kessiah bubbling with energy again. The talk cleared her mind, and that let her go back towards her usual self. That meant she woke up Althea with a bit more zeal than she needed too.

It was ok though. Althea frowned, grumpy during the mornings like usual as we headed out towards Torix's lair. The breeze was a pleasant cool, and the overcast sky bathed the ground in gray. The empty streets stood like a silent monument to what the city used to be like.

Now the only sound you could hear was rustling trash being blown around or the whistling of wind. Normally I wouldn't notice this kind of stuff, but the gloomy day brought out just how empty everything was now.

That was when we reached Torix's house. Several cords were running from the ground, stretching out by an antenna on top of the house. It all looked new, like it was built since the last time I was here.

When we walked inside, I figured out it was. There was a generator built into the center of the house connected with the cords outside. They draped through across the homey hallways and roofs of rooms. Technology was tapered onto the wall, enabling an instant communication of information.

At the center of it all, Torix scribbled onto a summoned blackboard. He would carve his finger into the expanse of black with white mana, like drawing on darkness with snow. When we walked in, he turned towards us,

"Excellent. You're all here." He walked up beside us and summoned a slight shift in the coloration of the air. As this subtle wave past us, all sound around us cancelled. Within the distortion, Torix spread his hands,

"I've devised a method of safely clearing out new areas."

Althea crossed her arms, "Really?"

"Indeed I have. The primary differences between the old plan and the new plan may be separated into three primary points. Firstly-"

He pressed his fingers together, making the floating blackboard pop into the bubble. Torix tapped it,

"I have summoned several tiny insect creatures. I've made them explore Yawm's camp to gather information. Yawm is centered within the growing world tree at the center of Springfield, as I believed he would be."

I raised an eyebrow, "The fuck? A world tree?"

Kessiah leaned over, "Basically a giant tree that sucks up a planet's resources. It's how Yawm and his followers got to such a high level."

Torix pointed his finger, "Precisely. He won't leave that world tree before finishing his infestation. That gives us time. His followers are the problem."

Torix pointed at a miniature map of Springfield with dots all over it, "These dots represent named ones that Yawm has either brought over or summoned." He pointed at several red dots, each of them moving slowly. "These are the followers."

We all nodded as he continued, "This will track their movements. Depending on the day, I will assign areas they are far from, allowing you all to clear out areas with relative safety. I've arranged with the steel legion to allow target encirclements that will let them still make progress despite the inherent complexity of this operation."

Torix pointed at the hanging cords, "These allow me to communicate with them. I'll use this to communicate with each of you as well using our own talking devices." Torix pulled out three glass spheres with gray ring lining the centers of them. He handed one to each of us.

"Do you remember what this does?"

I nodded, "Yeah. It's one of those obelisks, right?"

"Correct. These will allow each of you to visualize the data and instructions I send to you in real time. Kessiah will explain their operation. I've also created a private network for only our use. The steel legion will be told nothing of any of this. Trusting them too deeply is too risky for us now."

Torix grabbed the map of Springfield on the blackboard and pulled it out. A three dimensional hologram thing came out of the board. Underneath the map was a layout of tunnels. Torix pointed at them,

"The underlying sewer system underneath Springfield is a relatively unexplored area for Yawm. We will use it for mobilizing the steel legion and you all from here on out. This will hide our movements during the operation."

I smiled, "Ah, then you'll guide us away from the followers while we take out different areas. It's like guerilla warfare essentially."

"Exactly. That, and I'll be giving one of my more powerful summons to Kessiah in case something...unexpected happens again. I looked at this whole issue far greater nonchalance than I should've. I will not underestimate Yawm or his followers again."

Kessiah sighed, "Neither will I."

Althea uncrossed her arms, "Sounds like a solid plan."

Torix smiled, "That isn't all in fact. I'll be splitting these areas so that you may take down the named ones during each mission. They will be much like the disciples of Dakhma's. The location of this base will also be hidden with a few more cloaking spells and some jamming technology now, for good measure."

Kessiah grinned, "Good to see the old Torix is back."

Torix shrugged, "I just needed to clear my head and rest for a day or two. If all of you are rested as well, I've already drawn up a few routes you can take when you're ready."

I shrugged, "I'm down if the others are."

Kessiah clamped her fists together, "I'm ready. I'll teach that stupid, smug, bigoted piece of shit who's boss."

Althea gave a curt nod. Torix snapped his fingers, making the distortion that captured the sound disappear. A rush of white noise filled my ears as Torix said,

"Then I'll see you when you all come back. Follow the routes of your obelisks. They'll show you the way from here."

Kessiah draped her arms over my and Althea's shoulders. She grinned between us, "Let's go give this shit another shot." She walked out the front door before turning back towards us, "Come on. I'll show you guys how to use the obelisks."

We walked outside the house, Althea's steps light and mine heavy. Once we reached outside, Kessiah lifted her obelisk, shooting a bit of mana into it. The sphere expanded around her. I'd never seen the energy from outside. It was a ball of pure white sitting in the middle of open space, like a ball of textureless paper.

The ball returned back to the sphere as Kessiah raised it up,

"So here's what you do. Put your mana into the thing. The obelisk will then use your unique signature of mana from there on out. You can customize them later if you're into that."

I lifted the sphere out in front of me. Charging my runes, an orange light poured into the ball before the wall of white wrapped around me. No noise was let inside of it, just like before. All around me was a lush, green forest. I was standing on a small island in the middle of a creek. Cicadas hummed in my ears, and the rustling of the stream calmed me.

A map appeared then integrated into Schema's interface. With a thought, the orb shrunk back into my palm. The two dimensional square took up a little bit of my peripheral vision, but it didn't get in the way. I pursed my lips,

"So you can change Schema's interface?"

Kessiah turned, "What? Of course you can. On the open market, you can find all kinds of adjustments for it."

I put my hands on my hips, "Well shit. Alright, I'm ready to go do stuff if you guys want to."

Althea still surrounded herself in the white of the obelisk. Kessiah shrugged, "She's probably adjusting a few settings. You may want to do that yourself before we leave."

"Eh, alright. I'll give it a shot."

I opened my obelisk, the creek surrounding me again. With the relaxing background, I fiddled with a few options. Changing the backgrounds, the opacity of my stats, even the color was simple as thinking. I didn't have to fiddle with a menu screen or something arduous like a list of a trillion backgrounds.

It was a dynamic display, something really nice to have. It reminded me of phones from before the apocalypse. People dug their faces into those pieces of metal for hours on end, ignoring everything around them. I could just imagine how addicted and dependent some people may be on the obelisk.

Still, it organized and let me glance at all my perks, skill trees, and everything else with a sublime ease. No more scrolling through screens and screens of data. The obelisk visualized it into graphs, showing bar graphs tracking my exp gain per hour or levels per day. It made managing all this shit way easier.

In the middle of my piddling, I received a message from Torix,

Torix Worm, of Darkhill(2:08am 4/12/00) – I uploaded a variety of libraries towards your obelisk. Carrying around an entire library of books is impossible any other way. Progressing without the right book at the right time can be difficult after all.

Just think of accessing the data store and it will show up. I recommend *Finding Your Inner Resolve* by Artemus Korgah. It details a few of the more advanced tricks behind augmentation.

Following his advice, I visualized a library. The imagery of a creek blended into bookshelves, creating rows and rows of them. The title of the book flashed before my mind, shooting me through the library without ever having to move. Rows upon rows of books flashed through my mind before I appeared in front of a shelf full of old, leather bound books.

Right in front of my eyes was the book. Reaching out a hand, the book floated out of the book before landing in my other hand. It had no weight, but when I flipped the pages, the sound was the same as in real life. That nice smell of old books was here too, along with the nice quiet drum of conversations in the background.

I wanted to read right then and there, but I put the book back before closing my obelisk. Wind brushed against my skin. Uh, or armor. I guess it was my skin and bones now though. Hmmm, weird to think about it.

Regardless, Althea and Kessiah waited on me ahead, Kessiah tapping her foot as I paced up to them. She slapped my shoulder, "Let's go then. It's about time we leave."

Within a few minutes, we left from the camp. Of course we ran, using our speed instead of wasting it. We entered through a manhole cover before sprinting through the sewers. The disgusting horror I expected wasn't there. Instead, there was beauty.

Flowers sprouted from the walls, fighting for the few patches of light. Phosphorescent plants lit the hallways in rainbows of light. The sheer variety of scents amazed me, each of them wonderful. It was like walking through a light festival and a candle shop all at once.

As we passed, the plants would creep towards us. They were harmless however. Even when you let them crawl up your hand, they would at most tickle. A soft grass grew at the center of the sewer, covering what had once been shit. It gave way to a vibrant, emerald green. It was stunning.

We ooh-ed and ahhh-ed while racing through the tunnels. It was an adventure for once instead of this awful, terrifying task we had to accomplish at all costs. It was great for Althea's moral in particular. She grinned at the flowers, her eyes dancing in the low lit light. It was one of the few times she seemed happy since I'd seen her.

It made me wonder if all she really wanted was to live out her life as peacefully as possible. I could understand. My reasons for fighting were similar. I wanted choice. I wanted to be able to decide what I would do. If I wanted to kill monsters, then I would kill monsters. Being forced into something was like being forced to swallow. You can't even help but fight it, even if it's the rational choice.

With a gentle smile on her face, Althea seemed like a shy, soft person being made into the monster she was. In a different world and a different time, it might have been heartbreaking. In this one though, it was a necessity.

When we finally left the sewer and came back to the surface, that point was made all the more clear. Deeper than we'd been before, the fauna around us had developed into a jungle. I couldn't see the sky, outside of a few cracks of light leaking onto the forest floor. Roots crawled across the ground, mushrooms budding in the darkest, dankest places.

Vines crawled up the trees now, blood red and covered in spines. A few insects were around us, some buzzing and others tapping. Birds flew above us, each of them odd and reformed. Beaks of wood with feathers like leaves, they camouflaged into the surrounding area to perfection. No matter how closely I looked, I couldn't distinguish them.

Ants crawled along the ground, red with a black stripe along their abdomen. With white talons at the front of their eyeless faces, they looked fierce and imposing. That is until

they walked beside a nearby red mushroom with yellow dots. A crab's claw snapped out, catching an ant by surprise.

Before the ants could swarm it, the mushroom cap was pushed into the ground. The ants crawled over the mushroom, searching for the crab. They found none while a few crunches could be heard just under the mushroom cap. In all honesty, the clever way of avoiding the ants wrath was captivating. It was like watching a nature documentary.

Kessiah snapped me from my concentration,

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"Uh, watching this crab thing."

"We're on a mission. Focus."

I nodded my head, "Yeah, of course. I won't let it happen again."

I walked out in front of the others, following the obelisk's instructions. Once ahead of them, I cut on oppression. The vast forest around me withered over the next few seconds. I almost regretted killing off so much life. That was until I saw several of the red mushrooms growing from the eye socket of a decapitated head. That snapped me out of my sudden empathetic mood.

Back on track, a panther with thorns jutting from its back leapt towards me from behind. A spear sliced through its chest before I surged my mana into my runes. A rush of power filled me as I grabbed the panther's skull. I crushed it into the ground beneath me, the bone popping under my armor.

It wasn't hard anymore. It was more like a balloon than squishy rock like before. The panther didn't even pretend like it was giving up a fight though. It turned out to be an good old unnamed one of Yawm's. The perks made the sudden spike in strength apparent. I was a killing machine now.

A little cluster of crabs crawled towards me, squealing in pain. When they reached me, I began stomping and crushing them underfoot. Crazily enough, they were level 200 apiece. So small, but their claws could clip through steel apparently.

The roots crawled towards me as well, but they withered before being able to wrap around me. The blood red vines, on the other hand, slammed with a vicious power. They even dented my armor. The thing was, that was all they had.

I would grab them and uproot them from the tree they gathered around. That killed them right there. I guess my build was the bane of suicide bombers. No way they'd do enough damage to threaten me. It was funny, because right after I thought that, one of them hit Althea.

She didn't make it out unscathed. The red vine smashed straight through her arm, leaving a dent in her chest. She screamed in pain before Kessiah crushed the vine in a split second. Kessiah flicked Althea's forehead,

"I didn't think I'd need to help you out of that. Keep your guard up, missy."

Althea nodded, grimacing. She couldn't even reply. Her enhanced regeneration got her back up to her feet soon though. Killing her was deceptively difficult after all. This passed for a few minutes, killing the unnamed and the swarms of wildlife.

Oppression aided our efforts to a tremendous effect. Without it, we'd need fire or something similar. After three hours, a giant blot of brown plastered itself in this city of horror. That's when we reached the yellow dot on our map.

We entered an empty parking deck. Cars littered the concrete spiral, no streaks of blood here. There wasn't a reason for people to return here, so only the spare branch leaked in from outside. When we reached the roof of the eight story building, there was a humanoid thing perched on the ledge.

With a knight's deformed armor on it and a sword draped on its back, it was a knight. Unlike most knights, the armor was made of bone as was the sword. Between the joints in the armor, a blue skin creased as it moved. As we walked near it, the thing's head turned to us.

A pair of downturned, blue eyes looked back. Beside him, three decapitated heads stared out into the distance. Turning to us, the knight said in a deep voice,

"Tell me. Has the reaper come?"

I frowned, "For real though, is everyone related to Yawm melodramatic?"

Althea shrugged, "Who cares." Her biotic rifle hissed as she loaded another bolt into it,

"It's just a dead man talking."

Chapter 46: Fighting Evil

Schema let me know what this thing was.

Corsack, Knight of Yawm(lvl 505) – One of the most recently named of Yawm. He was given ascension after dispatching a party of humans. Always envisioning himself as a noble knight, Corsack gained his wish after being named by Yawm.

His bone armor, skill with a sword, and high level make him extremely dangerous for you. Be wary, as he's slain many humans for his lord.

He flopped himself off his resting spot, gazing at us. In a deep voice, Corsack said,

“Who are you three? Perhaps the reaper coming for retribution.”

I frowned, “Wait, were you an actual person?”

“Perhaps. My memory of before is a haze. I know I am more than one body that has come together. I am also...sad. These three did not need to die, yet I took their heads for glory.”

I grimaced, “Who were they?”

“A party of five. Two men guarded two women. One of them escaped, but the other four fell. It was simple as taking candy from a baby. That was when Yawm gave me a mind of my own. Now I am more than a mere animal. I am sentient. All I have done since is regret.”

He pulled out his sword, “I betrayed what I once was. I am a monster now, something that feeds on those weaker than I. In my master’s name, I must feed on you now.”

I charged my runes and charged towards him. I turned oppression on once out of the range of Althea. No need for taking my time listening to long monologues. This was a monster afterall. I wasn’t going to let it distract me with a load of bullshit.

It unsheathed it’s blade of bone and slammed it into my forearm. Slicing a few inches deep, I slammed a fist into his stomach. Like slamming into stone, the bone was hard as fuck. Still, my fist had a bit of powder on it from the punch.

He pulled out his sword before kicking towards me. I leaned back, his foot scraping the edge of my helmet. I dashed forward with his back facing me. I grabbed him and lifted, his feet coming off the ground before I pulled back with all my might.

Corack gasped in surprise as I slung him through the air. His head flung backwards before I suplexed him into the ground. The parking deck cracked as his head lodged a foot deep into the concrete. The crushing of concrete echoed throughout the city like a bolt of lightning in the distance.

I pulled on his chest, flipping me up and through the air. A spear shot straight through one of the knight’s kneecaps as I landed back on my feet. With his legs sticking up in the air, the unbroken leg kicked towards me. I leaned sideways, keeping myself balanced and my elbows tucked. When he tried pulling his legs back, I grabbed his shin.

I shot my knee upward, straight towards his kneecap. The joint snapped and bent backwards, his legs ruined. The knight howled, his scream muffled by the concrete around his face. I stepped forward, his leg snug against my chest.

His knee bent further backward as I flung him over my shoulder. As the knight flew through the air, one of Althea's lances pierced his skull. I slammed him into the ground, his body twitching. Still alive, the arms raised to protect him, but they were too weak.

I pinned him with my knees before pummeling him to a pulp. His arms lost strength. His crippled legs writhing for escape. I never let him go. I slammed and crushed and crumbled. When his face was more a red than white, a spine of my armor absorbed his corpse.

When it finished, nothing was left of him but the blood he left behind. I stood up,

"Come on. Let's go before someone comes."

Kessiah pointed towards the edge of the building, "That's where Torix is telling us to go."

I shrugged before sprinting towards the edge of the building. As I leapt off, gravity took hold. The buildings and brick rushed past my face. The wind pressed against my skin as I accelerated. The ground grew in size along with a car. As I neared the ground, I attempted landing on my feet onto the top of a car. You know, one of those awesome superhero landings.

Didn't work out like that. The car crumbled underneath my feet before my legs gave way under my momentum. I slammed into the ground, echoing out an enormous wave of sound throughout the city. A crater formed underneath me as I collided into pavement. Even then, it didn't do that much damage.

As I pulled my face out of the ground, Kessiah landed beside me. She stuck her form, like an olympic level gymnast. She grinned at me,

"Tisk tisk tisk. Gotta work on your form."

My armor molded away from my face as I spit rocks and mud from my mouth,

"Thanks for the tip. I'll take it to heart."

Althea landed, her feet tapping against the ground in an elegant landing. She'd grown wings to fly, so she just glided down onto the ground. I stood up, slower than I'd like actually. Kessiah ran forward,

"Come on. Let's get out of here. Mission accomplished."

We sprinted back towards a manhole cover before retreating back into the depths of the sewer. Despite a bit of blood being on my armor, the smooth scents returned. They kept us calm and focused as we sprinted towards our next destination.

During the run, I opened my status screen. Now was the moment of truth. What was I supposed to put my points into? Of course I couldn't get the perk just yet. I had three choices really since charisma was just a point sink by then. Luck would give me more health, and I loved me some health. I didn't like the idea of relying on chance, however.

The other two perks would work out pretty good too. Dexterity gave me all kinds of cool abilities, like the suplex I landed on that knight guy. Perception let me absorb information faster. Between the two of them, it was tough call. That is, until I remembered the precognition effect that perception gave me.

The ability was like a safety net for me, allowing me to save myself from situations that meant death without the ability. The runes, which were a solid chunk of my power stemmed from, would become clearer with the ability as well. Another reason for it was trying to understand some of Baldag-Ruhl's runes from BloodHollow.

Torix may have destroyed the cave, but he hadn't left without imprints of all the runes he found. His undead insects kept memory logs of the runes which he could access at any time. If I figured those out, some intensely awesome shit could come my way.

That being said, dexterity would let me do ninja flips. It was at that point that I took a step back, and I realized why I was weighing the two options in my mind. The stats fed into each other, and it just so happens that dexterity fed right into perception.

If genesis of potential unlocked four more perks then dexterity would feed right into perception. That meant I didn't need to rush the whole process of getting the level 100 perks. Instead, I could use the feeding strategy I implemented for endurance, willpower, and intelligence. I didn't before due to the circumstances at hand. Kessiah needed my help. Now I could afford to get the most bang for my buck.

With that in mind, I put all my points into constitution. Sixty clicks later, my armor tightened around me as the same constricting feeling of before came. A few seconds passed before my armor finally snapped again. The same rush of before came over me as my fists became heavy as sledgehammers.

Of course the others hadn't slowed down for me, so I sprinted to catch up while checking out my status screen.

Level 356
Attribute Totals
Strength – Increases carrying weight, maximum speed, and physical power120.8
Constitution – Increases hardness, density, and weight of your body166.1
Endurance – Increases regeneration of stamina, health, and their totals567
Dexterity – Increases ease of movement, flexibility, and reflexes60.2
Willpower – Increases internal motivation, mana regen, and Mental Res270
Intelligence – Increases memory, critical thinking, and total mana pool101.4
Charisma – Increases likeability, persuasion, and decreases prices at shops29.3
Luck – Increases money found, odds in your favor, and chance of rare

events54.5Perception – Increases comprehension, the five senses, and awareness

36

Daniel HillsideTotalsRegenBuffs/DebuffsHealth24,930/24,9304960/minOppression Damage- 10,000+30%hp/minStamina12,909/12,909178.5/secElemental Res – 97.5%Harbinger of Cataclysm52,364,198/256,000,0000/per minPlasma Res – 97.5%Phys Dam Reduction – 97.5%Rad Res – 97.5%Phys Dam Bonus – 2115%Mental Res – 97.5%

It was steady progress, though the dexterity looked like it would be slow as hell. I didn't get near as high a bonus for constitution and strength as I did for endurance and willpower. Hell, in order to reach 100 points in dexterity, I'd need about 180 more levels. It would be slow going.

After bouncing a few calculations around in my head, taking the long way would give me about 12 levels worth of bonus stat points. So far, taking my time had given me quite a few dividends when it came to bonus stats already.

I gained around 50 levels worth of bonus stats from upgrading obliterator early. Putting all my points into endurance had given me another 50 or so bonus levels of raw stats. That kind of thing adds up over time. Hell, it already had. There was bound to come a point where gaining levels would become tremendously difficult. Making the most of these easy gains would make all the difference in the long run.

With that in mind, I caught up with Kessiah and Althea who dashed forward at blistering speed. Althea had gained quite a needed boost with the strength perk. Her shots recently gained a fatal level of accuracy as well, probably from a leveling perk. It was good to see our level up strategy working out.

When we reached the next area, Kessiah led us up and out of the sewer. With a pristine care, she set the manhole cover beside the entrance. We skulked out, stealthy and cautious. Even with all the noise earlier, we still kept a low profile when first entering an area.

Walking on our toes, we went back into formation. This area was even deeper than the last one. The trees warped quite a bit, tangling together as you went up their trunks. They made it difficult to even see the sky, let alone get there without tearing through a foot of bark.

The ecosystem developed further. We met up against many unnamed this time, several of them eating mushrooms growing out of fresh corpses. A few of them even swung through the branches. This made them difficult for me since I couldn't reach them. They'd lob spears at me, and I didn't have many ways of retaliating.

Althea did though. She'd fire at them, and I'd tear any ground dweller apart. She and I both outleveled and overpowered these types easily. Especially if you consider our wide array of bonuses, which made us stronger than your standard 300+.character.

Routine set in once more, though we kept our pacing rushed. We neared a set of apartments, each of them with a basement beneath the stores. Lots of underground pubs set up shop here since a concert hall was nearby. That supplied easy traffic at regular intervals. Perfect for business.

Now it was an overgrown wasteland. I crushed the skull of a nearby zombie, elegant flowers blooming from its wounds. As it died, Torix sent us a message,

Torix Worm, of Darkhill(2:45PM 4/12/00) – Hide now.

As I finished reading the message, Kessiah and Althea dashed towards two shops nearby. I charged forward, straight into one of the shops in front of me as well. Shutting off oppression mid run, I reached a stairway behind a bar. I walked down the steps, reaching a dank basement full of bottles of wine and barrels of beer.

As I reached the bottom of the steps, the entire place reeked of shit and piss. It was like a thousand rats had taken a thousand dumps here. Disgusting. I hid behind a set of barrels. Several rats scurried away from me, as I squatted down.

There I sat for a moment before a crashing sound echoed from upstairs. The sound of snapping wood and breaking chairs continued for a few minutes. When the sound stopped, a disconcerting sound came into my ears. Someone was breathing in here with me.

I turned my head, finding a man hiding behind a wine rack. In a state of profound filth, he was smothered in his own grime. His hair ragged, his clothes torn, and his eyes broken, he clamped his hands against his mouth.

His eyes met mine. He shook like an old washing machine. Sweat poured from his forehead as he stared at me. His skin glisten yellow, all semblance of dignity long ago gone. I marveled at his survival though. Living here was far worse than living in BloodHollow. He was no doubt underleveled as fuck, since he was living off rats.

That's when a heavy foot landed onto the steps leading down here. A green glow leaked down the stairs, like the coming of both our deaths. I held my breath, as did the man beside me. His panic made him lose his breath far faster than he should have.

His shaking increased in intensity. It was like staring at a bomb about to go off and kill you. If this follower found me, I'd die. Another loud step echoed down the stairs. My mind raced. I could use oppression and kill him, but the follower would feel it. That would be my death right there.

Another step echoed down the stairs as if time had slowed down. I could walk over and hit him, but that would make noise no matter how quiet I tried being. Another step was sounded into the room. It was a brutal sound. Something like a man's neck breaking when he was hanged. It was like a hammer beating against my head, slamming against my mind.

Of course I kept my composure, but the man in front of me was losing it. As the glowing green light filled into the room, the man's chest convulsed. He wouldn't be able to hold his breath much longer.

Racing for an answer, I thought back to my limited magic. Augmentation wouldn't do shit at the moment. If I kept him quiet with dominion magic, maybe telekinesis, he wouldn't make any noise. I needed to learn that shit before he shouted. A hopeless situation turned into a race against time.

I swallowed before putting my hand behind me. There I summoned a bit of dominion magic, just the slightest blip of it. Better if the man didn't see the energy. He might have snapped at the sight of it. Glancing behind me, the silent energy surrounded itself in red stripes just like before. After a few seconds, The dark energy was a bright red, as if it was completely cut off from me.

At the center of my focus, the dumbass voice in my head spoke,

"I can save you, if you let me."

I clenched my teeth, "I don't need you too."

"Really? You would rather die then just let me control you?"

"Yes."

"You're insane."

"No, hell no I'm not. I'm not losing myself. I already lost everything else."

I closed my eyes and thought back to what I understood about dominion magic. To evoke it, I needed the desire to control those around me instead of myself. I channeled those thoughts. I should change the world instead of myself, like a scientist. I needed that kind of reasoning. That's when an idea popped into my head.

Instead of thinking about my body like it was mine, I tried disconnecting myself from it. If you think about it, we're all just flesh sacks holding souls. At least that's what I believed. Using that belief, I thought of my body like it was just a vessel. It was a car, and I was its driver. It was a golem, and I was the soul commanding it.

The augmentation runes charged, though they never sent sparks like before. It was a small amount of extra mana, not an enormous flow like usual. That mana poured down my arms and into my palms, reaching my previous inscriptions.

The orange mana bled into the black energy sealed in the red sphere. The energies rejected each other, like oil trying to mix with water. The dual energies vibrated with violence, but the red sphere kept the sound from leaking out. As they raged within their sphere, the follower reached down the stairs.

He was a Porytian, one of Yawm's species. It wasn't Yawm though. His legs were bent like a goats, even as he stood straight up. His arms were long and his hands massive, though they weren't hulking like the overseer's limbs. His eyes radiated a solid, emerald green, streaks of the glow crawling down his chest and arms.

The voice raged, "You've no time, Daniel. Relinquish yourself to me, and I will offer you salvation." The voice's words didn't convince me for one second. He sounded a little bit too much like Elijah for my taste.

The porytian stepped into the room. Wherever the shining streaks passed, something like muscle bulged from under the wooden skin. As it shifted its movements and steps, the creature moved with a pristine grace. It was nothing like either of the other followers. The way he looked and moved seemed like he chose to do it. The others were glorified puppets by comparison.

Two horns curved into the sides of his mouthless face, blending into the wooden skin and ending in spikes. The thin fingers looked sharpened and tense, like they were ready to tear out a throat at any second. The thing tapped its forehead before slapping through the glass of a wine bottle. Its fingers sheared through the glass with ease.

It grunted, inhuman and angry. After another pause, the thing leaned against a wall like it was frustrated. At this point, I prayed it wouldn't kill me.

Ajax Volan, the Void Eater(lvl 4289) – A follower of Yawm, he is Yawm's strongest and most loyal ally. During the war with the Bracken, Ajax acted a vanguard with Yawm. The both of them have torn apart entire armies on their own. Despite refusing Yawm's gift of flesh, they remain on excellent terms due to their history before Yawm's resurgence as a galactic threat.

Not much else is known about Ajax. With its enormous pool of experience, gigantic level, and untold power, Ajax Volan is devastating. Hide or run, but do not fight him. To fight him is to die.

The man and I shook with a quiet frenzy. The man twitched now, his face turning pale. He would reveal me in seconds, if Ajax hadn't sensed my mana already.

At the peak of my panic, Ajax spoke into the air.

“What are we even doing anymore?”

Chapter 47: Gaining Tools

The voice in my head rang, “He will obliterate you, Daniel. I will save you. Please, let me.”

“Find someone who needs saving.”

My heart racing in my chest, my thoughts raced even faster. At that moment, a realization snapped in my head like a whip across someone’s cheek. My armor was a part of my soul. That meant it was a part of my will and ambition. In other words, this voice in my head, it wasn’t some darkness trying to creep in. It was the darkness in me trying to creep out. It was mine.

So instead of fighting the voice, I embraced it. The frenzy of before came over me, like a rush of hatred. The voice laughed in my mind like a mantra of madness. It threatened to consume my mind like a flood of fury. I refused to yield to it.

“Why do you refuse to surrender?”

“Because nothing will control me. Not you. Not Yawm. Not Schema. Nothing.”

I crushed the wrath under my will and wielded it. The frenzy bent under the heel of my mind, like Atlas crushing under the sky. I dragooned the fury like a hammer driving a nail into wood. I commanded the insanity to obey. It would be my rage. It would be my savagery.

The voice roared, “You will not suppress me. I am the darkness that cloaks the hunter. I am the wolf that eats the stag. I am the lion that tears the zebra. I am the bear that rips the throat of the lion. I am the might of the hunger that eats the world. Defy me, and I’ll smash your mind to pieces. I’ll cave your head in.”

“And I’m Daniel motherfucking Hillside. Go fuck yourself.”

The red mana surrounding the discordant energies melted into them, molding them, crushing them. The red mana overwhelmed the other colors of mana, turning them crimson. Still contained within the shield, the mana stayed silent during the entire process. After a moment, the mana stabilized.

Unique skill gained! (Requirements: High affinity in both augmentation and dominion magic) Fuses the skills Augmentation, Augmentation Manipulation, Dominion, Dominion Manipulation, and Primal Frenzy into the unique skill Ascendant. Gives half of missing tree points from skill fusion.

Ascendant (lvl 1) – You rise by crushing aspirants under your heels. Augmentation and dominion magic fuse into ascended energy. Ascended energy contains the properties of both augmentation and dominion styles of magic as well as the capacity for corruption.

The mana sunk into the palms of my armor, melting into the dominion inscriptions I placed there. With the mana came the same rush as augmentation magic, along with the frenzy of the voice. Unlike the augmentation runes that hummed when charged, these runes sounded like silence. It was like they drowned out any white noise around me.

With the mana charging my palm, I reached out my hand, willing the man to be quiet.

New skill unlocked! Telekinesis (lvl 1) – You mold your world with the might of your mind. +1% towards strength and ease of telekinesis.

The burning sensation of using mana flowed up my limbs as I poured all my strength into pinning the man down. I couldn't have him shouting and exposing me, even if the fucker wanted to. As the mana channeled, the man froze in place, unable to move an inch.

Besides for his eyes. His eyes glanced around the room before glancing at me. As frantic as a rabid dog, they darted in his skull like a hornet caught in a jar. More and more of my mana poured into keeping him quiet as Ajax lifted his head off the wall. He headed back up the stairs, his steps heavy and downtrodden.

After hearing his steps creak the wood above me, he left through the front door, slamming it. I waited a few more seconds before releasing the man in front of me. Like a ragdoll, the guy flopped downwards. He didn't make any attempts to stay up. He was a puppet with his strings cut.

I was still reeling over the whole endeavor, so I walked up to him. I grabbed his shoulder and whispered,

"You alright man? Sorry about that. I couldn't let old badass reaper guy kill us back there." I let his shoulder go and reached out a hand, "The name's Daniel. Good to meet you."

He didn't reply. His eyes were empty. His skin blue. For some reason, it was like I was rejecting the obvious. Looking back on it, of course he was dead. We held our breath for over six minutes. Way back when I unlocked the endurance perk, it halved the requirements I needed for living. That included air, so I could hold my breath with the best of them.

This was just a normal guy for the most part, probably level fifteen or so. I hadn't kept him quiet. I choked him to death. That realization stunned me, so I stood there until someone else walked down the steps.

I figured out who when Kessiah grabbed my shoulder,

"Hey, you alright?"

I was fine, physically speaking. I should have been mentally too, but up till now, I hadn't murdered anyone. Sure, I killed tons of zombies, maybe even a few normal stragglers with oppression even. That wasn't the same as purposely willing them someone to die.

Even with Michael and Kelsey dying, a part of me just rationalized the entire thing. I told myself that I couldn't have known. I told myself they were dead anyway. Saying that stuff helped. This guy though, I killed him just to eliminate the risk of dying.

What made it so awful though was the look in his eyes. He was staring at me from where I stood, unblinking and cold like ice. I wanted him to look away, but that couldn't happen. If I looked away first, it made the whole thing real.

Before I could get a grip, Kessiah grabbed my hand and pulled me,

"Get your ass moving. We have to get out of here before that thing comes back."

Midway up the stairs, I came to my senses. I shook the shock out,

"Oh fuck. Uh, sorry. I can go on. Just stunned for a second."

"Well get un-stunned. We gotta get out of here."

We raced up and out of the restaurant before heading back down into a sewer pipe. After sprinting for a few minutes, Kessiah opened her obelisk as she said,

"Excuse me, you two. I've got a skeleton to verbally abuse."

Without her there, Althea and I stood there alone. I glanced at a palm, wondering what the fuck I'd done. Althea walked up,

"You look bad. What happened?"

I frowned, "Uh...I killed somebody, I guess."

"You kill people all the time. What's the big deal now?"

"I don't know. It doesn't make much sense to me either."

After another minute of standing there, Althea shrugged, "Well, you'll learn to live with it. I did. Kessiah did. Everyone does. Give it time, and the wound will heal."

I nodded, "Thanks. Yeah, I think you're right. I just need to give it some time."

A minute or two of silence went by before Kessiah's obelisk closed again. She put her hands on her hips,

"I just gave Torix a piece of my mind. He apologized and said that one of Yawm's followers broke off from the world tree and sprinted right over here. He honestly thought we were dead, but apparently not. Neither of us know what's going on."

I sighed, "Well, Ajax made a lot of noise in the bar I was in. After that, he walked downstairs and leaned on a wall. It looked more like he was frustrated than angry. I'm guessing our tearing up the district wasn't what made him come over. Maybe it was more like we were unlucky?"

Kessiah glanced down at her obelisk. She waved us over, so we walked beside her before opening it up. We were surrounded by sheets of metal and windows that viewed into space, Kessiah's background looking gorgeous.

Over an intercom, Torix spoke to us,

"I'm leaning towards what you claimed, Daniel. Ajax wasn't searching for anyone in particular. I think he was trying to find somewhere quiet to think."

Althea murmured, "Who's Ajax?"

Torix said, "He is Yawm's first of his four followers. I know little of his history outside of his exploits with Yawm. He assisted with destroying the Bracken who attempted invading his homeworld. They both shared a similar goal after that."

Kessiah nodded, "Yeah, I've heard stories about Ajax too. He wasn't far behind Yawm when it came to crazy bullshit. There were rumors he blew up a moon when he got pissed one time. No one really knows though."

I cupped my chin, "Do you guys think there could be some interpersonal strife in Yawm's camp now?"

Torix replied, "Hmmm. If that were the case, then this presents itself as an excellent opportunity. We'll need to know more before we act, however."

Althea chimed, "What if this happens again?"

With annoyance leaking into his voice, Torix said, "What do you mean by this?"

“Us almost dying. Again.”

“There’s something you must understand Althea. This is a risky mission, regardless of how many safety nets I put up for you all. Perhaps if you spent less time relying on me for all your needs and more time learning to fend for yourself, then you wouldn’t have to worry about dying, would you?”

She didn’t reply before Torix continued, “Good. We understand one another. Now, I will inform the three of you with greater speed next time. I’d recommend moving towards this zone now. Goodbye.”

My own mini-map changed. It showed a route towards my old high school. Kessiah put a hand on Althea’s shoulder, “Don’t worry about him. He’s just being an ass since he’s stressed. It happens to everyone.”

Althea frowned, but didn’t reply. Like most shy people, she just balled up when she was hurt. In my eyes, she should just grow thicker skin. I didn’t expect people to carefully word things just for me. I did expect to handle my own reaction to what they say though. I pushed that expectation onto Althea. Besides, if it really bothered her, she could talk to me or Kessiah about it later.

It wasn’t time for being hurt by words. We needed to get a move on, so we shot towards the next area with Kessiah leading the charge. She grinned and laughed,

“What a time to be alive. I haven’t been this close to death so many times since Torix and I waged a war on Alpha D-9. Eldritch and war machines and chaos. It was so much fun.”

Althea rolled her eyes before we reached the next location. After crawling out of the sewer, we reached one of Springfield’s several schools. It had been my school back before Schema. With shattered windows, the occasional streak of blood, and flipped cars, it was like watching the setting of a horror movie unfold.

Despite how central the school was in the city; the place was calm. It was like the forests shot up where people were, using their corpses for growth. No one was in the school though. No bodies, no scenes of horror. If anything, everything looked clean by comparison. We killed a few spawns here or there, but nowhere near the frequency that we’d seen before. When we reached the school’s interior, an explanation surfaced.

It turns out that the school was a dungeon. Considering the high school’s size, it was a big one too. After a second of thought, I face palmed myself. Of course the eldrich were still here. Just because Yawm invaded doesn’t mean the dungeons weren’t expanding. The deeper we reached into this dungeon, the bloodier things became.

We reached into a hallway lined with lockers. In our standard formation, we explored the area. Our caution levels were sky high though after meeting Ajax. Out of nowhere, a door shot off the hinges of a room in front of me.

Out of the doorway, a serrated scythe chopped into the ground. A bipedal thing lumbered out. With gray, decaying skin and no cheeks, the scythe wielder was unnerving. What took the cake was how the top part of his face flattened out in a semicircle, like one of those chinese hand fans.

He lifted one of his hands towards us, the three fingers black and grimy. At the center of his palm was a closed eyelid. The eye opened, searching the room for intruders. It stepped forward, dragging its scythe that shot sparks throughout the air. I cracked my neck as I readied myself for what was to follow.

SoulKeeper(lvl 442) – As dungeons develop, certain subspecies of creatures will harness the planet's populace for power. This is one such entity. This particular species will absorb the radiant energy of human souls for strengthening itself. It casts illusions that will draw in weaker minds, and then slay them with its enchanted scythe.

This is a stronger member of the species, having had plenty of time to absorb souls due to the inherent chaos nearby. Unlike most SoulKeepers, this particular member is holding far fewer souls than would normally be required for such a high level.

This is indicative of it following a SoulSwallower, which will be far more powerful than a mere keeper of souls. The danger levels reflecting the overall prowess of these enemies are inflated due to the disastrous consequences should an adventurer fall to one of them.

In your case, however, this specimen will struggle just to harm you. Crush it.

I charged towards the thing, ready to meet him head on. The monster waved its scythe, a green wave of energy following the strike. I slid on the ground, ducking below it. Another slice of the scythe, and another wave shot towards the ground I was on.

I pressed a heel into the tile ground, the momentum of my slide slinging me upright. I leapt up, the energy slice clapping against the ground where I was. The tile ripped off the ground, revealing the concrete underneath as I flew up and over the destruction.

With my enhanced weight carrying me, I shot up through the roof. It was one of those cheap, acoustical roofs. The flimsy material relented as I passed through it, and several spear bolts shot under me. The monster howled beneath me, its unearthly wails like a living nightmare.

I passed by several strings that kept the cheap ass ceiling tiles up before passing through it again. I landed on top of the SoulKeeper, pushing it to the ground. Two

speakers were lodged in each of its palms. The scythe lay beside him, no longer in his hands.

I reared a fist upwards before slamming it down. My fist hit a barrier of made of mana. I grinned with my armor following suit. It was time to pummel this piece of shit. Swing after swing, I rained down a series of blows. Cracks formed in thin air, right above the creature's face. The mana shield couldn't withstand the onslaught for long.

A cold, lightning sensation shot through my back, but I pushed through the sudden discomfort. The cracks grew before my armor chomped forward. The jagged teeth screeched against the invisible shield before it shattered. A few bites later, and the monster died surrounded in darkness since Althea shot its eyes.

I stood up before Kessiah snapped into existence beside me. She tapped my shoulder and pulled the cold sensation from my back. I turned around, and a scythe was in her hand. I put my hands on my hips,

"How in the fuck did that stab me?"

Kessiah glanced at the scythe and kept her hand away from it as if touching something fowl, "The SoulKeeper used telekinesis and stabbed you with it. I'm surprised you didn't keel over. The scythe attacks your mind instead of that burly body of yours. It means you don't have any resistance to it."

I shrugged, "My armor effects that kind of resistance too."

Kessiah frowned, "Why would armor affect that kind of resistance?"

Althea walked up, "Maybe because it enlarges his soul or something like that?"

I glanced at the corpse of the SoulKeeper. A spike of armor expanded from my palm and pierced it before draining the corpse to nothing. I turned back to them,

"Eh, I think that's probably it. That and maybe it means I have an expanded mind, so there's more to damage or something like that. I used to think the armor was something else, something trying to control me. Now I just think it's a different side of myself that I suppress. I could totally be full of shit though. Who knows."

Althea nodded, "I get that. I feel like that sometimes too. Uh, with my eldritch blood instead though."

Kessiah grabbed both our shoulders, "Enough contemplating stupid stuff." She pointed her finger forward, "Onward into adventure!"

Althea and I rolled our eyes before continuing forward. After passing through another hallway, we met two SoulKeepers standing guard at the lunch room's doorway. I

dashed towards them as two bolts from Althea stabbed through their spear holding hands. They both dropped their spears as I reached them.

The one standing on the left side of the door reached out its right hand, the eye opening as it faced me. I stomped my heel, stopping myself just short of the palm. I jerked my left hand, grabbing its upper arm and forcing it up. With my right hand, I turned his arm so that his elbow faced the ground. With a quick jerk, the monster's joint snapped as I pulled the broken limb towards the other monster.

The SoulKeeper on the right side of the door had reached out its left palm towards me during my attack. With another quick pull, I tore off the broken arm of the injured SoulKeeper. Using the jagged side of the broken bone, I stabbed the arm into the open eye of the other SoulKeeper.

Blood burst from the monster's hand, gushing like water out of a broken pipe. I grabbed its arm with my left arm and snapped its joint just like I did the first one's arm. Pulling back towards the left most SoulKeeper, I jabbed the arm through the face of the creature. I grabbed that monster's neck then tore off its skull with my left hand.

Grabbing the head like a club, I smashed the other creature's face to mush with the skull, bits of bone splintering as both skulls caved. With unnecessary violence, I kept crushing until nothing was left.

The body wilted then lost all animation as the creature died. I stepped one foot backwards, pulling my weight with me. I spun around, letting my arm drag behind me. The force of the blow smashed the last SoulKeeper through the wall they guarded.

A detonation of sound, louder than a gunshot, echoed through the empty hallway. After waiting for the dust to clear, I absorbed the bodies with my armor. The strange part was, the scythes remained. I picked them up.

SoulSlayer(lvl Requirement: 400) – This is a weapon that attacks the will and mind instead of a physical body. As a side effect, willpower and mana act as the health of the enemy. Arcane blood users are unaffected by this, instead taking damage to their health like normal.

This weapon can also carry the souls of slain creatures. This weapon steals the mana of the user, turning it into ambient mana instead. Skill level with normal scythes will carry over to this weapon's effectiveness.

Current containment: 440,425 Ambient mana stored.

I grabbed a hold of the blade and drained the mana stored in the glowing blade. The sheen of the weapon died down until it was dulling after a few seconds. I tossed it onto the ground and picked up the other one, draining it like the first. I turned back, Kessiah holding the spear of the first one we saw.

I raised a hand, and she tossed it towards me. A few seconds later, and the mana was mine. These enemies made the whole escapade much more useful than before. Of course, this once was human mana, but the scythe disintegrated it into ambient mana. That meant the souls had already been torn apart. In a way, I thought I was giving the old souls new life.

Existential rants aside, I crouched low as I walked through the hole in the wall I made. Stepping out of the other side, there was something sinister on the other side.

Imagine a SoulKeeper but gorged on souls until it was twenty feet tall. Instead of thin, wiry limbs, this monster was well muscled. With scythes jutting from its elbows and blades for fingers, the monster turned towards me with an eerie smile.

Its ragged mane of hair reached halfway down its chest, black like a raven. The gray skin of the other SoulKeepers was the same on this creature, though darker in shade. At the center of its chest was an eye with a contracted pupil, as if it was staring at the sun. The eye teared up, causing a sort of irritation in my own eyes.

The monster spread open its hands, revealing eyes at the center of its palms. A set of black raven wings spread wide, like some sort of fallen angel. The shackles on its hands and legs clattered against the ground as it moved. With movements faster than its large frame should allow, it whirled the chains around its hands.

Gorged SoulSwallower, Chained (lvl 600) – A powerful SoulSwallower, this monster has feasted on thousands of souls from its SoulKeeper minions. This has allowed it to gorge on the souls, making it stronger.

The blades on its fingers and elbows can consume mana. The chains around its wrists and ankles suppress its power. Once the SoulSwallower has consumed a certain number of souls, these chains will shatter, revealing its full power.

This foe will be incredibly difficult to kill, regardless if it is unchained or not. Be wary.

With a flick of its wrist, one of the chains around its wrists snapped into one of the tables of the large lunchroom. The table cracked, splintering in half as a crater formed on the ground. The grin on its face lengthened until it was too wide for its eyeless face.

Its words smoldered like hot coals,

“You have...a mighty soul...I will enjoy its flavor as I swallow it, as I swallow you.”

The runes on my arms and legs charged, my new red mana replacing the orange. A surge of power and fury filled my limbs as I grinned back at the beast,

“I warn you, I’m hard to chew. You might even choke.”

Chapter 48: Unleashed

Before charging him, I opened my menu screen and poured all my points into constitution. My armor tightened around me before I balled myself up. I grit my teeth and tensed my entire body, turning myself into a ball of iron.

A few snaps of my armor occurred before I regenerated my armor back to normal. I stood tall before cracking my neck. The SoulSwallower grinned,

“So you can transform then?”

I rolled my eyes before shouting,

“Kessiah, Althea, there’s a strong dude in here. I’m going to need your support. Hurry up.”

The SoulSwallower whipped a chain at me with a flick of his hand. I dashed forward, dodging the strike that tore through the floor. Before reaching him, he reached out his left palm-eye towards me. I ducked under his hand while dragging my left arm behind me.

Torqueing off the ground, I smashed a heavy strike into the palm of his hand. Blood gushed over us, and the SoulSwallower grunted and grimaced in pain. His arm didn’t relent at the power of my strike, however.

His fingers clamped down onto my arm and sucked out my blood like a vampire’s teeth. With a quick jerk, I pulled my arm out of his scythes. I grimaced at him as his eye healed and the blades grew brighter.

The SoulSwallower smiled,

“You taste delicious.”

I shook my head, shaking blood off my armor. I seethed, “You will too.”

With another flick of his wrist, the chain on his right hand shot towards me. After seeing it so many times, I gained the timing of the attack. I raised my hand, letting it wrap around my right arm before pulling myself towards him. I flew up before drop kicking his teeth.

My boots cracked his teeth, the enamel fracturing like a brick smacking against your mouth. The monster took a step backwards before I swung around him with the chain still around my arm. I ran on the floor, building my momentum as he turned towards me.

He shot out his left palm while stepping towards me once more. As my momentum hit its apex, I smashed my heels into the tile floor, pulling the chain on the monster's right arm downwards. Caught off balance, the creature fell forward.

His face shot into the ground, tile and concrete caving inwards. I dashed towards him while unwrapping the chains. My runes charged with the ascendant energies, letting frenzy fuel me. I reached him, stomping my heel into the back of his head to stop myself from moving.

The crags of stone around the monster's face grew higher as I heel stomped his face deeper into the ground. A mist of stone dust formed around us before I darted away, my instincts telling me to run.

The wings along his back pierced into the ground where I was, the feather's slicing through the rock. As the SoulSwallower pulled itself from the ground, the wings flapped towards me. Feather's darted towards me.

Taking around a tenth of my health pool, I pulled my arms apart. The ascendant mana poured from my palms, redirecting the feathers near me. They landed beside me, digging deep into the stone floor. The rest of my magic pulled hundreds of feathers from the SoulSwallower's wings.

Blood dripped from the SoulSwallower's face and wings, drenching the floor in red. Standing up again, the smile on its face was gone. Still, even without him ever getting a strike off on me, I already burned through a third of my health pool during my enhanced assault. Keeping pace with something so much higher leveled was difficult after all.

Kessiah and Althea ran in through the hole I made as I shut off Oppression. It was too dangerous to use with them nearby. Althea shot a bolt towards the SoulSwallower. In a sudden explosion of movement, the SoulSwallower shot a chain towards the bolt.

Althea's harpoon dug straight through the metal before stabbing through the monster's wrist. From the arm, a shackle fell onto the ground. I shouted,

"Don't attack the ch-"

Another bolt shot from her rifle as the SoulSwallower whipped his unchained arm towards her. Another shackle fell from it before the monster grinned. It spoke its words like a cult's mantra,

"So many years I have waited." He stepped forward before pulling on a shackle on his leg. From the eye at the center of his chest, an aura of power ebbed. His arms expanded, turning into hulking limbs. The metal groaned and creaked before a ear piercing pop echoed through the room.

“To be unleashed from my shackles. What a joy today has been.” It grabbed the last shackle before Althea shot a harpoon of bone into the center of his chest. Digging deep, the bolt caused the monster to stagger backwards.

With a burst of energy, I darted forwards while grabbing a chain. Before he could rip off the last shackle, I stomped onto one of his hands. Two of the fingers on his right hand bent backwards as I whipped a massive chain towards his neck.

He clamped his teeth against the chain, shattering the metal but his teeth along with it. With his left hand, he struck a fist out towards me. The blow of the creature bent the metal of my armor and forced me backwards. The scythes on his fingers cut into my armor. My feet scraped the ground as I dragged backwards.

Still I stood. I grit my teeth and darted forwards after I stopped moving backwards. With both the SoulSwallower’s hands on his shackles, his side was exposed. I bent low, letting all my weight build in my right hand.

With a wide, sweeping uppercut, I pulled upwards with all my might. My runes flared as my blow struck against the monster’s ribs. The bones caved in while craters formed under my feet. Despite the difference in size, the SoulSwallower stumbled sideways before Althea shot another bolt towards his chest.

The harpoon struck dead center into the indentation of my last blow. The bone spear dug through the creature before drilling out the back of the monster. Blood sprayed from his back as he howled. I shot forward again, letting my arm drag behind me.

As I reached him, I pulled downwards and pulled my arm behind me. A solid overhand right swung up and over my head before pummeling into the monster. My blow landed into the gaping hole on the monster’s back, digging deep into the creature’s insides.

With a burst of effort, I forced my armor to splinter outwards in all directions. Needles exploded into the SoulSwallower’s chest before I jerked my arm outwards. A fountain of blood and mound of organs followed my arm. The mush splat against the ground before the monster whipped its left arm at me.

I ducked under the wild strike, following with another sweeping left hook into the front of the creature. A bolt sliced into the skull of the creature before my hook sunk into the tiny hole left from Althea’s previous bolt.

My hand only sunk a few inches deep, but I splintered my armor again before jerking my fist back. Blood exploded from the monster before his left arm whipped back towards me. I ducked again, but his blow scraped the top of my shoulders and helm. Against his empowered flesh, my armor shot out sparks.

The force of the blow left me off balance before he hammer fisted towards me. The blow clapped against my back with the force of a cornered animal. I withstood the blow, my

knees creaking under the stress of the blow. Another hammer fist later, and I crumbled onto the ground.

With a quick shifting of the SoulSwallower's foot, he pressed me down against the ground. The force of the strike squished blood out of my mouth. A spear shot straight through the monster's shin, the bone fraying like splintered wood. The monster fell towards his injured leg, the limb no longer able to support his weight.

That same weight was what kept me down. Without it, I lifted myself upwards, pushing my hands into the ground. I found myself at half health. The sheer tenacity of my body amazed me. Despite all the punishment, I would be fine given just a few minutes to heal. I wouldn't give the SoulSwallower the same chance, however.

With a quick step, I reached the SoulSwallower's chest and pummeled into the eye at the center of its chest. Blood sprayed in every direction as the SoulSwallower gurgled,

"Stop. Stop!"

Ignoring him, I redoubled my efforts, slamming into the monster with an absolute abandon. My breaths turned to a heavy wheezing as each strike became wilder and heavier. I struggled through the exhaustion growing in my limbs. Even as they became like lead, I kept pulverizing.

Before I could finish him, two rows of teeth popped out of its chest, one around the eyelid and the other around the pupil of the eye. A hand pushed me towards the monster's chest, the clear coating around the crushed eye opening like another eyelid. The teeth ripped into my armor, the SoulSwallower clamping down onto me like its last lifeline.

Like tiny mouths, the teeth drained blood from me. After a few seconds, spikes exploded outwards from my armor. The monster's eye mouth gushed me outward with a torrent of blood. I rolled on the floor before trying to stand. All the mana I used left me with less than a third of my health left.

My limbs shook as a bolt dug into the monster's arm that reached for the shackle on its leg. It was already too late though. A burst of energy rippled up from the eye at the center of the SoulSwallower's chest. It coursed up his last working arm. With the sudden shot of vitality, he shot his arm towards the shackle and tore it off.

Energy poured out from where the shackles had once been. A sphere of green blue energy appeared around him. I shot forwards, slamming a fist into the sphere. I couldn't dent it. Althea could though.

Her spears shot through the portal, damaging the monster. Realizing I couldn't hurt it, I stumbled backwards and sat down. As my injuries healed, I shouted, "Step back. I'm cutting on my aura."

Kessiah and Althea ran towards the opposite end of the lunchroom before I cut the aura on. The bolts left cracks on the shield of the monster along with tiny holes from where they pierced. They weren't large enough for me to reach through, so I rested for a few minutes.

As the SoulSwallower evolved in his cocoon, Kessiah shouted through the room,

"You guys got this. I'll only help if things get desperate. This is a good exercise for you both. Reminds you why you're trying to get stronger."

I sighed. By now, I didn't need a reminder why I needed to gain a few levels and skills. I stood up, my health and stamina refilling after the fervent frenzy of activity. As the SoulSwallower transformed inside the sphere, I opened my status screen and poured a few tree points into Genesis of Potential.

With a quick clink, the skill tree reached 750.

Limits are more your perspective than your reality. Become fond of your limits. Become fonder of breaking them. +3 extra level 100 perks (6 max | 1 remaining.) Choose wisely.

I didn't have the attributes required for using the level 100 perk though. My long-term mentality wasn't serving me so well anymore, but it would after we squeezed through this fight. I shouted towards Althea,

"Listen to me next time when I'm shouting at you. Now we have to fight this fucker."

Althea sighed, "Yeah. Sorry."

Turning towards the monster, the barrier dissolved after another of Althea's bolts pierced it. A smaller person walked out of the sphere. Like a moving Greek statue, the thing glanced around with marble skin. It looked remarkably human, no longer deformed and chained. The wings of black remained the same size, with larger feathers.

The wings spread out, several times his height. With a quick flap, the dust and debris of the previous fight rolled away from him. He stepped forward, his steps quaking the ground a bit under his feet. Turning towards me, the living stone smiled. As his lips moved, they sounded like stone sliding against stone.

He reached out his hand, the stone moving with him,

"I'm finally free. It's good to be fully a part of this new world of yours."

I squinted my eyes, finding what I was looking for.

Gabriel, the Ascended Angel (lvl 850) – Once enough ambient mana was absorbed by the SoulSwallower, the original form of the chained creature took form. This is Gabriel, the ascended angel.

Quite unfortunate of you to let him unchain himself. His skin is living stone, harder than steel. The feathers on his wings are sharper than blades. In this form, he gains illusion magic that can torment the weaker willed members of your party. Even if you can destroy his outer layer, he has a second, berserker form that allows him to kill those who reach past his skin.

Despite your strength for your level, you will struggle dearly versus this foe, regardless of your tactics.

Another spear lobbed out from Althea, but Gabriel deflected it with a dark wing. He turned to her, "Come now. I won't let you hit me with those spears of yours anymore. Enough."

The wing flapped in her direction, sending enough wind to rock Althea off her feet. Three feathers shot out and pinned her arms against the wall. The feathers latched onto her arms, pinning her further. Gabriel turned to me,

"That...aura of yours...It displeases me. Cease."

His last word carried power, like Torix or Elijah's words. I grit my teeth, standing my ground as the word slammed into my mind. The words held a weight like iron. Unfortunately, they met my mind like a wall of steel. Gabriel raised an eyebrow,

"How do you still stand? You should falter at my might."

I rolled my eyes before raising my arms in a defensive stance. There wasn't any need to rush this fight anymore. The longer he talked, the more oppression would eat at him. Gabriel turned towards Kessiah and said,

"The lady of power standing there. Are you here merely to observe?"

Kessiah nodded. Gabriel grinned, "Good. I'll teach you little heathens some manners then."

He shot towards me, raising a wing towards me. As he reached me, he stabbed the wing towards me. I dashed forwards and planted a heavy hook straight into his side. My armor met his stone coat like steel bouncing on steel.

Gabriel grinned, "You will need more-"

Charging my runes, I rotated on my heels and whipped a hook into his nose. The ground cracked beneath me as the angel took a step back. He rubbed a bit of powdered stone from his nose,

“You can hit. I’ll give you that much.”

I dashed forwards and sent a knee straight for his nuts. He grinned before a spear popped out the center of his chest. Blood leaked from his wound and mouth before my knee slammed into his testicles with great force.

He keeled over before I used the momentum off the knee to plant that foot back into the ground. A tight, compact hook slammed into the side of his head, sending him stumbling off balance. Another harpoon drilled through the bones of a wing, ruining the limb I charged into him.

He fell face first onto the ground before his wing reached around. The feathers sliced through my armor, stabbing through my chest. He pulled me off his back, slinging me towards a wall. Everything in my vision circled before I slammed into a cinderblock wall. I pushed myself out of it as another well aimed spear pierced through a wing of Gabriel.

The angel roared in frustration before turning Towards Althea. He pushed himself off the ground and paced towards her. Deflecting spear after spear, he gained ground towards her before I charged towards him again.

When I reached him, Gabriel roared, “Leave me peasant.”

With a kick faster than I could react, he slammed a heel into my chest. I flew backwards again, a dent in my armor. I flipped through the air before growing several spikes from my armor. I pierced them into the ground, stopping me in place.

Retracting the spikes, I sprinted towards him again. When I reached him, he thundered,

“I told you to leave me Worm.”

He kicked towards me again, but I gauged the distance just right. I slowed down just enough so that his foot scraped my armor. As his foot pulled back, I grabbed one of his broken wings and pulled down. He howled in pain before another bolt shot through one of his shins.

Even though the armor was even harder than my armor, the bolt pierced it like nothing. It was like it would pierce through any amount of armor as if it was gelatin. If anything, everything to Althea was like gelatin. The only way to stop her attack was to pack on so much gelatin that she couldn’t fuck you up. In other words, you needed a ton of health.

Even though this new form was no doubt more durable than the last, that was because of its armor skin. This form couldn't hold a candle to its previous form in raw health. That meant he was easy pickings for Althea, who pierces through armor.

On the other hand, I couldn't do much besides distract him in my current state. Given enough time, I could kill him. It would be a long, arduous road to victory though. On that road to victory, Althea owned a shortcut with her armor piercing ability.

Gabriel turned and slapped the side of my face with a heavy palm. My helm bent. My teeth cracked. My jaw snapped. My cheek split. I didn't let go. Even if I couldn't hurt him, I could hold this fucker down and let Althea do the damage she needed to.

Gabriel grabbed my neck and lifted me off the ground. He slammed a fist into my face once, then again and again. On his fourth strike, a harpoon drilled through the elbow of the arm holding me up. I fell onto the ground with my skull caved. Despite the grievous wounds, I still had a quarter of my health remaining.

With my job handled, I laid on the ground and healed as the angel limped towards Althea. One spear gouged through his chest, then another. By the time he reached her, he was a pin cushion full of spears.

Gabriel grinned when he reached her, Kessiah sitting at a lunchroom table. The angel spoke,

"Now I've got you."

Althea smiled before her cannon and normal arm reformed into two mauling limbs. Gabriel raised an eyebrow. Althea smashed a massive fist into his face, cracking the armor like paper. He tumbled backwards, but she didn't let him escape. With her other hand, she grabbed him and pulled him back towards her.

Strike after strike, the armor over his skin peeled away like wet tissue paper. Under her onslaught, the invincible armor was nothing. Like a hungry lion, she tore his flesh apart. Blood gushed from all the red underneath his armored skin. She tore his wings off, snapped his joints, ripped him limb from limb.

Before she could finish him, the blood across the battlefield siphoned into him. The few bits of his armor remaining fell from his skin. Veins crawled and sunk into his body, pushing vitality into his body. His skinless body shifted and contorted as Althea continued pummeling him.

A hand caught the fist of Althea. It pushed her hand backwards as two thin, wiry legs pierced into the ground. Althea's arms shook as Gabriel's new, thin frame overpowered her massive arms. Gabriel's face grinned until the edges of his smile reached his ears. Blood gushed from his face as his mouth opened, revealing serrated teeth as his maw opened.

It tore into Althea, tearing a chunk from her face. She howled in agony and dropped him. Stumbling backwards, the crimson, berserker form of Gabriel dashed towards her and used his clawed hands to tear her apart. Like two scythes, they tore through her flesh. They ripped her apart in seconds just as she had his stone skin.

Althea fell to the ground before the monster contorted the four human limbs backwards. The limbs bent Gabriel backwards, like a scene off the exorcist. The exposed fibers of his muscles rippled as he tore her flesh off her bones.

Althea fell apart, her head being crushed to a pulp. Gabriel's deformed, skinless face laughed at her demise before my fist dug into his fleshy side. His body flew backwards, slamming into the wall.

Of course I wasn't standing still and watching her die. I regenerated most of my health, shut down oppression, and reached him as Althea tore off his armor. Without that set of stone skin, he wouldn't be nearly as difficult to punish. Gabriel darted from the wall, lunging a clawed hand towards me. I ducked under it, the claw scraping against my armor.

I shot a compact hook into his side. Blood gushed from Gabriel's cheekless mouth before he tried sending another wild strike towards me. I cut the attack off with a shorter, denser strike with weight behind it. The blow broke his bones. The berserker form lost balance before I dashed forward.

I grinned. If anything, the crazy, untamed movements of the berserker form were easier to deal with than his previous form. Most of the physical weight of Gabriel was in his armored skin. Without that weight, he couldn't push and sling me around with ease anymore.

That meant I could maintain my distance and chain my hits together with deadly proficiency. My mythical skill, Boundless Storm, ensured I could outdo him as long as I was even remotely similar. That effect enhanced tremendously with a surge of ascendant mana.

When Gabriel was in his armored form, I didn't use my runes. I just took advantage of my health regen since I didn't think I could do significant damage regardless. Without that same shield keeping him safe, there was nothing stopping me.

So, with the ascendant mana overflowing, I dashed towards the bloody monstrosity. It whipped another strike at me, but I deflected the strike before slamming a blow into its stomach. The maw of the creature widened, the jaw unhinging as it bit towards me. My own armor opened a set of teeth, meeting the creature's bite.

We wrestled upright for a moment before I tossed him onto the ground. He was far stronger than me, but I weighed more than him now. That let me maintain my own positioning in the fight.

The berserker form tumbled on the ground. As it tried standing, I channeled my mana. A tile ripped off the floor at an angle. It caught the berserker's leg, causing him to trip. The monster attempted running once more, but it was too late. I was upon him.

The fervor and zeal of battle overwhelmed me. Coursing like the blood through my veins, that madness of battle unleashed brutality. Strike after strike, I pulverized and pummeled the creature to powder. I tore his limbs asunder, and rived his bones. I tore teeth. I broke bone. I flayed skin.

I tore through the flesh of the mongrel. The sheer tenacity of Gabriel's body worked against him as I tore him apart. His frame wouldn't let him die. That prolonged his torment. Blood soaked strike after blood soaked strike, I ignored his own attempts to harm me.

His claws dug into my side, but I retaliated with a vicious hook into his own. He bit into my forearm, but I tore the flesh off his. He attacked me with madness. I crushed him with brutality.

As the dust settled from the long fight, I glanced at my health. Down to around 1/10th. It wasn't too bad an outcome. In front of me was a bloody pile of mush. I sighed outwards before falling backwards. I stared at the ceiling, letting my mind wander for a bit. It needed the break.

I pushed a fist into the air and shook it for a moment. We did it. One fallen angel down. Who knew how many left to go.

Chapter 49: Reaping Rewards

Kessiah stood up and shouted with her arms raised,

"That was fucking awesome. Man, you guys had to pull out all the stops to win that one."

She walked over and picked up Althea who was passed out on the ground. Kessiah glanced towards me. She shrugged her shoulders,

"I guess that's all for today. You can do whatever for the rest of the day. I'll be carrying Althea back to the camp."

I leaned up, my health regenerating at a rapid pace. In front of me was a dungeon core. It was a black ball with a red, glowing outline. I picked it up,

"Yo, Kessiah. What's wrong with this dungeon core?"

She turned to me and raised an eyebrow. She pointed a finger at me, "That's an advanced dungeon core. Has anyone ever explained the dungeon cores to you?"

I shook my head, so Kessiah walked over. She reached me, and sat down with her legs crossed. She reached out an open hand, so I set the dungeon core in it. She tilted it, observing it,

“There’s five known tiers for dungeon cores. This is tier 2, or an advanced dungeon core. It levels up any skill you have by ten points, and gives you ten attribute points.”

My jaw dropped. I stammered, “You serious? Ten skill and attribute points? What the fuck.”

Kessiah shrugged, “It’s not as good as you think it is. Take whatever level you are. Now divide that by four. That’s how many attribute and skill points you can gain from dungeon cores.”

“So, if I’m level 400, I can only get 100 skill points and attribute points from dungeon cores?”

She nodded, “Yeah. Exactly. Torix and I already maxed out our dungeon core limits a long time ago. I’m sure I could find a few extra just lying around if you want them.”

I nodded my head, “Of fucking course I do. Why the fuck are you holding out on us?”

“Well, I had to earn those cores. I figured you should at least see how much trouble it is to get one first before getting as many as you needed.”

I shook my head, “That’s just...so dumb.”

Kessiah pursed her lips, “Why?”

“Because we’ve almost died to followers twice. Why in the fuck would you leave us in a weakened state for so damn long? What if I died to Dakhma’s strike that one time because you didn’t give me the dungeon cores? What if you died because of it?”

I grabbed the dungeon core from her hand. My armor absorbed it. I frowned at Kessiah,

“Do you have them with you or are they somewhere else?”

She sighed, “Fine, fine. I get it. My bad. Calm down. It isn’t like I have to give you anything either.”

I raised my hand up before letting them slap my thighs, “Alright. I guess you’re right. I’ll ask Torix for them. See if he wants to help out. You know, stop us from dying or some shit.”

I stood up, but Kessiah reached out a hand,

“Wait a second. I’m sorry. I’ll be honest with you. Most people when they first make their builds don’t think in the long term. Torix and I wanted to have an in-depth discussion about the ins and outs of your builds before giving you the cores.”

Kessiah stood up, Althea cupped in one of her arms. She continued,

“We figured some real-world experience in fighting would give you guys an idea of what stats are important. Once you guys understood that, we’d give you the cores and advise you on what to put points into. Neither of us thought that all of us would almost die both times we went out purging.”

I sighed, “Alright, fine. It’s ok. I’m just on edge is all. I think Althea and I have a good understanding of what and how to build around our stats. Do you mind giving me the cores now or no?”

Kessiah reached out with Althea. I took her from Kessiah’s arms. Kessiah rustled through a knapsack on her left side. She pulled out a ring. She grinned,

“This little knapsack is covered in a nanofiber mesh to make it tough. This-” She raised up the ring. “-is a temporal field generator. It holds all kinds of goodies, most of them you aren’t ready for.”

She put on the ring. A second later, I could hear the sound of her skin being split. It sounded like shearing iron, oddly enough. Crazy how hard her skin was.

Anyways, a little portal opened in front of Kessiah. With a glowing band of white surrounding a starry sky, it was beautiful to look at. Kessiah reached her right hand inside before pulling out four red dungeon cores. She piled them onto her unused arm, like the cores were a baby in her left arm. She raised an eyebrow at me,

“Eight should be enough for now? I don’t have anymore on me right now.”

Shocked at her generosity, I glanced away, “Uh, yeah. Sure.”

She nodded before reaching out with a core in hand, “I’ll feed them to your armor. I’ll give you a few extra points for when you gain levels later down the line. Let me know if you need any more later, ok?”

I nodded my head. Suddenly, Kessiah was like a mom. It was really weird. She reached out a hand and pressed the core onto my armor. The core sunk in. Eight later, and I was fully stacked out. Kessiah took Althea from me,

“I’m heading out. Don’t stay here too long.”

I nodded before Kessiah ran out of the room at a blistering pace. Once she was gone, I walked over and absorbed the corpse of the Gabriel. I walked around the room, taking in the bits of his armored skin as well then the chains too.

After finishing the feast, I opened my status screen. There was a special prize waiting for me.

Experience from the Gorged SoulSwallower will be added to Gabriel, the Ascended Angel's exp total. +60,000,000 total experience gained.

I gained so many levels from the fight that it astonished me. Since defeating that dumbass bone knight guy, I gained 140 levels. I glanced at the history of my experience gain for a second, and 126 of those levels were from the Gabriel and the SoulSwallower.

A sudden realization snapped in my head. This dungeon was in the quarantine zone. Althea and I both received doubled experience from the big boss man himself. That's why I gained so many levels. That and my obliterator perk bonus that doubled experience from unique bosses.

After that eureka moment passed by, I furiously allocated my points into constitution. After many, many clicks later, the perk menu finally opened up. I'd gained the perk for dexterity.

[Prodigy (Dexterity of 100 or higher. You have (1) level 100 perk left for selection. Choose wisely.) – What takes others years, you do in seconds. Doubles the extra balance, flexibility, and reaction time from the dexterity leveling perk. Adds another 5 points of health per point in dexterity (10 health in total.) Adds another 1/10th of dexterity to perception (3/10th's in total). Doubles reaction time, balance, and flexibility bonuses from points in dexterity. Increases mythical skill cap by 1(4 Total).]

I selected the perk. After checking out my status screen, I still had four points left. I didn't really know what to invest in from here though, so I finalized my choices. I left the four points unallocated for now.

Immediately my armor tightened around me again, but I balled myself into a knot of muscle, making the armor snap. Even if I hadn't, the armor wouldn't have held for even a second. The size I grew was simply too much. The sudden surge of strength didn't hurt the situation either. That wasn't the only difference though.

My angle of sight changed. Not by much, but enough to notice. My heels dug into the floor, not by inches but enough that I perceived the difference. Everything was lower to the ground. After all the points I put into constitution, I thought I would have gained more height. It turned out differently in practice.

My guess was that constitution added a certain amount of weight per level and per point in the stat. As I gained that weight, I gained enough height so that I didn't end up becoming to brawny. If you think about it, someone who's five-foot-tall isn't half the weight of someone who's ten feet tall. The difference in weight between the two ends up being a lot more than just double.

In other words, I didn't have to double in height to double in weight. Constitution also made me denser, meaning the height difference would slow down over time. That meant constitution's height increase would be slow. Still, it would build over time, unlike the sudden difference in physical control. That's a weird way of saying it, but it's hard to describe.

When I took a step forward, I naturally adjusted the weight of my foot depending on surface I walked on. I took a few effortless steps, my feet light as air to me despite being heavy as stone. I leaned against a table, pressing my weight against it. I rebalanced myself, pushing myself up into a handstand on the table.

The table cracked, slumping down. I kept balanced despite the sudden shift. A second later, the table caved inwards, but I kept myself in my handstand without any difficulty. Even with the sudden changes in size and weight recently, this body was my home now. Nothing about it was foreign. For some reason, doing this wasn't surprising. In my mind, it was to be expected.

I let my feet fall forward before turning into a sprint. I front flipped before landing in a perfect split. I glanced down, awe struck at the ridiculousness of it all. I laughed aloud at myself. I was a gymnast now.

A fly flew past me, and I waited till it was behind me. I pulled my legs together, making me stand upright again. Stepping backwards, and off the sound of the fly alone, I jerked my hand back and grabbed the fly out of the air. As I did so, I tried not to crush it.

When I pulled the fly in front of me, I hadn't even torn a wing off the thing. The fly buzzed in between my index finger and thumb, alive and well. I'll admit it. That surprised me. I let the fly go before cracking my neck. The difference from before was starker than I thought it would be.

With that in mind, I checked the beautiful numbers.

Level 496
Attribute Totals
Strength – Increases carrying weight, maximum speed, and physical power 252.6
Constitution – Increases hardness, density, and weight of your body 562.1
Endurance – Increases regeneration of stamina, health, and their totals 567
Dexterity – Increases ease of movement, flexibility, and reflexes 100
Willpower – Increases internal motivation, mana regen, and Mental Res 270
Intelligence – Increases memory, critical thinking, and total mana pool 101.4
Charisma – Increases likeability, persuasion, and decreases prices at shops

30.1Luck – Increases money found, odds in your favor, and chance of rare events54.5Perception – Increases comprehension, the five senses, and awareness54

Daniel HillsideTotalsRegenBuffs/DebuffsHealth33,890/33,8906484/minOppression Damage- 10,000+30%hp/minStamina13,469/13,469215/secElemental Res – 97.5%Harbinger of Cataclysm219,872,985 / 256,000,000/per minPlasma Res – 97.5%Phys Dam Reduction – 97.5%Rad Res – 97.5%Phys Dam Bonus – 3290%Mental Res – 97.5%

My constitution was three times higher. That's what a ton of levels and dungeon cores will do for you. Those points piled over nicely into strength, keeping me powerful despite my one-sided investments. That in turn fed into my dexterity, letting me get the level 100 perk. All in all, I was a much more balanced fighter in an instant. All that was because we fought a boss so many levels above us.

As always, Schema rewarded ambition. The volume of levels and mana amazed me. If that fight took place without Kessiah there, it would have been damn near deadly. Having her there made all the difference. Not having to worry about death lets you focus when fighting. Considering how close the fight ended up being, I figured Althea and I would've died without Kessiah's presence.

That being said, I doubt I'd struggle so much anymore. I could bully the SoulSwallower with my sheer heft, and the dexterity would let me defend myself versus Gabriel's armored form. Of course, it still would've been a desperate struggle, but I honestly believed in myself. I could take him now.

I clasped my fists, noticing how my armor already adjusted to my new form. The only reason it snapped each time I gained a bunch of constitution was because of how snug it always was. Without really thinking, I took a step like I was giant. I let my feet slap against the tile floor, and the ground shook a bit. Not much, but just enough to notice.

I laughed at how ridiculous I must look. The giddiness of gaining levels passed as I walked out of the lunchroom. I opened my status screen, finding my 2-D map of Springfield. Several other dungeons were available, some not even a mile away. After how fruitful this dungeon had been, the prospect of clearing them was tempting.

With that in mind, I sent Torix a message,

The Harbinger of Cataclysm (7:21 PM 4/13/00) – Yo Torix. Would you mind guiding me to a few more dungeons? I want to clear them for a few more bits of experience and ambient mana while they still give double exp.

Three minutes passed. I wouldn't have known without the timing system in place.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill (7:24 PM 4/13/00) – Open your obelisk. We'll speak over voice intercom.

I followed his advice before my armor produced my obelisk from my palm. I had no idea how in the hell it stored stuff, but it was convenient at times. With that in mind, my home screen opened from the disk.

The calm creek and soothing sound of pouring water surrounded me. Birds chirped in the background, along with the hum of cicadas in the background. It was peaceful until Torix said,

“Are you there?”

I nodded, “Yeah.”

“Good. Think of a visual call with me.”

I did so, and a patch of the creek blurred into a dried-out lich. Torix leaned over a table made of mana, glancing at the tracking chalkboard every few seconds. He turned towards me, raising an eyebrow,

“You’ve gained quite a few levels...I can honestly say your progress is no less than astonishing.”

My chest puffed out, “Thanks. Althea and I have been putting the time in. The thing is, I don’t think fighting Yawm’s minions is the best way to gain levels.”

Torix frowned, “They are a plentiful source of experience, mana for your armor, and are easily killed with relatively little effort. They are the perfect experience sponge.”

I shook my head, “No they’re not.”

“Explain.”

I raised a hand and counted on my fingers, “First off, they take forever for us to level with. We might not even gain a level a day clearing out his jungle. Hell, while Yawm is stuck in his world tree or whatever, he might be gaining more levels than that. That means we’re losing more ground than we’re gaining.”

“Very true.”

I counted another finger, “Second off, the level disparity between us and the spawns is drastic. We need more challenging enemies if Althea and I are going to develop our skills. I can’t take those zombie fuckers seriously anymore after the thousandth time I’ve killed one.”

“Understandably.”

I counted a third finger, "And finally, clearing out the dungeons draws less attention to us. The followers don't seem to care about the dungeons at all. If my assumptions are right, they're letting the eldritch proliferate so that they have material for experimentation. That might be one of the primary reasons that Yawm does this whole world tree thing."

I raised a hand, "I think he's trying to kill off most of the present species so that he will create another fringe world. He'll use the eldritch as raw materials for his experiments while gaining more strength. That means clearing out the dungeons slows him down too."

Torix cupped his chin on a bony fist, "Wow...Those are...wild, crazy...and, what I believe, are eerily correct assumptions. Did you think of that yourself?"

I shrugged, "Uh, yeah. For the most part. The ideas popped into my head when I started talking about it."

"Good ideas for popping up out of nowhere then." He turned towards the chalkboard, taking a few seconds for thought. He turned back to me,

"Your plan sounds excellent in all honesty. I never even considered it. Good work, Daniel."

I pulled back the armor on my face and scratched my nose, "No problem, no problem. Glad I can help."

Torix nodded, "I'll speak of this with the others as well. I believe they'll agree with your judgment in this case. I'll make a route towards a nearby dungeon. There's no reason for you to stop while the other's sleep. Of all people, I understand how boring it is to wait on others to wake up."

I propped my weight onto one leg, "Yeah, being a lich means you don't have to sleep really...Before I go, I was wondering how the time system worked over messages. It's accurate, but I don't understand it."

"When Schema assimilates a planet, he discards arbitrary metrics for timing. He resets the world's clock, and replaces it with the time since he took over. Earth hasn't even cycled the sun since Schema has taken over. Is that all?"

I nodded. Torix grinned, "Excellent work, disciple. I'm updating the data feed to your obelisk as we speak. Until next time."

"Cya."

Torix closed out the intercom before I closed mine. As I waited on my minimap to update, I practiced using my ascendant mana. Learning a bit defter control wouldn't hurt anything after all.

In the middle of trying to juggle three rocks with telekinesis, my minimap shifted. A new red line appeared, so I rolled my shoulders and set off. I sprinted through the school before meeting another SoulKeeper. With the same scythe and ominous eyes in his palms, I wasn't worried.

He stood at the opposite end of a hallway. I charged him. When he swiped his scythe, I channeled my mana and tweaked his swing with some telekinesis. The slight change in the angle was enough to make him miss.

Two times later, and SoulKeeper seemed frustrated. Good. I reached him. He swung his scythe. I grabbed the handle before the blade touched me. Like meeting a wall of stone, the blade stopped before I pushed on its chest.

I gripped my fingers, digging them through its skin. My ascendant mana surged, filling me with strength. I pulled the SoulKeeper with me before slamming the monster into the wall. The cinderblocks crumbled as the SoulKeeper was blasted through the wall. As it tumbled on the ground, I charged it once more.

The monster met the other side of the room with a vicious tumble. I dashed forward, knocking school desks aside before tackling into the monster. The wall detonated as I crushed through it with ease. As we passed through the rock, I slammed into the monster with all my weight.

The thing popped underneath me like a stockbroker's ego during a market crash. My armor absorbed the blood and bile on me as I picked up the scythe of the thing. Sucking out the energy in the weapon, I noticed I broke through the wall into another classroom. To my right, a SoulKeeper glanced at me in confusion. Behind me, the other SoulKeeper already reared back its scythe.

I ducked down under the sweeping slice of the blade. As I stood upwards, I turned around with a sweeping left uppercut towards the SoulKeeper behind me. My fist hit the stomach of the monster, catapulting it upwards. Before it flew out of reach, I grabbed its legs with my right hand.

Turning back around, I dragged the SoulKeeper in my right hand like a ragdoll. The rightmost SoulKeeper dashed towards me, swinging its scythe like the other. Before it touched me, I hurled my ragdoll SoulKeeper into the incoming blade.

It tore the monster in half, blood spraying in every direction. My hand kept moving forward. The blade of the scythe pierced through my hand until my palm hit the hilt of the weapon. I gripped it, and the only SoulKeeper left tried dragging the blade from my hand. It couldn't even make me budge.

I pulled the blade towards me with my pierced hand, the SoulKeeper dragging with the scythe. I palmed the monster's face with my left hand, gripping my fingers around the skull of it. I shoved the monster's head downwards while pushing upwards with my right knee.

Like an exploding watermelon, the skull ruptured in between my knee and palm. Even after squashing the skull, my hand clanged against the metal joint of my leg. It was overkill. I grinned at the fact with my armor.

The ascendant mana flowed like a raging river. The ecstasy of battle flooded my veins. My armor absorbed the corpses in a few seconds with long spikes. I picked up the scythes before continuing down the red route on my minimap. I would make sure that red route lived up to its coloring, with the blood my armor happened to miss.

It was time to move forward. On to the next dungeon. On to the next body.

Chapter 50: Pieces of the Puzzle

I exited the school before running towards the entrance of a sewer. Passing by the multicolored fauna, the ascendant mana flowed through my runes as I kept two stones afloat beside me. With every twisting curve of the sewer, I came closer towards the next dungeon.

A few minutes later, I reached it. I crawled up the metal stairs and pushed off the manhole cover with a reserved slowness. I didn't want to attract any unwanted attention, despite how bloodthirsty I sounded at times.

I crawled out of the sewer, finding myself in an alleyway. A few blocks from me, there was a community shelter. It was a bunker built way back in the 50's during the Cold War. The city maintained it all these years in case there was some crazy disaster or something. It was ironic. A place built to keep people safe now produced monsters that feasted on them.

I passed nearby, squeezing between two alleyways. Peeking from behind an empty dumpster, I leaned over and noticed two other blips on my minimap. I squinted my eyes forward, towards the bunker.

There was a thin, wiry woman and a blackened, featureless man. Behind them, a row of people and even a few spawns followed them. The blackened man turned the vault door before leading them into the abyss. I followed behind them, measuring my steps to mitigate noise. As I closed in, Torix sent a message.

Torix Worm, of Darkhill(8:14 PM 4/13/00) – I've identified them both. Neither of them are enemies you should struggle with. Both of them are below level 500. Killing them won't attract much attention either, since

they both spend several hours inside this dungeon anytime they visit. That gives you plenty of time to handle what needs handling. Good luck.

After reading the message, I waited for fifteen minutes. I figured giving them some time to go deeper into the dungeon would give me more leeway once I was in there. As I passed the time, I practiced with my ascendant mana.

The runes kept the normal frenzy under control, tempering it into a usable form. Now that I familiarized myself with it, my runes would be tapered towards their use. Combine that with the rapid initial leveling of the skill, and I'd be a telekinetic mage in no time.

Clearing this dungeon took precedence, however. Enough time passed, so I skulked down the steps and through the open vault door. The sun set as I waited, making the city dark. It wasn't pitch black since there were a few solar lights here or there. For the most part though, only a little light leaked into the dungeon.

Clean, concrete, and empty, it was like a terrorist cell from a horror movie. A few florescent lights blipped in the distance, revealing pieces of pathways off in the distance. The hallway stretche out like that for several rooms, like the lit areas were islands in a sea of darkness.

It wasn't unfamiliar territory. My first few days with Schema were much like this, with little light and an eerie quiet. It didn't bother me anymore, so I kept my steps calm and composed as I went forward. Anytime I was unsure of where I was, I'd charge my ascendant mana for a bit. That gave me enough light to see forward.

Still, the blipping lights mixed with a few streaks of blood from the wall made for an ominous atmosphere. My willpower and experience kept me focused despite all that. As I tread through the winding hallways, I reached a set of three hallways.

I sat still and listened. I closed my eyes, honing all my attention to the slightest sounds. After a minute of doing so, a slight echo ebbed from the left hallway.

Skill Gained! Listening(lvl 1) – You forge your senses to hear what you haven't heard. +5% hearing distance when listening. -1% to focus required for listening.

The skill helped as I tread forward, finding myself deeper in the dark caverns. The slight echo turned into a slight screech, then a far off scream. I walked down a few sets of steps, wondering where all the monsters were. This was a dungeon afterall. When I slowly snuck past an open doorway, I found out why.

This was an open room, the kind of room you don't expect in a bunker. The walls warped a bit at the end of the room, like the dungeon began here. A balcony lined midway around the edges of the wall, acting as a walkway. Observational windows, above the balcony, reflected bits of orange and white light in the room.

The soot covered man from before ebbed orange light from open streaks all across his skin. It looked like his blood was magma. That light lit the room with a fluorescent lamp overhead, enough to see what was near them.

An eldritch was crawling out the room. A long slug slithered next to the spawn. Gills flapped up on its sides, the slimy mucus trailing behind it. The spawn was a deformed man, bloated on something. Honestly, I'd rather not know what it had eaten.

The two tentacled eyes of the slug reached out of the side of its head, where the gills ended. The creature opened up down the middle, before spearing the summon of Yawm with a thin, spiral shell. Several other spikes shot out from the insides of the creature before one pierced the core of the Spawn.

The spawn wilted, dying already. The monster then lurched forward, swallowing it whole. I leaned over the balcony, getting close enough for identification.

Sacrificial slug(lvl 510) – This is an enormous, underwater slug. It glides through large bodies of water, using giant horns to push itself forward along the bottom of the seabed. These horns can be used for defensive purposes, especially considering the density and hardness of the shells.

Outside of the water, their speed and defenses lower dramatically, making them vulnerable. When in the water though, these are deadly, fierce creatures that should not be underestimated.

This species will feed on the surrounding species, liquefying their prey into nutrient rich soups for later consumption. They will then go towards a queen of sorts, feeding it with the soup. This makes sacrificial slugs a higher priority species since the queen can cause mayhem on a massive scale once she's fully formed.

Before I could read the notifications for the named ones, another slug slithered up. As it waited for food, the wiry woman pushed a man towards the slug.

From the balcony, I pushed on the railing before landing on it feet first. I let myself fall forward, letting myself get fully sideways. The ascendant mana roared through my limbs as I slammed my heels into the steel rail.

It bent as I launched through the air. I pulled my legs up, letting my heels turn in front of me. I landed directly on top of the new slug as it opened its disgusting mouth. The jagged spears pierced an inch or two deep before snapping against my armor. As I landed inside of it, my feet crushed its insides.

The impact acted like a detonation inside the slug. Muscle tore and organs ripped. Growing two spikes out of the edges of my hands, I sliced back and forth. The slug died in seconds. The man fell backwards, gasping in shock at his sudden saviour. Either that or he gasped in horror. Hard to tell.

Before the shock of my landing wore off, I pounded my heels into the concrete floor. Dashing into the wiry woman, I trampled her underfoot. The glowing soot man stepped forward, letting his hands pull behind him. Two spheres of red, superheated mana formed as he pulled his hands together.

They combined, forming an orange ball of energy. With a foot still planted on the woman's throat, I wrapped my left hand around her face. My fingers gripped like the a beartrap as I pulled her up. A wave of magma poured towards me, but I used the woman as a shield, blocking most of it.

She howled in my hands, her screams sharp enough to cut into my ears. I pulled the back of her head towards me while stepping forward and pushing off my heels. That force traveled up my hips before I snapped a vicious right hook into the back of her head.

Like punching an aluminum can, the skull dented inwards with red spraying out. I threw her down before the soot guy launched a fiery fist towards me. Ducking under it, I twisted on my heels, launching a left hook straight into the pit of his stomach.

Magma blood spewed from his mouth as he flew backwards. I walked towards him, stomping onto the skull of the dead woman as I passed. The soot man pushed himself back with his hands, his feet dragging behind. He shouted out in desperation,

"Help. Help."

He glanced at the eldritch slugs lining the warped walls of the room. They stared back with cold, unfeeling eyes. I rolled my eyes,

"They aren't pets."

He turned back towards me, his horror fading as he reached out his hands. Just knowing I could speak let him know I wasn't a monster like these eldritch.

He shouted, "I'm sorry. They forced me too. It was that or die. Please. Have mercy."

I walked up before grabbing his wrists. I planted a foot onto his chest before saying,

"Sorry, I'm in the same boat. You live, you tell Yawm about me. Either I kill you, or die. I'm sure you understand."

He howled out as I stomped his chest and jerked up. His arms tore off his body, magma spewing from the gaping wounds. Using the arms as clubs, I reared back and slammed his right arm into his head. Then his left arm. Again and again, I pummeled his face until it was mush.

I tossed the arms aside before letting my armor absorb their ambient energy. I glanced behind me, noticing a group of terrified people. I glanced back towards the opening of the eldritch cave, finding the other slug monsters not coming towards me. They must be scared after watching one of their own be insta-gibbed.

I sighed, "Alright, I'll help you guys out. I'll get you guys outside of this hellhole before sending one of my friends to help you. Knowing him, he'll probably send skeletons or some shit, so don't be too surprised at what comes to help you. Do you all understand?"

They shivered in terror, each of them waiting for their execution. I suppose that's how they got here in the first place. I pulled my armor back, showing my face. With a bit of ascendant mana, I lit the room enough with my runes for them to see me. I smiled,

"What happened then?"

One of the older men walked up, his beard gray. He frowned, "We were a part of the resistance. These evil things found our base. They tore us from our homes, and sent us to camps before being taken here."

His voice cracked a bit as he continued, "They...they fed people to those things...I watched them scream. I saw their eyes as they were eaten alive...I don't even know what's going on anymore. It's too much. Everything is too much."

An older woman from the back walked up, putting a hand over his shoulder. With a bit of steel in her eyes, she turned to me,

"I'm sorry. Samuel's lost too much to bear. I'm sorry you have to see him like this."

I waved my hand, "Don't worry about it. I understand. Things have been hard since the change. Everyone needs time to be weak between the times when you're forced to be strong. I sure as hell have had a few times where I wasn't able to handle it all either."

The old man wept for a minute. One of the other members took him away, letting the old lady speak. She crossed her hands in front of her, standing up straight. She spoke with a clear voice,

"You hear him. We're struggling."

I nodded, sending a message towards Torix that explained the situation. The grandma spoke,

"When are we getting out of here, or are you too busy fiddling with those silly status screens to notice."

I scoffed. I met her eye, "You think these little screens are silly then?"

"You're toying with it while people are dying. That's not just silly. It's irresponsible."

I rolled my eyes, "Are you actually serious?"

She glanced around at the people behind her, looking for some verification. She glanced back at me, "Yes. You're plenty strong. Use it instead of spending all your time on that damn screen."

I laughed, a slow, mocking kind of laugh. I pointed at the slugs, "You wanna know why I can fight those monsters and you can't?"

The grandma frowned, but stayed silent. I continued, "Because I spend my time fiddling with my status screen instead of trying to help people. This is something you should already know. You have to help yourself before you can help other people."

I pointed at the sad group, "How in the fuck are any of you supposed to help anyone? You can't, because you can't even help yourselves. That weakness of yours, it's a convenient excuse. I know I sure as hell can't just say *Oh well. I'm too weak to do anything. Better wait till someone saves me.*"

She blinked a few times before speaking, "You're just like those things back there. A monster."

I spread out my arms, "Have you looked around lately? This isn't the place for people anymore. Only monsters survive. Either die or get with the program."

She turned away, her feelings hurt. I swallowed my spite before holding up my palms,

“Look, alright. Sorry. Tough times call for tough words. I’m just tired of hearing excuses and being blamed for other people’s problems. Just because I’m strong doesn’t mean I have to save people. Just because you’re weak doesn’t mean I have save you.”

I pointed towards a staircase, “Anyways, I’m done talking about it. I’m escorting you guys out of here. Once you’re in the first room of the bunker, stay still and quiet. A minion of this guy named Torix will save you.”

I walked them out of the room. They kept quiet now, only a few whispers coming out here or there. Most of the whispers were prayers or thanks. Out of them all, I think only the grandma was ungrateful. She just so happened to be the only one speaking is all. Maybe seeing the man break down made her react off stress. Maybe that had been her husband. I didn’t know.

Those thoughts tumbled in my head until we reached the entrance to the bunker. I waved a hand behind me as I walked back towards the cave, leaving them there as I said,

“Good luck out there.”

As I walked off, one of the women whispered, “Thank you.”

The simple gesture planted a smile on my face, so I paced towards the entrance of the cave. Making sure I didn’t miss any monsters, I reached the opening again. Several slugs crawled out of the cave, but most of them returned to the depths of their cave. Surging with the ascendant mana, I slammed my fists together.

I sprinted before jumping into the room, landing with a booming echo on the ground. Cutting on oppression, the slugs turned towards me in succession. I grinned along with my armor. A slug nearby slinked towards me, more of a lunge than a crawl. I bent backwards to the side, dodging one of the jutting horns.

I grabbed the horn as it retracted and jumped back. The horn tore from the creature while I avoided another spear with leap backwards. As the new horn retracted back, I dashed forwards and pierced the creature’s maw with the ripped out horn in hand.

The horn punctured the slug, stabbing through creature. Another spear stabbed towards me, drilling towards my head. I leaned my head sideways while lifting my right arm. The spear went right between my arm and head. Before it pulled back, I slammed my fist down. Leveraging the spear on my shoulder, my hand snapped it.

The slug pulled back, but I followed. It lunged towards me, but I sidestepped towards the right of monster. As it's head pulled back, I stabbed the monster with the snapped horn and pulled back. The horn sliced the monster's head in half, killing it. After a few more stabs for good measure, a spine from my armor absorbed the ambient mana in the creature.

By now, two more slugs neared me. Before they caught me though, I tore out a few more spears from their dead brother. A few tosses later, and one of the slugs died before reaching me.

Skill Gained! Spear Mastery(Ivl 1) – You throw and wield spears like a part of your own body. +2% to spear throw speed. +1% to spear handling power and speed.

I grinned before dashing towards the other slug monster. Shooting out another horn, I leaned to my left. Using the momentum behind the movement, I smashed a left hook into the horn. It shattered before leaning towards my right, dodging another spear.

I swiveled a crushing right hook into the next horn, snapping it. The monster squealed in anguish, pulling back again. I dashed forward. Again, the dumbass slug tried to swallow me. I stomped my front foot into the ground and turned my shoulders, smashing its face with another right hook.

The slug fell sideways, tumbling over before I stomped the monster's head with my heel. The blue blood splattered in every direction, covering my face. I turned back towards the next slug. There was none.

The others had escaped into their cavern. Even the dumbest animals won't charge into death I supposed. Regardless, I opened my status screen and found myself having leveled 12 times. I also noticed a pool of tree points from the dungeon cores I had earlier. That combined with my new skills gave me just enough tree points to unlock the last tier of Genesis of Potential. Boy was it a big one.

Force your thoughts into reality. Tear down the whoever and whatever stands before you. Live up to the potential of your kind. +4 extra level 100 perks(7 max | 1 remaining.) Increases the dungeon attribute and skill cap by 100%. (from 1/4 of total level to 1/2 of total level. EG, if level 100, you may absorb 50 attribute and skill points instead of 25 total.) Raises mythical skill cap by one(5 Total).

The mythical skill cap was already over my head, especially considering the difficulty involved with getting one. The other bonuses were just a plethora of raw stats. In a single word, beautiful. Once I got back to Kessiah and Torix, I'd get another boost. I looked forward to it.

With the tree finally finished, my other options for skill trees opened. I'd forgotten them it had been such a long time.

[II Vicious(Beat an enemy 40 levels higher than you in combat lasting over an hour, Death's Dance, Scorn, and Desperation over level 25)(0/50)]

[III Fighter(Kill an enemy 40 levels over you)(0/50)]

[Cosmic Soul(Obtain level three different soul related skills before level 500, ascendent unlocked before level 500, and willpower over 250 before level 500)(0/500)]

[I Invincible(Take over 10,000 points of damage, with capped resistance in the damage type, and live)(0/250)]

[Fearless(Battle an enemy over 1,000 levels above you and live)(0/250)]

I had quite a few choices in my hands. My initial thoughts were to go with the highest number tree, Cosmic Soul. I decided against that once I checked out the bonus of vicious and fighter. Vicious gave me 5% more damage. The fighter tree gave me a multiplier to my bonus physical damage.

Either of those would be invaluable right now, especially the damage bonus. Despite being such a high level with high stats, I would notice the difference something like that would make immediately.

With that in mind, I put the rest of my 13 remaining points into vicious.

Rip them apart with your hands. Maul them with your rage. Despise them. Use that hatred as fuel for fire. +2% damage.

For such a small investment, it was a solid bonus. Hopefully unlocking boundless storm didn't mess with my ability to get further down the vicious line. If so, that would be painful.

For now though, I just needed to decide on my next levelling perk. It was a choice of either luck or perception. Charisma was out since my armor reduced it so much. Maybe that was why the last few groups of people had been so disagreeable. I didn't really know.

What I did know was that luck gave me a bit more health, but perception was something I could take advantage of. I mean, you can't abuse luck. It's risky to put your life in the hands of something so intangible. Perception would allow me to better use runes, use my senses better, and get a bit more of that precognition ability.

So far, it had made a difference only once or twice. That could change whenever I made a new rune or saw a bullet piercing my skull, letting me move before it killed me. That made my decision easier, especially with how

important the runes were to my effectiveness. Understanding the runic language would let me understand things that may otherwise be unknowable.

With that in mind, I crunched a few numbers in my head real fast. Intelligence helped with stuff like that. If I kept putting points into constitution, it would take another 673 levels before I finally got enough points for the perception perk. In other words, fuck that.

Sure, putting so many points into constitution paid off quite a bit with dexterity. I doubt having over 1500 constitution would be worth it though. That would throw my build way out of balance. With that in mind, I put all 28 points into perception. I checked out my status screen then.

Level 508

Strength 252.6 | Constitution 562.1 | Endurance 567

Dexterity 100 | Willpower 270 | Intelligence 101.4

Charisma 30.1 | Luck 54.5 | Perception 82

Daniel

**HillsideTotalsRegenBuffs/DebuffsHealth34,780/34,78006484/minOppress
ion Damage- 10,000+30%hp/minStamina13,525/13,525220/secElemental
Res – 97.5%Harbinger of Cataclysm234,872,985 / 256,000,00069.4/per
min(conduit)Plasma Res – 97.5%Phys Dam Reduction – 97.5%Rad Res –
97.5%Phys Dam Bonus – 3359%Mental Res – 97.5%Total Damage Bonus
7%Boundless Storm**

The vicious bonus popped up again, reminding me I had the tree. I guess it was a way of letting me track my progress with trees. Either way, it was helpful.

With my status handled, I cracked my neck and walked into the cave. After crushing a few more slugs, my armor would upgrade and I would gain enough levels for the perception perk. Life was good. By the time I got deeper into the cave, life took a turn, like a dive into cold, deep water.

I went into those dark depths with a smile.