

The New World

#Chapter 51:59

Monsters of the Deep - Read The New World Chapter 51: Monsters of the Deep

Chapter 51: Monsters of the Deep

I mean that literally. Once I passed a bit deeper into the cave, the walls bent and turned wet. I glanced around, wondering where the snails met. A few more turns down the passage, I found my answer.

This was an underwater cavern, mist floating over the water like white cotton. I neared the water, walking along a shore made of stone. A set of crawling legs clacked as a crab walked out of the water. One of its overgrown pincers dragged behind it, like it was dragging a club.

It stood five feet (1.5 meters) tall, and around twice as long. It turned its claws towards me, the right one far larger than the left. I stood a solid distance from its snapping range, observing it.

Deep Dweller(lvl 376) – This is a weak but fully grown Deep Dweller. This crab species has an enlarged claw that it can snap to produce sonic booms above air, and it can produce stunning blasts underwater.

The way it works is the crab will snap its claws, producing a stream of water. This creates a low pressure bubble in its wake. When the bubble collapses, it sends a ripple of force that stuns nearby prey. During the collapse, the temperatures inside the bubble reach heat that matches the surface of the sun.

It's only for a fraction of a second though, so the damage is minimal. Below water, you may struggle against this enemy. Above water is your domain, however.

My runes charged as the creature snapped the right claw towards me. It didn't even come close to me, but the sound echoed louder than a missile's explosion. My eardrums busted immediately, but my pain tolerance prevented me from falling to my knees in agony.

I ran towards the creature, oddly off balance. It was strange to run without hearing, but I gained a sense for it after a few steps. The crab didn't enjoy me coming closer, so it snapped the claw again, booming a loud sound.

Didn't do much to me now that I couldn't hear though. Once I reached it, the crab snapped the claw at me. It clamped onto my right arm before I pulled it back. Being heavier than it, I lifted it into the air before running over and smashing it against the wall.

Like squishing a giant cockroach, the shell smashed. As it squirmed and twitched in pain, I walked over and shot a quick punch into the face of it. My fist dug a few feet deep into the monster before finishing it off. A quick absorption of my armor later, and the fight was over.

Turning back to the pool, I glanced at the edges of the cavern. It was enormous, the size of a football field at least, and that was only the size of the top of the pool. Who knew how big it was below.

Of course fighting giant crab and slug monsters underwater seemed like a jolly good time, but I sat down and thought for a bit. If I entered the water, I could easily drown. That wasn't the easiest way of handling this. Instead, I walked up the edge of water with oppression on.

The odd energy of oppression stretched out, covering most of the pool. I grinned before things started swelling to the surface. Dark, squirming things writhed in the water. The neared the surface, darting back and forth.

I created a long spike with my armor. The further out it went from me, the harder it became to control. It let me create a spear stretching half my body length. With a quick, puncturing stab, I pierced into one of the dark shapes underwater.

The moment my armor stabbed into it, I let it shoot out like needles. The needles caught the thing, letting me pull it out of the dark water. It was a glowing blue eel, short but muscled. Two dark blades grew from the back fin, looking razor sharp along with a swordfish's nose. It squirmed on my spike, trying to get away from me. I pressed it against the stone before heel stomping it.

Spectral Eel(level 421) – Though not the strongest eels, they make up for their lack of strength with an unparalleled speed underwater. They swim and dart around their prey, which is often much larger than it. Their fast metabolisms let them out speed their prey, then they eat until they are swell up to ten times their normal size.

This food turns into a nutrient rich liquid that it then feeds to the queen of the pond they reside within. They give the queen tribute so that they can live. If you fight this monster underwater, be ready for a long and frustrating fight. Otherwise, this fish is useless.

Another heel stomp later, and the monster died. My armor absorbed it, and I went to work. Dozens of fish later, and an option finally showed up.

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

I stepped away from the edge of the coast line, giving myself some distance before pressing yes. Of course, the pain came, though not like before. I spent some of my skill points from to max out my pain tolerance, giving me 99.9% pain reduction. If anything, it amazed me that the pain was still notable. Just imagining the pain at full force made chills crawl up my spine.

This evolution took far longer than the others, probably due to the increase in mana needed for it. Unlike with the other transformations, the pain wasn't severe enough to prevent me from analyzing the reformation.

So far, the armor had covered my skin, and become my bones. Now, tiny little tendrils of the armor laced within my muscles and tendons. Like cords of metal, these tendrils made my muscle and flesh harder to tear apart. When I charged my runes, the energy pulsing through my armor would conduct with those tendrils. That made using my mana even easier than before.

They acted like copper wires through a house, giving electricity the conductor it needed to power the home. In this case, the electricity was my mana and the home was me. Having these cords infest my muscle hurt like a thousand needles digging all throughout you. Well, 0.1% of that at least.

As with all hard things though, it eventually ended.

V 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. 0/65.5 Billion Mana left till next evolution.

A Harbinger's Might – Increases Damage reduction cap by 3% | Current Max: 98%

Of Eldritch and the Unknown – Additional 25% increase to total health | Current Total Health: 125%

The Charging Calamity – Gives unique ability IV Oppression | Current Damage: (15,000 + 40% of health/min) within a maximum of a 200 ft/61 m radius. Affected by physical damage reduction.

A Perennial Force – 5% of health added towards health regen per minute, which is affected by regeneration multipliers | Current regeneration bonus including multipliers 20% of maximum health per minute

Wielder of Souls – Soul Forged Runes reduce total mana cost of spells by 20% | Current mana cost: 80%

Malignant – Decreases Charisma by 30% | Current Total Charisma: 70%

– *And so, you wield me. One day, I will wield you.*

The main difference I noticed was the boost in health regen and oppression. Those aspects of the armor became much stronger. Combine that with a solid boost to my runic boosts, and I felt far stronger. That extra health regen acted as extra mana, due to my arcane blood. Multiply the bonus mana regen with the extra conductivity from the wires running through my muscle, and my mana charging increased by leaps and bounds.

Itching to test my new limits, I neared the pool once more. Easy as taking a step, I elongated my armor, producing a spike three quarters the length of my body. Controlling it became easier after the reformation. With that extra range, I walked near the pond, ready for fishing.

As I did so, something under the water swelled. A hump appeared under the water, racing towards the edge of the pond. The monsters I worked so hard to pull from the water began flopping from the pond. Pufferfish covered in glowing spines of violet, anglerfish with hooked whips that shined yellow, even crocodiles with steel scales polished to a sheen, they all sprinted from the water. I took a few steps back myself, wondering what the fuck was going on.

A tentacle came out of the water, covered in eyes and warped mouths. The tentacle slammed on top of a steel crocodile. Blood squirted from the mouth of the reptile, before the tentacle wrapped around it. It writhed in agony as the monster pulled it back into dark depths of the pool.

Claws snapped from the alligator's hands as it dug them into the rock. I snapped at the rock ground, trying to get a hold on anything. With a desperate howl, it submerged into the water. Glancing at the tentacle, a message appeared.

Krakow-Wahl(lvl 700) – The fully formed version of the Krakow, this monster has amazing sight with its innumerable eyes. With tentacles covered in mouths and those same eyes, it can hypnotize prey with sweet sounding words.

Even then, its combat prowess is amazing. Underwater, this beast rivals a creature 500 levels higher. Its unseen body shifts in the water faster than the eyes can follow. It is but a writhing shape in the water, unknown and spelling death.

The only known piece of its massive body is the eye that opens when it swims near the surface. Many of its powers stem from this mechanic. Avoid its clutches, for if it drags you out, you will drown.

Not the most comforting message. The welp of water disappeared as water poured from the top of the creature. A giant eyelid opened, revealing a giant eye. A glowing mist poured from it, but opened eye met my own.

A voice shook into my mind,

“Hello there, little lamb-“

“Is that like, an eldritch thing or something?”

A tentacle rose from the water, leaning back,

“Do you not fear me? I wonder if that is why you interrupt me.”

I waved him away with a hand,

“Naw, it’s because some guy named Baldag-Ruhl called me a little lamb, and most eldritch that can talk do too actually. Just wondering if it’s something that’s inherent or...?”

The tentacle leaned closer to me,

“All of your kind carries two traits. You are all food, and you all obey a higher order. We do not follow the commands of anyone, unless forced to. Your kind bends at the slightest benefit.”

I rolled my eyes,

“Sounds like you’re just looking for some bullshit excuse to justify yourself. Sounds...contrived.”

The tentacle slapped towards the top of me, causing my knees to buckle.

“Do not question my motives, child.”

With one knee on the ground, my head was bloody but unbowed. I stood with the tentacle across my back, like atlas carrying the sky.

The monster mumbled, “How is something so small so...strong.”

My ascendant mana roared in my armor as my armor grinned. My grip tightened, digging into the flesh of the tentacle. The bright, crimson mana bled from my runes like evaporating blood. The tentacle shivered, no longer able to crush me.

“You are no little lamb...you are a wolf, masked in the skin of a sheep.”

From the tips of my fingers, my armor pierced into the monster. A thousand needles dug into the monster as it attempted to pull me up. My weight stopped the tentacle from leaving me. My armor sapped the strength of the monster.

Unique skill unlocked! Gorgor of Mana(lvl 1) – You consume the power of others. +1% to draining speed. -1% to mana drain setup time.

The voice roared through the room,

“Do you believe that you can eat me?”

My armor grinned wider as another tentacle shot out of the water. A splash of water covered me, covering me in the blood of the monster. As my armor absorbed more and more of its energy, bloody spots formed on the tentacle, spreading further down the limb.

With each passing second, the crimson spots on the creature spread further out. The other tentacle slapped towards me. With my feet creating craters, I leapt backwards. The tentacle I held onto tore from the monster’s body.

With a roar of pain, the sea monster missed its strike. The piece of tentacle above me wilted. Once fully drained, I tossed the dry, gray mush aside. More tentacles rose from the water, like the water was coming to life. Three of the eye covered tentacles darted towards me, but I leapt into the air.

One the tentacles slammed into the ground beneath me, another missed. The final one came flying down from above. As it slammed me downwards, I curled into a ball. Spines expanded from my back, jagged and strong as steel. They pierced into the tentacle before the tentacle below me turned over. A circular mouth opened, revealing a sea of teeth.

The top most tentacle pushed me into the gaping mouth before the squirming insides of the creature appeared. The teeth above me closed. Saturated in red light, I pushed my arms and legs outwards. Two sharp, serrated swords grew from my palms, stabbing through the monster. With a surge of mana, a burst of strength exploded in my arms as I turned my palms in a giant circle.

A rain of blood covered me as the cave appeared. The two walls of flesh separated as the kraken-thing roared in agony. The bleeding half of the tentacle retracted back into the water as I landed on the slippery ground. The detached tendril wriggled on the ground like a headless chicken. I stabbed my sword through the armor, draining it of the life force still there.

It wilted in seconds before I turned back to the sea monster. The tentacles wavered near the water, more cautious than before. I stomped my foot into the ground, shards of stone splintering upward near my foot. As the deafening echo radiated through cavern, I picked up two pieces of stone. With a step forward, I tossed one of them like a javelin.

The rock shot through the air before shattering against the monster. More a nuisance than a serious attack, I shot another boulder at the creature. The voice roared,

“Cease your pestering and leave me be.”

I frowned,

“Odd how your kind is so open to fighting until you realize it’s going to be a challenge. Then you’re all about peace and rainbows. Pitiful.”

Six tentacles rose from the water, arcing towards me. I grounded my feet, retracting the swords and pumping my mana into my arms. A tentacle slammed towards my right side, but I funneled force into my left arm. I pulled my right arm back, sliding on my heels before planting a strike into the tentacle coming towards me.

Using a bit my telekinesis, I pulled the tentacle towards me as my fist hit. The teeth and eyes broke and ruptured as my fist landed. Muscles composing the limb tore, as the voice yelped. Another tentacle wacked towards my left side, but I turned on my heels again. Twisting on my feet, my fist drilled through the air before I grounded another strike into a tentacle.

The ground beneath my feet cracked as my fist landed. Like detonating bombs underfoot, two clouds of dust wafted from me. An enormous implosion of sound ebbed from the tentacle, like a tank shell firing beside your eardrum. The force of the blow rippled through the tentacle, exploding out the back of it.

The skin at the other side of the limb split. Flesh ruptured out of it, leaving the tentacle attached by a sliver of skin. A tentacle neared me from above, but I pulled my right arm backwards. Another channel of power formed as I kept my elbows tucked, turning like a top on my feet. The tentacle slammed on me, but I stepped forward with my right foot.

The foot stomped into the ground, forming a cloud of stone dust. The force off the stomp traveled up my foot. I turned my left heel, the weight of the stomp pulsing through my core. Like a gunshot, my left fist landed a fierce uppercut into the creature.

I dug deeper into the ground as another blow landed. A fissure formed beneath me as my fist punctured the tentacle above me. The sheer impact made my knees buckle at just how cleanly the strike landed. A larger cloud of stone dust erupted along with another thunderous boom from below.

Before I could stand up straight again, a tentacle wrapped around me. With an explosive jerk, it pulled me from my spot. I dragged against the ground, the deadly line of water coming closer.

I slammed my hands into the stone, expanding claws into the ground. They held me for a second before chunks of stone cleaved from the ground. With the hunks of stone on my clawed hands, the line of black water grew.

I dug my heels into the stone, the rock cracking. I stopped for another second, but another tentacle wrapped around the first, reinforcing it. The pull doubled in strength, jerking me closer. Before I slammed into the water, I inhaled as deeply as I could.

That's when the water surrounded me. The piercing cold, the all-encompassing wet, the suffocating embrace of the liquid was like the grim reaper whispering in my ear. The tentacle's grip tightened around me, like the monster was reminding me where I was.

The black brightened in a flash of light as a gargantuan eye opened right in front of me. Larger than the edge of my vision, the monster stared at me for a moment. Lifting the eye up, countless legs of insects revealed itself. Suckers lined the throat of the monster, like they wanted to pump out my organs.

A voice echoed throughout the water,

"Now, little lamb...You lay in my domain."

Chapter 52: True Intentions

My helm split, the jagged teeth of ruptured metal sharper than before. With a bite, I tore into the tentacle surrounding me. The monster's grip loosened, letting me shove my right hand into its eye. My whole hand pierced the clear lining that protected its eye. A forest of armor needles erupted from my arm, pinning me to the monster.

The massive eyelids of the creature came crashing down from above and below. They slammed against me, knocking me sideways. Before it could blink again, I punctured my other arm into the monster. Another forest of needles appeared, locking me in place.

The giant creature writhed in pain, shaking as glowing purple tears poured from it. They floated in the water like globules of heavy oil. The monster darted its other limbs towards me, but I forced my own arms apart, ripping the creature's eye apart.

The monster dashed backwards in agony, but my armor kept me attached to the monster. The sea creature shot its gargantuan tentacles towards me once more. I slipped into the gaping wound, escaping it.

I had about three more minutes before I needed another breath. All that endurance paid off when I needed to hold my breath after all. I pulled myself deeper into the eye of the creature, the entire organ shivering in pain. The monster reached into the painful tear, but it couldn't rip me out. My armor already expanded the collection of needles, keeping me in it as it tried to get me out.

With a burst of effort, I ripped and tore with my arms, letting me reach further into it. Within a minute, I pierced through the eye of the monster, tearing into the optic nerve. I wrenched the tissue apart, shearing it with raw strength. Another minute passed, and the inside of the creature's skull was turning to mush.

Its health ate away as I swam in the thick blood of the monster. Running out of breath, I reached the soft brain before crawling on it. I reached upwards, dealing tremendous damage with just my movement. A few seconds later, and I reached a thick layer of bone.

Moving through the thick, pressurized mush of its insides, I reared my fist back. A flood and fury of ascendant mana rushed into my right arm as I forced my fist forward. Like tearing through a block of wood, the bone snapped, gushing me outwards. Out of the skull I floated before sinking to the bottom of the pool.

The dark water was red now, bits of brain and mush tapping me as I sunk. Disgusted, I landed on the floor of the cavern with my lungs burning. My chest convulsed a bit, pleading for air, but I kept my breath held. My vision closed in, my peripheral vision dampening. My lungs wanted to let the air out and breathe again, but that meant death.

Once my feet landed, I ran along the bottom of the pool. My weight let me move quick since I had enough weight holding me down to push myself forward. If anything, the water didn't feel that different from air. The only difference was that I could breathe air. Alright, it was a pretty big difference. Whatever.

Anyways, seaweed and corals bumped into me as I ran along the water. My pace increased before I took around half my health and used it as fuel for my ascendant mana. I figured using my health to live was better than letting myself die without using it. My health was a mana pool I could use and a colossal one at that.

Channeling the mana took about three seconds. My runes grew in brightness before pieces of my armor ruptured. The cracks crept across me, letting out a blindingly bright crimson glow. The entire lake lit up like someone shot a dozen flares under the pond and they stayed lit under the liquid. Strength filled my bones until I almost shattered under the weight of my own energy.

With sudden godlike explosion of power in my limbs, I leapt upwards. The stone cracked under foot before I bolted upwards, the water trailing past my face like wind. The water around me splashed upwards as I swooped up and over the surface of the lake. I kept going, my speed waning while I took in another lungful of air.

I misjudged how much I needed to jump. I smashed into the top of the cavern, the stone chipping with another booming echo. I flopped in the air, back down towards the lake. I kept enough composure to take a full breath of air before belly flopping into the pond.

I sunk like a stone, plenty of oxygen left in me this time. With a few more stomping steps, I sprinted out of the pond. I mentally praised the dry land I walked on, my steps light despite the level of damage I took. Glancing backwards, a giant hump was left on the pond. Glancing at my notifications, the giant sea dude was dead.

As I assumed, the fight wasn't that hard. The only dangerous part had been falling into the water. Still, I could hold my breath for a long time now. Combine that with all my other advantages, and a level 700 boss wasn't anything too deadly.

I got a bit close to choking afterwards, but nothing a little ascendant mana couldn't fix. Behind the lake, a corridor continued deeper down the tunnel. One of the tentacles of the creature flopped onto the edge of the pool's side as well. Getting over there would let me absorb the creature's mana, something I was quite keen on doing.

With that in mind, I walked along the edge of the pool, keeping knee deep in the water. As I passed through the pond, one of the gross slugs from earlier crawled up to the edge of the water. After lurching twice, it vomited into the pond. Many species of the fish in the pond rose from the depths, snipping at the nutrient rich soup. Once I passed into range of oppression, they darted towards the other edge of the pond.

I suppose killing their leader made them fearful of me. It didn't matter now. I already killed what I wanted to kill. Even the slug crawled away, leaving a mucus trail behind it. I would follow and kill it later. For now, consuming the boss's body came first.

I reached the back of the pool a minute later. I grabbed the tentacle flopped on the edge of the pool and pulled the monster out. I only got it to move a few feet, but with a bit of ascendant mana, I got the job done.

Most of the monster's body was still in the water, but I could reach the center of it. From what I could see with the red light of my ascendant mana, the monster was a giant octopus. It had eight tentacles, most of them missing from our fight earlier. Fighting me on land almost left it without any arms it turns out.

At the top of the creature, there was the giant eye. Below it was a bone skull with a million bajillion insect legs and teeth. Looked like it would make for a mean death at least. My armor wasn't much different though with all the needles and what not.

Speaking of which, I stabbed into the monster and absorbed the mana of the creature over the next few minutes. The drained corpse floated like an empty skin on the surface of the pond. Nothing nibbled at it. My armor left nothing of value behind.

Once finished feasting, I walked towards the mucus trail of the snail. As I reached the back of the pond, I glanced back at the pool. A few bones floated in the water...human bones. I turned back towards the mucus trail and remembered what Yawm's named ones were doing earlier. A few seconds of thought passed, and I came to a conclusion.

Yawm was feeding humans to the eldritch, to let them grow. My brain kicked into gear, connecting disparate dots. I was wondering in the back of my head why Yawm hadn't just broken the quarantine zone. He could easily after all. It made sense now.

He could create his world tree thing here while feeding this city to the eldritch. The eldritch would grow and become ferocious. The dungeon's doors would break before the eldritch poured outwards, hungry for more.

Yawm gained loyal followers from the forested parts of the city, and fed the eldritch with the outer portions of the city. Once the eldritch reached a certain level, they would break out of the dungeons. The eldritch would then break the quarantine without Yawm ever having to sacrifice a soldier breaking it himself. His entire legion would never have to even lift a finger.

After spending a minute or two typing up the information, I sent my theory on over to Torix. I had no way of knowing if I was correct, but it seemed likely. With that finished, I followed the snail's mucus trail towards the back of the cavern.

A minute of running later, and the snail hunched beside tiny crevice. The hole led outside, and the snail was halfway through. It couldn't quite get through though, so now it was stuck. Easy pickings for me. A few strikes later, and the snail converted into a pile of bloody mush.

With that handled, I tried passing through the crevice myself. Oddly enough, I barely fit through. The size of constitution almost worked against me there. I could always just snap the rock constituting the wall though.

Anyways, after passing through the crevice, I reached a room full of clear eggs and the dungeon core on a pedestal. I walked up and snatched the core, my armor absorbing it with ease. Glancing around, the tiny squids writhed within their eggs, the smaller ones already withering. Oppression would kill them soon without me needing to lift a finger doing so.

Needing to wait a few minutes for the eggs to all die, I checked my status screen. Of course, I gained nowhere near the same volume of experience. It was a solid 55 levels since defeating Gabriel, putting me at level 563. I tapped my chin, having 110 points to invest. The obvious choice for my initial points was in perception. I put 18 points into it, unlocking the perception perk.

[Oracle (Perception of 100 or higher. You have (1) level 100 perk left for selection. Choose wisely.) – Often the most complex things can only be seen, not understood. You are the seer of these truths. Doubles sensory, awareness, and comprehension bonuses for perception. Doubles precognition bonuses from perception. Dramatically lessens the required effort for focusing your senses, like actively listening. Adds 5 more health per point in perception (10 total.) Adds one to total mythical skill cap(6 Total).]

It was a simple and effective method for a slight boost in my options here on out. From here on out, I'd be working on building up a mass of stats to work with. I already had a strong inkling of how I'd progress from here out, but time would tell.

It turned out that my endurance, armor, and my arcane blood gave me an enormous working pool of mana. If anything, having full health was a waste of my potential. My pain tolerance was maxed out, so using enormous portions of my health at once was well within the realm of possibility. Considering how high my health pool was, I had more options for bursting than I thought.

Talking with Torix may enlighten me on some options. For now, I poured my points into endurance. It gave me plentiful amounts of willpower and a good bit of intelligence. Those stats would help with the discovering magic while the extra health acted as extra mana. Those benefits aligned with my current goals.

With that in mind, I put all my points into endurance and checked out my stats.

Level 563

Strength – 252.6 | Constitution – 562.1 | Endurance – 705

Dexterity – 100 | Willpower – 332.4 | Intelligence – 123.7

Charisma – 28.3 | Luck – 61.5 | Perception – 100

Daniel

**Hillside Totals Regen Buffs/Debuffs Health 41,040/41,040 11,006/min Oppression
Damage- 15,000+40%hp/min Stamina 16,505/16,505 253/sec Elemental Res –
98% Harbinger of Cataclysm.07 Billion / 56.6 Billion 69.4/per min (conduit) Plasma
Res – 98%**

**Phys Dam Reduction – 98% Rad Res – 98% Phys Dam Bonus – 3395% Mental Res –
98% Total Damage Bonus 7% Boundless Storm**

If I wasn't looking wrong, my health regen was scaling faster than my health now. At the very least, it was scaling almost as quickly. It wouldn't even take four full minutes to heal any wound. It would look like I was reversing time or some shit.

The increase in health and resistances made me tankier as well. I might even be walking after taking a hit from Dakhma by that point. That's good, because the next armor evolution was miles away. It would take months if not years for it, but that was fine with me. My armor already gave me more than I needed to succeed. When I finally got the next bonus for it, I'd look at it with surprise instead of expectation.

I lifted a palm, letting the mana ebb from my hand. It poured up and out, a red torrent of energy. I kept urging it out until it matched my health regen. It was like my hand was full of liquid nitrogen, with a red, electric mist pouring from it. Brute forcing some magic with this much mana wouldn't even be that hard anymore.

The same rush of wellbeing and health radiated from me as well. Endurance gave a sort of vibrancy after investing into it, like waking up after a good night's sleep. Using that vitality, I glanced around and all the eggs devolved into mush already. Sitting in a cross-legged position, I leaned forward and pushed off my heels. I didn't need my arms to stand anymore since my balance was excellent. I could stand with one leg, like doing pistol squat, if I wanted to.

I didn't though, so after standing up I crawled up a stone tunnel leading towards the sewers. On both sides of me, collapsed rubble locked me in. The only way out was the manhole above me. I climbed the metal rungs of the sewer ladder before reaching a set of bars. Grabbing two bars of metal, I pulled them apart.

The metal gave out a light squeal as I did so. With a bit of my ascendant mana, I ripped the bent bars, giving me room to squeeze out. There was no light leaking in from outside. When my head banged on a piece of metal, I figured out why. There was a dumpster lying over the sewer entrance, making it impossible to notice. Combine that with the alleyway it was in, and you would never notice something so out of the way.

I lowered myself before planting my legs against the wall and pushing up with my arms. The dumpster tilted over before I pulled myself up and out of sewer. Glancing around, I was at the bottom of some hilly resident area. Even then, no one was here. I dashed across a street or two before slipping into the sewers again.

As I crawled into the manhole, the sun crept up along the horizon, the first inklings of a sunrise cascading onto the rooftops. With that in mind, I dashed back towards our encampment while shutting oppression off. No need for it now. Once I reached the encampment, the vibrant levels of activity were a welcome sight.

The tents folded against a gust, the wind enough to send a stack of papers flying. As I reached deeper into the encampment, voices came into focus with ease. I didn't need to lean over and focus to listen. It was like the information was being fed to me instead.

"Over level 500...Wow."

"He's a monster."

"I see why's he's called a harbinger now."

A little sprinkling of pride was in my chest before I walked up to Torix's current hideout. No more homely furniture was in the room. Data points, charts with data on followers and enemies lined the walls. A map of Springfield with the moving dots was taking up an entire wall now, segments separated into specific sector names.

Torix wrote a giant ritual onto the floor, some of the runes familiar. As I walked in from the door's entrance, Torix looked up from a fly he had at the center of the ritual. With ink and other dust all over his robe, he patted himself down as he stood,

“Good to see you Daniel. I take it your roaming was successful then?”

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

His eyebrow raised, “Level 565? That’s...incredible. Excellent progress.”

Noticing a shade of suspicion in his voice, I decided to stay casual about it. I shrugged, “Eh, I think it’s the quarantine zone combined with this obliterator perk thing I have. It doubles experience from unique boss enemies.”

He nodded, “Quite a powerful bonus then. Regardless, I thought over your previous messages and thoughts. I find myself agreeing with them more and more as I analyze the data.”

He walked over towards the map on the wall and pointed towards a one of the dots. This happened to be one of the dots with an area highlighted around it. Each of these dots had different sized circles surrounding them of a different color, some green, others yellow and red.

Torix pointed at one of them, “This is a color-coded map. Each of these dots represents a dungeon. I tallied all the dungeons in Springfield, and I noticed a worrying trend. Each dungeon had missing parts of Yawm’s jungle around it. This is due-“

I waved my hand, “To Yawm feeding the nearby population to the eldritch.”

Torix raised a finger, “Precisely. Each dungeon has a varying size of missing forest depending on how ravenous the eldritch lying within are. I color coded them based on danger levels. Green meaning benign. Yellow meaning dangerous. Red meaning malignant. The shift in our current plans involves taking out the highest priority dungeons that we can before they spiral out of control.”

I nodded, “Sounds good. I was planning on suggesting that too.”

“Powerful minds find the same conclusions.” Torix turned to the map, “You’ve taken out two of the highest priority dungeons already. But that leaves seven, very dangerous and very invasive dungeons left. If you can take them out before they can spread to far, then we may be able to turn Yawm’s plans against him.”

He pointed towards a giant tree etched into the map. Torix tapped it, “Yawm is stuck in here, trapped into absorbing the nutrients of the planet to feed and control his growing army. Our team will whittle away at what he has created, using them to grow stronger before assassinating each of his named, disciples, and followers. One by one. “

Torix sighed, “Hopefully, by the time we reach Yawm, You and Althea will have strengthened enough for us to cripple or assault him. Either way, we will have a sentinel’s rights by the time we get that far into the plan. Perhaps that shall change

things, unless the reward is deceptive. If the situation spirals out of control before then, we'll use the dimensional slicer rewarded to Sentinels to go towards our planned fringe world."

I clapped my hands, "Now that sounds like a damn good plan. That's what we've been needing."

Torix walked over towards the center of the room, "It's a solid plan now that we've gained enough information to infer Yawm's plan. That's what this is all for. I'm revamping my little spies so that we can continue to plan and adjust as needed, depending on the circumstances. It should give us the bit of oomph we've been wanting."

Torix walked over towards the center of the ritual's circle and pressed a palm into the ground. The complex runic inscriptions glowed with light, folding off the floor. They formed into a circle, shining a bright blue for a moment before collapsing onto the fly.

Torix stood, wiping imaginary sweat from his forehead, "That should enable greater clarity for future messages. I wouldn't want you all running into another follower again. Organizing these events will likely have certain timed intervals between the dates of them. Perhaps a week or so between them. Besides that, I believe Althea is tiring of this lifestyle. She needs some time to relax, otherwise she's going to fall apart at some point."

I walked up and put a hand on Torix's shoulder, "You're doing a damn fine job of this Torix. It's good to know I'm in the hands of someone who's knows how to handle this kind of thing."

Torix glanced up at me, "You are...taller...When did you grow taller than me?"

"Probably after defeating Gabriel. Anyways, I need to show you something else."

I moved my hand off his shoulder and pressed my fingers into my palms. The ascendant mana roared in my veins, turning my flesh and blood into pure energy. The rich, powerful force surged through my runes, resonating in the confines of them. There was wobbling in the runes, like an engine that needed some screws tightened.

The extra perception was already paying off. I couldn't even sense how my runes weren't quite right before. Now I could tell they weren't exactly right for my new mana. It was like an off-center wheel. It wobbled a bit, making the rune convert the mana less efficiently than it should. After tearing the runes earlier, a more flexible enchantment would be needed. Something larger and different for the larger flow and different mana coming in.

Torix would be vital in learning that. I raised a hand, the ascendant mana pouring from my palm. Several planks of wood cracked under my foot before I poured more mana

into my silent casting. The wood sheared, letting take several planks of wood and circle them around me.

My mind exhausted at the sheer volume of magic done, I released the cast. The planks fell to the ground before the room returned to the normal morning light. I sighed,

“Hah, hah, hah...how was that?”

Torix pointed at the boards, “Was that...telekinesis?”

“Uh, yeah. I think so.”

“And was that...augmentation you used to do it?”

I shook my head, “Naw. It was a new type of mana. I fused augmentation and dominion magic into something called ascendant magic. It works like both, with a few kinks here or there.”

Torix blinked a few times, “Ascendant? Are you certain?” Torix reached out a hand, “Would you mind letting me control some?”

I reached out a hand, pouring the mana from my palm.

“Uh, am I doing this right?”

“Yes.” Torix bended the mana before squeezing his fist. The mana sunk in before Torix grinned, “This is a potent cocktail you’ve made.” He pulled the mana from him before pressing his fingers together. As he outstretched his hand, the planks all bent in the same direction, forming a spiral that completed a perfect circle of missing wood. His hand lowered as Torix nodded,

“This is much like an overseer’s mana. Theirs’s is a mixture of origin and augmentation mana. It’s less volatile, but this mana may carry even more power. Controlling it should be quite trying. Are you able to handle it?”

I weighed my hand back and forth, “Eh, more or less.”

Torix shrugged, “Good enough I suppose. You’ll gain a more precise handling of it over time. It’s an excellent tool to have. Perfect for gravity wells. That’s what I just used it for, a reverse gravity spiral. It’s difficult to maintain without high constitution.”

Torix’s eyes narrowed as he looked me over, “That shouldn’t be a problem for you however, being taller than me now.”

I laughed, “Neither will a limit on my mana. With my armor, I regenerate it at a pace I doubt any mage could match.”

Torix rolled his eyes, “Really now? You’d be surprised how many tools there are out there for enhancing the regeneration of mana. What would yours be per minute? A thousand?”

“Eh, eleven.”

Torix scoffed, “Hundred? Nothing exceptional, for a pure mage of your level at least. Commendable for your warrior roots.”

“No, I meant eleven thousand.”

Torix leaned back, his face scrunched up. He looked pissed as he frowned, “Lies. Show me your status.”

I opened it then twirled it towards him. The interface flew in a semicircle before stopping in front of him. Torix’s jaw dropped. He glanced back up at me, then back down at the status. He whispered,

“40,000 health...11,000 thousand health regeneration...98% damage resistance...7 attributes totaling over 100. An enormous amount of bonus physical damage and stamina pool. Your aura, it’s improved dramatically in strength. How...how have you gained so many tools and stats?”

I tapped my armor, “This gives me the bonus resistance, most of my health regeneration, and the aura. My obliterator tree basically doubles my stat points per level. My determinator bonuses give me a ton of extra willpower, endurance, and regeneration. Finally, my genesis of potential tree lets me unlock the level 100 perks for seven of my stats. It’s a solid bunch of stuff I’m bringing, though learning how to use this mana better would be huge for me.”

Torix blinked, stunned to silence for a few moments. He nodded a few times before laughing. His laugh grew until it was nigh maniacal. He met my eye and said,

“Yes, gravity magic will be perfect for you. After unlocking it and mastering your mana, you’ll live up to your title.”

He nodded, his grin growing till his grew almost evil,

“Except you won’t be a harbinger. We’ll turn you into cataclysm.”

Chapter 53: Making Progress

I shrugged, “Well, we’ll have to see later down the line. What’s the first step to becoming some crazy master of gravity?”

Torix grabbed his chin, a serious look replacing them mania from earlier, “Hmmm. Learning to master your mana would be the first step. After that, creating runes for it, considering how effective they are for stabilizing it.”

He nodded, “All that is required after the basics is spatial chaining, dimensional locking, then mass deviation.”

I bit my lip, pulling my armor back so that we could see one another eye to eye. I frowned, “Like, that shit sounds really, really complicated.”

Torix waved away my concerns with a hand, “Nonsense. Anything that is complicated can be made simple by breaking it into enough parts. Learn each of those pieces, master them, then use them in conjunction. That is all a master of any craft does.”

I sighed as he continued, “In your case, your runic abilities allow us to create shortcuts in knowledge. A proper set of runes acts much like mastering a basic function. In your case, creating your own runes will be necessary. That requires at least a basic understanding of the underlying principles.”

I nodded, grinding my teeth for a moment before glancing at the runes on my forearms, “I guess these runes let me use my ascendant mana.” I glanced at my palms, “These runes let me use telekinesis.” I glanced back up to Torix, “Why do their usages have to stop there, right?”

“Precisely. Have faith in yourself Daniel. Anyone may learn anything. The only thing between you and this knowledge is discipline and time. Put both of those principles to practice, and you will become a master soon enough.”

I clasped my fists, “Alright, cool. Let’s get started.”

He grinned, “We’ll start with reviewing your runes and working on the next working incantation.”

Since Althea needed a break from constant slaughter, Torix and I worked together on learning the basics of what I needed to know. Turns out, it required a lot more learning than anything I’d done before. Even after a few days’ worth of lessons, most of the material was foggy.

The first few steps were the most difficult. We started with learning how to manipulate my mana without my runes. I hadn’t realized just how reliant on them I had become until I tried channeling the mana without the runes help. It was almost impossible to do so without going ballistic.

That weird voice roared in my mind like an endless echo anytime I surged it. Trying to handle delicate tasks with my mana while that fervor flooded my veins was like trying to

paint the Mona Lisa with a sledgehammer. If I summed the experience up in a single word, exhausting.

I had all the time and focus in the world though. All my willpower and endurance allowed me to handle this kind of task with a sheer force of will. Imagine learning how to manipulate the mana was like breaking a brick with your body. Breaking that brick could be done in numerous ways, but I just slammed my face against it till it crumbled. I learned a lot of extra tidbits that way, oddly enough.

If I ever lacked motivating for instance, I could burn through a light portion of the mana. If I only used a small amount of it, it acted like caffeine in coffee. That energizing aura helped whenever my desire to continue waned. Considering I didn't need sleep, that urge came up often.

Another tip I picked up was that I could form my armor into the runes now. With the new evolution of my armor, a new level of control came as well. With that extra precision, I could create intricate patterns in my armor if I wanted to. I didn't care for enhancing my aesthetics, but learning to manipulate my runes on the fly would be invaluable.

With a bit more experimenting, I could make tiny wires that traveled down the flesh of my arm from the runes. This change acted as a conductor for the mana, just like with the smaller wires in my muscle. When manipulating my armor like that, Torix would sit over me and analyze my work. He said it reminded him of self-surgery. I agreed.

Rewriting my runes was difficult as well. I had to make the wording short and sweet, otherwise the runes became inefficient. Since ascendant mana was a combination of both dominion and augmentation mana, my runes had to cover twice the ground in half the time so to speak. In the end, it reminded me of writing poetry.

Every phrase had to carry multiple meanings. The visual layouts of the runes came into play, becoming pivotal in how each piece of it was interpreted. The runes became more powerful with a jagged, rough lettering instead of smooth. The way the letters looked had to reflect the feel of the energy coursing through them.

That's not even tapping into the intricacies of the meaning in the words. Wrath, power, rage, control, even discipline, it all had to mix into a line or two. Like writing a story with drama and tension in only ten words, writing the passage would take time.

After a week of working on all the different aspects of mana manipulation and the runic carving, I managed some functioning prototypes. They would function more or less like the previous ones, though a bit more efficiently. I wouldn't need to massive pools of mana into simple effects. I still had a choppy control of it though, so a few backfires were bound to happen.

Our next mission was coming up. Everything passed by in a haze during that time since I studied like an obsessive madman the whole time. I didn't need to stop though,

because one of my willpower perks took away the need to sleep. That meant I was in a state of perpetual progress, which put me more and more ahead of Althea.

Speaking of which, she wasn't handling everything too well. I couldn't blame her though. Living in Schema's world was like living in an endless war. You fight monsters, the decaying bodies of your friends, a few mutant chimeras here or there. Even the strongest willed person needed a break from it every now and again. Schema, being a robot, didn't understand that.

That dissonance in his understanding of a person was where most of the problems with his system came from. If he just had a working army or portion of the population that fought then he could dish out the rewards to everyone based on merit. In the current system, you had to fight regardless of if you liked it or not. People like Althea struggled in that kind of world.

So during the day of the mission, I knocked on her tent. She snapped,

"Who is it?"

"Uh, Daniel. Did I catch you at a bad time?"

She unzipped the tent, her silver skin and purple hair as shocking as always. She stuck out anywhere like a sore thumb. She sighed before going back into her tent,

"Yeah, you can come in."

I waited a few seconds before stepping inside. If I was to describe the place, it was messy. Not in a filthy sort of way, but like the place was lived in. Compared with the eerie clean of Torix's place, it was a refreshing difference.

The unmade bed and a few cooking books were spread out on the ground. Based on the smell of food in the room, Althea may have tried cooking a thing or two. It was strange. Who knows, maybe it was weird that I thought cooking was weird. Cooking was like fixing my hair or driving in a car. It was a relic of a different time, something that was useless now.

At least I thought so. It was still kind of cool that she wanted to learn how to cook. Althea hopped onto her bed, her legs crossed as she leaned onto them. She wasn't wearing the long, flowing robe like before. She wore fitted combat fatigues with a belt around her waist. It accentuated her figure. Even with all the changes Schema made, I was still a teenage guy. My hormones blazed before I doused them out with a mental lashing.

I grinned, "You pumped for the mission?"

She rolled her eyes, "No. I don't want to do all this murdering anymore. I don't understand how you can be so cheery about it. We're slaves for Schema's sake."

"Eh, a man chooses, a slave obeys. I've chosen to fight. You can too."

She pointed at me, "See, you would never have said that when we first met. You'd be all gruff and curt. Schema changed you. You think it's natural to stay awake for weeks on end, studying non-stop?"

"Well, with my willpower- "

She snapped, "There it is again. Don't you care if that robot is getting into your head and changing things around? Doesn't that bother you?"

I raised an eyebrow, "Are you telling me it bothers you?"

She spread her arms, "Of course it does. I want to be me. I don't want to be some glorified servant for Schema."

I sighed, putting my hands on my hips. An awkward silence passed for a second before I met her eyes with my own,

"There's something you have to understand. This world, it isn't going to change for you. No matter how much you beg, Schema won't even give you a second glance. You will be chewed up, spit out, and thrown onto a pile of corpse if you aren't ready for an unknown monster."

My eyes steeled and my hand clasped, "You and I, we have a ton of help. Don't pretend like you don't have it easy compared with other people. Hell, my friends were turned into monsters. Me being alive, that's lucky. That's something to celebrate when the world outside is like that."

Althea grimaced, "I just...I don't want to be like that. I want to be able to enjoy my time and relax. I never can. I'm always fighting. Either that, or I'm always studying for the next fight. It's just...I'm tired of it all."

I sighed. I glanced at my palms. The new inscriptions brimmed with a silent power, like a loaded gun. I glanced back up at her, "You have a choice. Either you let the darkness outside creep in, or you can let your own darkness creep out. I remember reading about some guy who said to be careful when fighting monsters."

"Because their dangerous?"

"No. Because in fighting monsters, you may become one. I will never become a monster. Instead, I'll eat them."

“Uh...doesn’t that make you one?”

I scratched my nose for a second, “Hmmm...well I guess so. Uh, let me think for a second.” I pressed my hands against my temples for a few seconds. After a few moments of thought, I smacked one of my fists into an open palm,

“I think I can describe it. I won’t be a monster of men. I’ll be a monster of monsters. It’s like, uhm, imagine something made to scare you, a boogeyman of sorts.”

She leaned back into the bed, accentuating her chest for a moment,

“What do you mean boogeyman?”

I refocused myself, “It’s a tale told to small children. You tell them that if they misbehave, a boogeyman will come out and scare the shit out of them. It’s just something made to scare someone.”

She nodded as I continued, “I want to be a boogeyman to the boogeyman. A monster to the monsters. When they think to eat someone, I want them to think in the back of their mind that I’ll come and tear them apart. I don’t know, a legend or something like that maybe.”

Althea laughed before I shot down a wave of embarrassment. I waved her off, “I haven’t thought it all the way through.”

Althea smiled, “No, I get it. I just...I thought you were a machine or something like that. Who knew I could make some sense of your goals.”

I nodded, “Well, you aren’t very transparent either. You just sit there and be quiet all the time. It’s really hard to get a grip on who you are.”

Althea rolled her eyes, “And you’re just a worker. You work all the time, twenty-four seven. Who’s supposed to relate to that?”

“I don’t know. Calculators.”

Althea laughed again. I grinned with her before letting myself out as I said,

“Anyways, I figured you could use some cheering up before the mission. Just know that you can make anything miserable. This-“ I gestured to everything around us, “-doesn’t have to be.”

She sighed before grinning for once,

“I guess I’ll try to make the most of it.”

I nodded, leaving the tent. With the first blitz coming later that day, I walked over towards my own tent and checked my status. After a week of studying, I gained quite a few skills and points into those skills. Ascendant Manipulation, Soul Conduit, and I even had a breakthrough in two skills, Carving into Oblivion and Comprehension of Oblivion.

Those were the skills for carving runes and understanding them. I passed 50 in both of those skills, which let me develop the new runic passaged in my forearms, shins, and palms. All in all, 123 tree points. I glanced at my current tree.

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)(13/50)

I placed 37 points into the tree, messages popping up in my notifications.

With the might of your struggle, rip your enemy asunder. Rive them apart with fury of frenzy and the might of malice. +2% total damage.

Feast on their flesh. Bathe in their blood. Break into their bones and mold their marrow. This wrath of yours, it's a tool. +2% total damage.

In order to inflict hurt on someone, you must come at them with the intention to hurt. You must embrace the primal. +2% damage.

And make the primal frenzy your own. +2%, and unlocks the skill Primal Frenzy. [!Skill already unlocked!] +5% total damage added to bonuses.

Primal frenzy was what the voice wanted me to embrace. In order to use dominion magic, I had to be using that skill, but it made that weird voice in my head take over. I didn't like that, so I got rid of it. I guess the tree adjusted since I got rid of the skill.

In total, just a few tree points gave me 13% more damage. At a lower level, that wasn't a big deal. Now it was a massive bonus. With the tree finished, the menu for selecting my next tree appeared.

[III Fighter(Kill an enemy 40 levels over you. Path of Iron perk obtained.)(0/50)]

[Cosmic Soul(Obtain level three different soul related skills before level 500, ascendant 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 selected the Fighter tree line, hoping for some easy bonuses. After filling out all the points in the tree, it didn't disappoint.

Those that enjoy battle and live for it are strongest. Either you gain the discipline to become a master of it, or you simply feed an obsession. +3% to physical damage and physical damage reduction multiplier.

You are the latter. The act of war is narcotic for you, a therapy of sorts. While other people find peace in paradise, you find your center among a mass of corpses. +3% to physical damage and damage reduction multiplier.

Only there can you truly focus. Once you've seen the brilliance of battle, everything else shines dull by comparison. Even the brightest light dies down to a grim gray. +3% to physical damage and damage reduction multiplier.

That gray bleeds into life, infecting it with an overwhelming apathy. Finding purpose amidst that gray is as senseless trying to nurture a predator on bread. One day, they will need blood. +3% to physical damage and reduction multiplier.

One day, so will you. +3% to physical damage and reduction multiplier. +50% to physical damage.

This tree didn't work out as well as the last one. The 50% extra physical damage wasn't much in comparison with my 3000+ physical damage bonus. The multiplier added onto my other multipliers too, but it wasn't multiplicative. Still, it was enough to notice. The tree menu popped back up again.

[Cosmic Soul(Obtain level three different soul related skills before level 500, ascendant 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)]

This time I selected cosmic soul. It looked like it may help with the runic stuff I was focusing on. I only had 36 points left, so I put all of them into the tree. Before heading out on the mission, I had one other set of bonuses to finish.

One of the big trees I finished, Genesis of Potential, increased the amount of dungeon cores I could absorb. From 1/4th my level to half of it. That meant I had a couple of bonus cores to eat before we left. That meant talking with Kessiah or Torix to make good on the bonuses.

With that in mind, I walked through the camp. As I did, the eyes of soldiers bore into the back of my head. Most of the people here at the steel legion were just normal people before Schema came. They just assumed I was some interspecies monster. Kessiah and Althea on the other hand even formed little cults that almost worshipped them.

It was a strange feeling. In a way, I was more disliked and divorced from humanity than two aliens. I still wasn't hated like Torix though. The steel legion utterly despised him. I couldn't blame them either. He killed their leader, had them reorganize three times in three weeks, and worked them to the bone. I mean what else did they expect. He's a necromancer. He needs his skeletons.

Get it? Cause he works them to the bone...Alright, yeah. Back to the story.

I wasn't despised as much as I was feared. The title and blackened armor made me intimidating as fuck. I'm guessing that's why no soldiers had even attempted walking up and talking to me this entire time.

That all changed as I walked over towards Kessiah's tent. I was glancing at my status screen like I was holding a phone. Felt weird to look at it while staring straight forward, so I ended up bumping into a soldier who was passing by.

I didn't mean to, but I knocked him onto the ground like I was a linebacker tackling him. I even dented a piece of his armor, and he dropped his rifle into a patch of mud. As I turned my head to glance at him, he scrambled onto his knees.

He pulled off his helmet before wobbling back onto his feet. He gave me a short salute, his messy brown hair and five o'clock shadow making him look older than he was.

"I-I'm sorry sir. I should have been looking where I was going."

Being polite, I pulled my helmet back, exposing my face. I gave him a smile,

"It's no big deal." I pointed at his rifle, "Is that a problem though?"

He glanced at the rifle, mud lodged in some of the mechanical parts. He picked it up,

"Uh, yes. But, I-I mean it's not your problem. It's mine sir."

I put out my hand to him. He glanced around before handing me the rifle. His hands shook as he did so. I glanced inside the compartments, looking it over. Bits of grit were in the loading chambers, along with the barrel. Cleaning it would be a complete pain in the ass.

The soldier turned pale as I moved the gun around to view it. Testing my new runes, some ascendant mana flared into my palm. The runes glowed a bright crimson, making red light sheen off my armor. Using my palm enchantments, I pulled the grit from the

rifle. Taking care not to mess with anything else in the rifle, I cleaned it with my telekinesis over the next few seconds.

I handed the rifle to him, the barrel of the rifle facing me instead of him. I figured it was politer that way. He took it from me, his hands shaking. I raised an eyebrow,

“What’s got you so scared?” I laughed, “Did you think I was going to shoot or something crazy like that?”

I glanced around. A group of people were standing in a circle around us. I was making quite the scene. The soldier glanced around, frozen in place. I rolled my eyes,

“What kind of guy do you take me for? You drop a rifle and then get killed...That’s crazy talk.”

Someone chimed from the group, “That’s what happened to the Sargent.”

With all eyes on me, I shrugged, “Think of that as a change in management. Torix needed an example. Your Sargent was the unfortunate victim of that example. Me though-“ I tapped my chest, “I’m not going to do something like that.”

I pointed at them, “If you fire at me, I’ll kill you where you stand.” I lowered my hand, “Anything else and I’m completely fine with it. I just want to stop Yawm. That bastard needs to die, and I’m the man to do it. Stand in my way, I’ll kill you too. Walk with me, and I’ll be your sword and shield. Remember that.”

Right in front of me, I tapped the brown-haired guy’s shoulder pad,

“Bumping into me is nothing to worry over. Relax and work hard. We’ve got a monster to kill.”

I walked off, leaving the group of soldiers behind me. Once they thought I was out of earshot, an electric whispering took over the crowd.

“He isn’t so bad.”

“And here I thought Jeff was dead.”

“Not such a bad guy I guess.”

Being in a state of perpetual fear must have taken its toll on them. Seeing a more human side to our group helped moral more than I imagined it would though. I walked through the camp, reaching Kessiah’s tent. I tapped on it, but no one replied. I frowned.

“You in there Kessiah?”

Silence was my answer. I unzipped the entrance, glancing inside. Messy as a garbage bin, Kessiah wasn't inside her tent. I closed the door, the smell of half eaten food leaking out. I surveyed the area, noticing no one else nearby.

Thinking Torix had some dungeon cores, I walked up towards Torix's house that he turned into a laboratory. As I neared by, Kessiah and Torix's voices came into focus.

Kessiah whispered, "Are you serious? 30,000 health?"

Torix answered, "Even more. His health regeneration was over 10,000 a minute. Every stat across the board was inflated for his level. I never honestly believed we stood a chance against Yawm. Now, I do."

"It doesn't matter how tough the guy is. If Yawm hit's him with the sentinel's spear, he's done for."

"Daniel has already been sent to the eldritch and returned. He will survive what no other has survived."

With an evil glint, Torix uttered,

"He will survive exile."

Chapter 54: How to End a Legend

Kessiah murmured, "No, that's impossible. Why would you want him to?"

A giant set of pincers raised out of the ground and clamped onto my waist. A giant beetle with armored plates all over it rose out of the ground and dashed towards the house. Like chunking a sack of flour, the beetle tossed me through the window.

I flew before smashing into the window. Bits of drywall snapped along with the shattered glass panes. I tackled into the floor, tearing through a few planks of wood. As I glanced up, Kessiah had her hands on her hips while Torix crossed his arms.

Torix mouthed, "Shame on you, disciple."

Kessiah shook her head, "And here I thought you were trustworthy. Tsk, ts, tsk."

I stood up, lunging up off one knee while Torix glanced his eyes at Kessiah,

"As trustworthy as a snake."

I rolled my eyes,

“Alright guys, you got to admit you were both being suspicious. Besides that, what did you mean by exile?”

Kessiah propped her weight onto one hip, “You remember the sentinels?”

“Uh, yeah.”

Kessiah opened her arms, “You remember how they’re level 5000 with spears that tear through dimensions?”

“That’s a hard thing to forget.”

“Who knows, you might find a way. Any who, those spears aren’t all that good for cutting people. Sentinels will grab you, slice a hole in the fabric of space time, and chunk you in there.”

I frowned, “So in other words, they exile you.”

“Bingo.”

Torix nodded, “You’ve been there before. Whenever we opened the portal using the ancient ruins in BloodHollow. Who was it...Ah yes, Baldag-Ruhl I believe. He is the maker of that rift. You were put within it.”

I nodded, “Yeah. I remember it being utterly terrifying, meeting Etorhma and everything.”

Torix raised a palm to me,

“But you see, we now know you can survive exposure to the dimensional energy within the eldritch’s dimension. You can survive the exile.”

I shrugged, “I mean we only put my arm in there. Shoving all of me in there is a big step.”

“Etorhma pulled you through the portal, and you lived. That is more than enough proof. Your armor prevents you from dying. Yawm on the other hand, we don’t know if he will or not.”

Kessiah placed a hand on my shoulder,

“You can pull Yawm into the eldritch dimension with you. So, what do you say?”

I brushed her arm off,

“Fuck no.”

Kessiah frowned,

“Well, I wouldn’t wanna go in either, but we don’t really have any other way of killing Yawm. You and Althea are going to struggle to get over level 1500, even with doubled experience. That’s nowhere near enough to defeat Dakhma, let alone Yawm or Ajax.”

I sighed, raising both hands, “Here’s the thing. Why not just use a ghoul or something you summoned Torix?”

“The issue with using one of my summons comes with how the sentinel’s spears are designed. Think of them as enemy specific. They are designed to destroy eldritch, and to be able to allow the sentinel’s to travel. My minions, while not actually eldritch, are registered as eldritch.”

I raised an eyebrow, “How do you know that?”

“Because the dumbass tried capturing one once.”

Torix frowned, “An entire army of minions disintegrate in seconds.” Torix sighed, “You’ll be able to sustain yourself within the dimension as well. My minions disintegrate into mana when exposed to the eldritch’s domain.”

“Man...Fuck. Gah, that sucks. Like, that really, really sucks.”

Torix nodded his head, “Indeed it does. I’m sorry the burden of this task belongs to you. The fortunate piece of this puzzle is that you have time. Time to forge yourself into a warrior that even Yawm may fear.”

I leaned onto my knees, breathing out for a moment. Despite how insane the plan sounded, defeating Yawm by whittling away his entire army of followers sounded even more insane. Yawm had so many strengths, beating him in direct combat may not even be possible. Using this kind of cunning would work well by comparison.

Besides, I didn’t want to spend the next 50 years reaching Yawm’s level.

I banged my fists into my knees, the force of the strikes breaking the planks of wood further. My dexterity and heightened senses let me disperse the force better. Otherwise I’d fall through the floor. I lifted myself up,

“Alright, I’ll do it. I have a better option though.”

Torix raised an eyebrow, “And what might that be?”

“We kill one of the followers, get sentinel rights from Schema, then use the spear they give us.”

Kessiah leaned back, her lips pursed, "Heh, I guess we could do that."

Torix cupped his chin, "Indeed we could. We could then send each of his other followers to random worlds or dimensions. That would leave Yawm all alone, ripe for the taking."

I opened my arms, "I know right? I'm a genius."

Torix lifted out his hand and thumped my nose. With my armor reinforcing my flesh, Torix's finger clanged against the skin and bone. Torix pulled his finger back,

"What in the name of Schema is that?"

I tapped my head with my gauntlet. A dull clang let out like a piece of metal covered in playdough. I grinned,

"The armor reinforces my bones and muscles. That's why my damage resistance is up to 98%."

Kessiah walked over. She put her thumb into her mouth, biting down through her skin. Blood leaked down her hand before she wiped it onto her index finger. She walked over and flicked me. My head swung back like I was impacted by a sledgehammer. She grinned,

"I've got a few new tricks up my sleeve."

I frowned, "What the fuck was that?"

Torix frowned, "Hemomancy. The process of using blood for magic."

"What the fuck? Where was that when you fought Dakhma?"

Kessiah glanced down, her face harsh. She grimaced, "I didn't want to use it."

I spread my hands, "What, why?"

Torix shook his head, "It's long and complicated. We'll speak with you later."

She placed a hand on his shoulder, "Enough of that. He isn't some kid you took under your wing anymore. He's one of us. The guys going into a different dimension for Schema's sake. The least I can do is explain."

She glanced back at me, "Uh, well..." She let her hand off Torix, letting her arms flop on her sides,

"I'll get to the point. I had a daughter. She was very...talented in hemomancy. Most of my family was. The thing is, hemomancy is tough to control. Once the spell has been

cast, it will draw however much blood it needs from you. Even if you die, it will continue draining you to a dry husk.”

I frowned, “Did your daughter mess up a spell?”

Kessiah shook her head, “No. Another one of her classmates did during a demonstration. The way it works is the spell will drain you of blood till you die. If it still needs mana, it will take on hosts until it has enough to complete itself. Her classmate overexerted herself and died. The spell kept draining blood from her classmates.”

Kessiah stopped talking for a moment. She took a breath, “And my daughter, being the brave little girl she was, tried to help her classmates. She ended up stopping it from draining the entire room. But...”

Kessiah closed her eyes. A moment passed again, and she opened them, “The spell cast and destroyed the entire portion of the space shuttle. Everyone died. Everyone.”

I glanced at the broken planks beneath me. A long, awkward silence passed the room. It was a suffocating sort of silence, one of those kinds of silences that makes the air heavy and makes you wish you were somewhere else.

Torix interrupted that silence, “The greatest tragedy is for a parent to outlive their child.” He placed a hand on her shoulder. Kessiah shook her head, and as if the gloom was never there, she shrugged,

“And that’s why I haven’t done any hemomancy since. It’s dumb, childish even. I couldn’t bring myself to do it until after you saved me from Dakhma. Made me realize this isn’t some game. I can’t be a spoiled kid and not do something just because it’s unpleasant.”

A sad, slight grin traced her lips, “If I keep living in the past, I’ll never have a future.”

She took a step forward, ruffling the hair on my head.

“Come on big man. We got a mission we need to finish. You need the dungeon cores right? You gained a few levels.”

I glanced at Torix. He was pokerfaced, so I just turned back to her,

“Uh. Yeah. I forgot to mention it, but one of my trees lets me get more dungeon cores. I need, I don’t know...at least ten.”

Kessiah nodded, unzipping the gray knapsack at her side. Pulling out the ring and opened the starry sky portal. Reaching her hands into it, she pulled out five dungeon cores. She handed them to me before reaching into the portal and taking out a few more.

The cores sunk into my armor on contact, notifications popping up in the corner of my vision. It took a total of seventeen cores before my armor ceased absorbing them. Torix sighed,

“This is a fortune’s worth of cores. I hope you’re willing to pay that debt in time.”

I picked up a dungeon core from the floor, the black sphere surrounded in red clanking onto the floor. It bounced off my armor, no longer sinking in once I hit my dungeon core cap. I glanced at it,

“I think hopping into that dimension will suffice.”

I handed the core back to Kessiah, “Thanks for all the cores. I’ll put them to good use, I assure you.”

Putting the core back into the portal, Kessiah pocketed the ring,

“You damn well better. That was a couple years on a fringe world I just handed you.”

“And hopefully, you won’t ever need to again. Besides, I’ll be able to pay you back with interest later. How does a suit of sentinel armor sound?”

She grinned, “I suppose that’ll do.” She walked towards the doorway, “I’m going to get Althea. You can do whatever with your status till we meet back up here.”

Kessiah left before I turned towards Torix,

“Man...That really sucks. I mean fuck...”

Torix nodded, “Grieving. It’s a painful process. Neither of us were any good at moving on. Tough to be immortal and not know what to do with your time. It’s like life becomes some sort of curse. Combine that with Schema’s oppressive labeling of us as unknowns, and life turns to a boorish chore. This whole venture was revitalizing for both of us.”

Torix paced back towards the floor. After opening a portal, he pulled out a brush made from hair. He pulled out a bowl full of red liquid. Dabbing the brush into it, the color changed to black and the consistency to a thick sludge. He marked on the floor, designing a new ritual.

I watched in a daze, sort of numb from Kessiah’s sudden story. I guess saving someone’s life had a way of making them open. Regardless, I walked over towards a wall and sat down. My back pressed an inch into the dray wall, leaving an impression. I sighed as I opened my status.

Up till now, I'd invested all my skill points from cores into Boundless Storm. It was my only mythical skill after all. That was something I never focused on, the level of my skills. I figured it was a hell of a lot more productive to focus more on learning than checking them out. Now I figured it was time to give them a look see.

Most of the skills related to my studies had made damn decent progress, capping out around the 60 to 70 mark. The only standouts were pain resistance and Boundless Storm. Pain resistance was at 100, giving me 99.9% pain resistance. On the other hand, boundless storm was at 167. It was a skill over level 100.

I turned to Torix, "Can skills go above 100?"

"Only mythical skills can. They have a cap of a 1000. In other words, you may increase them endlessly."

"For real?"

Torix glanced up from his marking, "Of course. Why else would you be willing to sacrifice 15 different skills and half the points you gain from them. There's no other reason too otherwise."

"And about that blood magic, it seems like it isn't any different from Arcane Blood."

"Of course it is. Arcane blood converts mana into health. Hemomancy sacrifices health to create temporary buffs. You couldn't harvest a hemomancer's blood and use it as fuel for instance. However, that is possible with someone with Arcane Blood."

"What are they sacrificing their blood too?"

Torix sighed, "Baldowah. One of the nastier Old Ones." He pointed his brush at me, "Enough questions. Finish allocating your points. They'll be back soon."

I nodded, glancing back down at my menu screens. With such an enormous bonus towards my skill point total, I could even max out a few stats if I wanted to. I turned towards Torix,

"Is it ok if I ask some questions about skills then?"

Torix resumed his markings, "What do you need to know?"

"What would happen if I maxed out ascendant manipulation? Wouldn't I become some sort of savant in an instant?"

"No. Some skills give bonuses that are absolute. Pain Tolerance is a perfect example. You may max it and gain it as an ability. On the other hand, learning skills act as multipliers. However effective you are with the ascendant mana, your skill total will

multiply that. Even Schema cannot zap knowledge into your brain. Knowledge is one of the few things you cannot buy. It must be earned."

"So if I maxed out ascendant mana, it would double how effective I am with it, but I would still need to actually learn how to use it?"

Torix nodded, "Think of Althea when she first sparred you. Her aiming skills were top notch. They allowed her to shoot precisely where you were. With a few jerks in random directions though, she couldn't hit you at all. That is the difference between having a skill and knowing how to use it. Your mythical skill, Boundless Storm, bridges that gap for you in most instances."

Torix dabbed the brush into the thick, black sludge, "It's a powerful skill, even by mythical skill standards."

"Alright, cool. Thanks for the explanation."

"Keep one fact in mind. Just as it is the responsibility of the tutor to give good answers, it is the responsibility of the student to ask good questions. As annoying as it is to be interrogated by you, these are still good questions."

I nodded, glancing back down towards my status. Putting points into knowledge centric skills wouldn't do much for me then. Plus, focusing on higher level skills gave greater returns anyways. With a level 1 skill, gaining a point in the ability was simple. On the other hand, bridging the gap from 99 to 100 took a very long time.

Taking my time allocating those skill points was a good idea for the long run. Just like with allocating my attributes, I kept being efficient. There wasn't really a point in stopping now. I would wait until a skill was level 90 before I invested into it, besides for my mythical skill. I'd wait till it was at least over level 200 before making that one increase.

With that handled, I came to the far simpler business of using my attributes. It seemed like stacking endurance would remain the end goal for now, though putting points into constitution here or there was a good idea too. Over time, I would find some sort of balance between them.

Once I had a firmer grip on how gravitational and telekinetic energy worked, making these decisions would be easier. Honestly though, constitution and endurance were all I needed. Since my leveling perks ensured a solid baseline in seven of my nine attributes, I only needed to beef up what made me strong.

That's right. I needed some moar motherfucking health.

I furiously allocated the points into endurance, needlessly pressing on the virtual button. I could just use thought to put the points in them if I wanted to, but the satisfaction of

pressing the button was too great. Once I finished, I set my eyes onto my status screen. Like the slow coming of a red tide, the amount of health I had was awe inspiring.

Level 563

Strength – 252.6 | Constitution – 562.1 | Endurance – 960

Dexterity – 100 | Willpower – 447 | Intelligence – 158.1

Charisma – 57.2 | Luck – 71.43 | Perception – 100

Daniel HillsideTotalsRegenBuffs/Debuffs

**Health47,591/47,59112,605/minOppression Damage-
15,000+40%hp/minStamina21,597/21,597253/secElemental Res – 98%Harbinger of
Cataclysm.07 Billion / 56.6 Billion69.4/per min(conduit)Plasma Res – 98%Phys Dam
Reduction – 98%Rad Res – 98%Phys Dam Bonus – 3952%Mental Res – 98%Total Damage
Bonus 20%Boundless Storm**

The thing is though, most of my other stats beefed up along with endurance. My core build was turning out to be constitution, willpower, and endurance. Secondary stats were strength and intelligence. The other stats were all solid besides charisma and luck, though neither were incompetent either. All in all, it turned my build into a very well rounded one.

With that handled, I began practicing telekinesis while waiting on the others. Something I figured out early on was that when you used telekinesis, there was a pull on you as well. If I tried pushing a boulder in the distance, it would push back. Think of Newton's laws of physics. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

That made all my constitution much more valuable. The reason I hadn't noticed it yet was because I only did small things, like stopping arrows or lifting rocks. When I tried moving something like a car, my feet would slide back and it felt like I was lifting the car.

Even more limiting, the further away I was, the worse the conversion was. Strength and constitution both became limitations because lifting even small objects from afar was very difficult. The telekinesis also couldn't lift from the inside of an object. When I lifted a clump of dirt, it lifted it from the outside.

Adding even further to the complexity was how I 'held' onto an object. If I was lifting a block of wood, the solid grip made lifting it easier. Lifting a block of sand was much more difficult, because I had to extend my grasp so that it didn't fall through the gaps. The most effective use of telekinesis so far had been close range amplification.

In other words, using the telekinetic power to enhance my own strikes and defenses. I could also use it like a bullet up to about 4-5 feet away. With a bit of focus, I could condense the surface of the telekinetic burst. The smaller it was, the more force I could put into it. This also gave it more piercing power, like I was using a sharp point of a sword instead of the dull hammer.

In fact, telekinesis worked a lot like extending my limbs in fact. Even though it sounds complicated, the rules just worked like I was lifting something with stretched out arms or something. I'm guessing that intuitive understanding stemmed from Boundless Storm like Torix said. He said that most people had to learn vector calculus at the very least before being an effective psionic.

Instead of running calculations in my head, I just felt my way through the power. Torix told me my massive health/mana pool worked in my favor as well. Telekinesis was dangerous for that reason. If you worked within the bounds of your strength, then the mana cost was minimal. Once you went outside the limits of your physical power, the mana cost for telekinesis was absurd.

It was easier to use my runes to increase my strength instead of trying to use mana for the telekinesis. All these little tips and tricks are what we focused on most over the last week. It let me come up with a few ideas for the power.

I walked outside, walking a block or two over towards another house. Beside the ugly, yellow building was a thick oak tree. I walked beside it, and set up into my normal fighting stance.

Something I'd been working on for a while had been the idea of adding a spin to the telekinetic strikes. I took karate when I was a kid, and the punches they made you do involved turning your wrist and palm. This caused a twist in the punch.

Honestly, in a normal punch this drill effect was almost useless. Your fists simply aren't sharp enough to get anything from the extra twisting in the punch. The telekinetic powers changed this. If I extended out little fields just in front of my fists and ended them in sharp points, it acted like wedges on my fists.

Standing in front of the tree, I let my right fist lay beside my hip. My palm faced upwards. Before I stomped forward to add power to the punch, I let out tiny, invisible fields to the edges of my feet. Imagine them like snowshoes.

You see, the dirt mushed underfoot now. I was dense and hard enough that dirt didn't give me enough grip use my full strength. I mean still I got enough resistance from it to add serious torque to my punches but not my full potential. It's like punching while standing on eight feet of snow. Your feet will just dig into the ground once you try getting some power from the ground.

I used my telekinesis to make my feet effectively larger, just like wearing snowshoes. It gave me a better grip on the soft earth, letting my slam my fist harder. If I was on sand, it would make a much bigger difference. It would help even on concrete.

And if there was something I learned from fighting to the death, it's this – every little bit counts.

I stomped forward, my feet barely digging into the earth. Cracks webbed through the ground. My arm shot straight forward as the force moved through my core and into my shoulders. Like firing a cannon, the built-up force exploded into my arm into my hand. My arm twisted as it bolted forward, my fist clasp as my palm turned to the ground.

With the telekinetic wedge at the front of my fist, my arm drilled forward. It spiraled right into the wood, crunching through the wood with ease. The tree cracked down the middle before my fist blew out the other side of it. Portions of the tree splintered, but my fist almost pierced the tree like an actual knife.

There was a circular impression made out in the tree, like a tornado had burrowed through it. At the back of the tree, it was like the exit point of a bullet wound. My fist had blown the back of it away, leaving a missing chunk of it.

I sighed as I pulled my fist out of the hole. I wanted my hand to drill all the way through. It would give me a piercing move against armored foes, which were my biggest weakness. If I faced Gabriel without using these new techniques, I may not be able to get through his armor. With that punch though, it may be possible.

It still wasn't perfect though, so I pulled my hand out of the tree. I could drill through the walls of houses, but trees were still a bit too much. I didn't just tear the tree in half though like when I first tried. The move would be difficult to learn. It was a combination of all my skills and stats up till now.

Strength and constitution's assistance was obvious. The other skills, not so much. Dexterity helped with the tiny adjustments mid strike and the flexibility helped me torque my arm more than a normal human. Perception let me spot the weakest parts of the tree, striking at tiny, minute cracks in the wood and bark.

Boundless Storm helped smooth out all the different parts I was working on. I mean, imagine trying to use fifteen different skills all at once. It's a nightmare. Boundless storm was easy as breathing to use, and let me focus on incorporating new techniques into my fighting style. It even made most skills easier to use while it was activated. The skill really showed its worth over time. Now that I was trying to amplify my fighting style with the telekinesis especially.

Those thoughts raced in my head as I wiped some splinters off my arm. I already heard a set of steps landing on the pavement of a nearby street before I even punched. I turned around, Kessiah and Althea walking up.

Kessiah put her hands on her hips when they reached me,

“Well I’ll be damned. What was that?”

“Something Torix and I’ve been working on.” I turned to Althea, “You ready to end some eldritch?”

Althea pursed her lips, “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

I walked forward, the grass ripping underfoot,

“Then let’s crush them to powder.”

Chapter 55: The Might of Progress

After making sure Althea had her dungeon cores maxed out as well, the three of us left towards the next dungeon. Apparently, it was a wierd, open kind of dungeon that existed within the local sports stadium. The three of us left the house before meeting up with two guards that Torix lended us. After the close call last time, he ensured us that he wasn’t going to hold back any longer.

Being summons of Torix’s, the guards were armored, enormous, and armed to the teeth. One of them wore a helmet with the antlers of an elk jutting from his head and shoulder pads. From under his helmet, the guard stared forward with floating, blue fires for eyes. Unblinking and soulless, he carried a sword ending in a hook in one hand with a chain and sickle that he carried in the other hand.

Aatrox Vernan(lvl 1200) – A summon of Torix Worm, this is a guardian spirit tethered to the corpse of a grand warrior. Using his sword and sickle, his attacks incapacitate foes at a distance before he pulls them in and guts them. Specializing in constitution, dexterity, and strength, his lack of health leaves him vulnerable to high damage per second foes.

The guardian spirit, while loyal in the utmost, lacks the adaptability of most mortal minds. This reduces his danger level drastically, but this summons still reaches the level of 1200 off raw power alone. You would likely die if he was on the other side, so count your prayers that this monster stands with you.

The other guard was a heavily alien with cloven feet and legs like a goat. His own horns twirled out to the side of his head, but a strong, long jaw full of sharp teeth was left unarmored. On its back, two enormous barrels pointed downwards. As we walked up to him, he lifted the cannons upwards in his arms, holding them like two miniguns.

Kade Byle(lvl 1200) – A summon of Torix Worm, this is yet another guardian spirit tethered to the corpse of a grand warrior. Using the two cannons mounted on his side,

the offensive potential of this guardian can threaten monsters of a far higher level. Kade lacks any meaningful defenses. He is the epitome of a glass-cannon.

Furthermore, the lack of an adaptable conscious prevents his offensive potential from shining. Everything must be planned with Kade, otherwise he'll be overwhelmed, either by numbers or by sheer bulk.

Having said that, he could likely blow you away in a few seconds of being exposed to his damage. He will be a strong tool for your arsenal.

All in all, they looked completely badass. As we walked up, I said,

"Who are these guys?"

Kessiah sighed, "Two more summons of Torix."

I blinked a few times, "How many minions does he have?"

"More than a few, from what I can tell."

Althea chimed, "It's his mythical skill. It's going to be powerful."

I frowned, "Man. Makes my mythical skill look shitty by comparison."

Althea rolled her eyes, "He's had a long time to make his good. Give it time."

Kessiah hit my shoulder, "You haven't even seen mine in action."

I raised an eyebrow, "I thought your mythical skill made you dense or something."

Kessiah shook her head, "Sorry toots, that's the level 100 perk for constitution. My mythical skill is Hemomancy. I was born with it."

"Hell yeah."

Althea murmured, "Are these two things our guards?"

Kessiah turned to her, "Yeah, they are. Kade and Aatrox. They have names like they were named by some edgy teenager."

I added, "Yeah, whoever named them has no sense of taste in his naming skills."

Althea sighed, "Come on...Let's get this over with."

Kessiah frowned, "I preferred when you complained a little less."

"I'm just tired of this. It's no fun to just wake up, fight, train, sleep."

I walked forward towards the entrance of a sewer,

"Get used to it. If we can kill all four followers of Yawm, then you can get a Sentinel's rights. Probably. That's an easy way out of Schema's endless war I bet."

I lunged down and pressed the tip of my armored finger between the manhole and its cover. I popped the lid up and caught it with my other hand. I turned back towards Althea,

"What's that phrase...Ah yea, where there's a will, there's a way. You just have to have the will is all."

I leapt into the entrance, sliding through the air while smoothly sliding the cover back onto the entrance. My ascendant mana flared, the red light letting me see the coming ground. The circular, concrete walls slid past my face before I my feet slammed into the ground.

The concrete didn't crack as I landed. The telekinetic field around my feet dispersed the impact. My dexterity let me bend my knees as I landed in a fluid motion. If anything, I hardly even made a sound. I dashed forward, light on my feet as the fervor of ascendancy flowed within me. The others followed a few seconds after.

They caught up before we bolted towards the dungeon. I dashed between the two walkways lining the gray water. I grappled along, using the growing green vines cropped up around bits of light. Hell, on several of the curved segments of sewer, I picked up enough speed to run along the cylindrical walls. It was a blast just moving.

At one point, I had analyzed Althea's level. She was only level 467. Nearly a hundred levels below me, and that didn't even account for the distance my mythical skill made. She'd fallen behind. Looking back on it, I kind of saw it coming.

Althea never liked fighting, and she tired of it. If anything, I enjoyed it a little too much. She needed sleep and I didn't. That's 8-9 hours every day that I get to train and study without distraction that she doesn't have. I even get doubled experience from unique bosses, and that adds up over time.

Althea still had her own innate power, but she wasn't doing much with it. I, on the other hand, well I was thriving. The rift between us was a difference in mentalities in the end, especially considering we both had advantages no one else had.

I wouldn't slack off though. With my relentless approach to leveling and study, I was covering ground many times faster than a normal person. I wasn't competing with normal people anymore though. I left that behind a while back. I was competing with monsters now, and that meant I had to be a little bit of a monster myself.

Those thoughts swirled in my head as we reached near the stadium. We reached the entry point where I walked out of the sewer first. Considering how tanky my build was, I was an excellent vanguard for the group. Althea and Kade would sit back, with Kessiah and Aatrox as their protectors. I would run up and make a mess of the enemies ranks, like a distraction from the real threats of our group.

I didn't mind our setup. I liked being up close and personal when I fought anyways. It suited me, in more ways than one. With that strategy in mind, I reached up above manhole, out into the street. We were three blocks from the stadium, having a few intersections to cross before reaching the building. A minute later, the five of us where up the stadium stairs and walking inside.

Passing through the dilapidated, empty building, there was a slight echo in the distance. As we walked around the circular hallway, the sound grew in intensity. The pillars lining the wide hall shook and cast shadows off light from windows on the outer edge of the stadium. Walking on the checkered tile floor, a giant in a deep-sea diving suit walked up.

His steps caused cracks in the floor, and even the lightest touch from his massive foot shook the earth. From within his helmet, a dozen eyes glowed yellow. Its right arm ended in a drill, the tip of it digging a ditch in the ground. The left arm ended in a massive, gloved hand. Electricity pulsed from it, arcs of lightning streaking into the nearby area.

Along its back, the lightning created ozone that smelled like chlorine in a pool. The monster glanced up at us, the both of us standing still, like both of us stared at dark things. The kind of things you didn't want to look at, but you couldn't tear your eyes away.

Mauler, Keemak Juggernaut (lvl 877) – A servant of an undersea emperor of their home world, their kind lives in the dark. Having their kind enslaved by Yawm, they serve as juggernauts in his army. Covered in a thick suit with protective metallic plates, this monster carries two kinds of attacks. The arc reactor on its back powered the left-handed glove, letting it paralyze and destroy enemies at a distance.

If an enemy somehow closes the distance, the drill on its arm acts as a piercing attack, letting it destroy armored foes with ease. Be wary of this foe.

Kessiah pursed her lips,

“Shit...this is worse than I thought. Torix said the eldritch might have guards, but to send the Keemak as guards...”

Althea frowned, “The Keemak?”

Kessiah pointed forward, “It's that thing.”

The Keemak Mauler revved its drill, the spinning metal blaring loudly. Kessiah put a hand on my chest,

“We’ll let you handle this when you’re ready.”

I pushed her hand off my chest, “It’s not even a boss monster. It can’t be too hard.”

Kessiah glanced at me, her face worried, “It’s three hundred levels over you.”

I shrugged, “I probably have pretty even stats with the thing. I can handle him-“I turned to Althea, “-with a little help of course.”

A reluctant grin grew on Althea’s lips before the Mauler opened its left hand. Lightning burst from it, sparking into the nearby area. Singe marks burnt into the wall. Glass shattered as bolts blasted through them. Trash caught fire, creating tiny plumes of black smoke. I banged my fists together, the sounds echoing.

I grinned before running forward. The ascendant mana flooded my veins like liquid power. The telekinetic fields covered my fists, turning them into piercing drills. With a shocking speed, the Mauler slapped one of Althea’s spears out of the way. My grin grew at the sight of it. This would be a good fight.

I reached within punching range, a few hundred feet from the others. I activated oppression as bolts of lightning streaked towards me. The electricity charged into my armor, traveling deep into my bones. It dispersed through me, almost like I was drinking it.

Skill level up! Gorgor of Mana(lvl 2)!

A few more arcs streaked past my head, but my armor devoured the energy, starving for more. I reached the monster. With a mighty swing, the monster launched out its drill towards me. Keeping cold and calm, I diverted the drill, hitting it at an angle to make it slide past me along my armored shoulders. The sparks off the drill danced with the lightning in a display of sound and light.

I torqued my hand, twisting my hip as I turned my fist. With a heavy hook, I drilled my own punch into the side of the monster. The telekinetic point pierced the suit, digging inches into the armor. With my hand lodged in the monster, splinters of my armor expanded, gripping into the flesh of the creature.

As I stepped back and pulled my fist out, the splinters sheared the Mauler’s insides. A thick, blue blood covered my hand and dripped onto the floor as it stabbed its drill towards me. I slammed my front foot into the ground, using the force of the step as I deflected the drill once more with my right arm. A thin sleeve of telekinetic energy eased the process, smoothly gliding the monster’s wild attack away from me.

The drill veered off towards my right side, sparks flying off my armor. The drill left freshly carved trenches in my armor, the drill showing enough piercing power to slice through my armor. It didn't matter. The monster had no skill, something I was more than willing to exploit.

When striking his drill to deflect it, my arm bounced back. Using that momentum, I ducked down, following the force. As if gliding on my heels, I smoothly guided the inertia from the hit as I lunged up. Keeping my left elbow tight against my side, I rotated on my heels, weight building in my left hand.

Like a train wreck, my left fist punctured the monster's gut. The spines expanded as I jerked my fist out, turning the monster's insides into outsides. The organs and blood and bile flopped onto the ground, pouring like thick mush. The monster stumbled backwards, unable to handle the agony anymore.

The generator along its back flared with light, the energy coalescing into its palm. The ball of energy detonated forward, creating a flash of blue electricity. The bolt hit me, burning my armor and searing my flesh. I convulsed, the electricity causing my muscles to tense. As the lightning left me, I fell forward.

Before landing on my face, I caught my fall as I fell into a lunge. I pushed myself up, a quarter of my health missing. Even with my ascendant mana burning in my runes and forearms, my health readily climbed upwards. I smiled at the monster, almost feeding off its fear.

I pushed forward, slamming my fists together. The monster fell onto the ground, blood pouring from its two gaping wounds on its sides. As it landed, the earth quaked. I kept steady, my steps timed before reaching beside it.

It stabbed its drill towards me, but I lifted my foot and stomped on the contraption. The drill and the metal wires along the engine of it caved in, my stomp crumpling the metal. Again I stomped, and again his body caved. The monster whimpered, crushing under the onslaught. Within seconds, it turned into a blue sap spread all over the floor.

I turned back around, facing the group,

"I told you I could handle it."

Chapter 56: Guardians of Yawm

The sickle wielding guardian spoke with a steady voice,

"Impressive."

I raised an eyebrow,

"I thought these guys didn't have a conscious?"

Kessiah shrugged, "This isn't a normal guardian. Uh...Let me think." She frowned, pointing a finger towards the sky in mocking imitation,

"Indeed Kessiah. Using my incredulous intellect, I infused the corpses of two dead disciples into the corpses of warriors. I know, I know, hold your applause at me sheer and unmatched intellect."

Althea giggled at Kessiah's Torix impersonation. I even cracked a smile before the sickle guy spoke again,

"He gave us new life. What else are we to do but serve him?"

Althea mumbled,

"I don't know. Not serve him maybe?"

I rolled my eyes, "Come on, let's go. Yawm has guards here. Why? Probably because the fucker learned about our plans after I cleared the last dungeon. That means we have to hurry."

Kessiah gave me a short salute,

"Aye, aye captain."

I pressed my palm into the floor, my armor soaking up the blood in moments. After that, I walked up and consumed the corpse the same way. Each of these guys had about 5 million ambient mana as well. It would only take a whopping twelve thousand for my next armor evolution. At that point, I knew the grind would set in soon.

I hadn't hit that wall with my levels though. This wasn't a boss monster, so the experience bonus I gained from the Obliterator tree wasn't there. It not being a boss monster meant it had less experience regardless. I still gained an easy 43 levels from it though.

With that handled, I began pressing the select button before the perk screen appeared,

Devotion to the Enduring (Have 1000 points in a single attribute before level 1000, Endurance over 1000) – You decided to become a symbol of endurance. Your unyielding faith does not go unnoticed. Every eldritch killed over level 1000 adds another year of life. Immunity to sickness and disease. +10% more health, health regen, stamina, and stamina regen per 1000 points in endurance. You may choose to add 1/10th of endurance to any attribute of your choosing, besides endurance itself. You may now unlock a unlock a legendary skill.

After looking over the perk, it had an odd set of bonuses. The extended life from killing eldritch would translate to immortality. The sickness and disease immunity helped with preventing other kinds of death outside of old age. The 10% bonus to endurance's stats seemed kind of meager for what the perk was as well. The 1/10th bonus to another attribute was massive though.

It would be like injecting 100 attribute points into any stat of my choosing. Considering how focused I was on endurance, whatever stat I chose would be handled nicely as well. I could choose intelligence for even more health, or perhaps strength for the extra power I'd gain. Those answers seemed like fun, but I already knew which attribute I would choose, constitution.

It would feed into the other chains of stats. Constitution fed into strength which fed into dexterity and so on. Endurance fed into willpower which fed into intelligence and so on. I could connect the chains with this extra 1/10th conversion. Endurance would become a sort of do all attribute. The legendary skill thing sounded awesome as well, but I didn't know what to think of it. So far, getting my only mythical skill, Boundless Storm, had been hard enough. I'd think about that part of the perk later.

So, I selected the perk before grinning at the rush of vitality. Before I could soak it in though, another message appeared,

Which attribute will you select for the 1/10th addition? Con, Strength, Will, Intel, Luck, Char, Dex, or Per?

I selected constitution, the sudden rush in stats feeling like another fifty level-ups. My body grew denser, making me weigh even more. After putting the rest of my attribute points into endurance, I checked my status.

Level 606

Strength – 293.5 | Constitution – 686 | Endurance – 1077

Dexterity – 112 | Willpower – 499.7 | Intelligence – 173.9

Charisma – 54.8 | Luck – 76.2 | Perception – 103.6

Daniel

**HillsideTotalsRegenBuffs/DebuffsHealth58,194/58,19416,499/minOppression
Damage- 15,000+40%hp/minStamina26,519/26,519344/secElemental Res –
98%Harbinger of Cataclysm.16 Billion/56.6 Billion69.4/per min(conduit)Plasma
Res – 98%Phys Dam Reduction – 98%Rad Res – 98%Phys Dam Bonus –
4322%Mental Res – 98%Total Damage Bonus 20%Boundless Storm**

Pacing down the lowlit hallway of the stadium, I noticed the sudden shift in stats. I was heavier now, if I let my feet clunk against the tiles, they would splinter. If I let my weight press into the ground without finesse on my part, the slight quaking that ensued was awe inspiring. Besides that, the arcane bonds in my flesh tightened till they reminded me of the wires running through my flesh.

They were so strong, they felt physical, not even like magic. My raw stat total had become something to behold, turning into a monstrous total of around 3000. I had around 2-3 times more than a normal person, not including my armor's bonuses. I had the stats to match someone well over level 1000.

My skills probably didn't matchup with someone like Torix though. These guards he made for instance were incredibly powerful, being comparable with his current strength. Torix had made these guards and countless others since coming here. That distance would take time to close.

I grinned at the thought. Closing that distance wouldn't take as long as I had first imagined. After looking closer at the rest of the devotion to the enduring perk, I may be able to shorten that distance further. Unlike with the leveling perks, this perk didn't state any kind of limit. If I could reach 1000 in other stats, then I would be able to get other perks for other stats. Looking at my status, willpower and constitution were well within the realm for just that.

I got two attributes per level, and I could absorb a dungeon core every other level. That meant around 25 attributes every 10 levels. If my math was right, then I could get these perks for constitution and willpower as well before reaching level 1000. It would create a trifecta of super stats for me.

With that in mind, I figured putting the points into constitution would be my best bet for now. Till it reached 1000, I'd just pour the stats into it. After that, willpower would follow. It was good I had these perks lined up for me, since beating Yawm without them would be impossible.

He almost certainly had the genesis of potential perk as well as a few other advantages I didn't know about. I mean he was pretty much the warrior king of a whole species. That's bound to come with a few absurd bonuses. To beat something like that, I need something absurd as well.

With the stats handled, another set of echoing ebbed in the distance. More explosive in pitch, the echoes sounded like a thunder storm instead of stomping steps. We reached the ticket booth leading into the stadium's center, the ticket booths lined up. One of Yawm's guards walked by, the arc reactor on his back shooting lightning every few seconds.

The thing had a harpoon cannon as a right hand instead of a drill. The entire head was composed of glowing, yellow glass with a wire mesh supporting it. Along its feet were

blocks of iron that looked like a ton of tiny strands of iron compressed together. It glanced up at us, shocked by us for some reason. Maybe it could see our levels too.

Spiker, Keemak Sentry (lv 944) – A servant of an undersea emperor of their home world, their kind lives in the dark. The sentry's acted as a form of ranged offensive potential in strike groups during military excursions. Using their wide range of visions, they could also be used as exceptionally effective scouts given the right situation.

Their harpoon rifle is designed for maiming rather than piercing due to the elongated prongs on the sides of the spear. Once they've pinned an enemy down at a distance, spikers send powerful bolts of electricity into the spear. This can make their electric attacks many times stronger than a normal Keemak soldier from the enhanced conduction of the metal.

Their mobility is also superior to their more grounded brethren, the juggernauts. A spiker can magnetize the magnets under its feet with the arc reactors on its back. This allows it to preform moves otherwise impossible due to the power of magnetism. If all else fails, they can also detonate their reactor cores upon death.

While not a sure-fire way to death, facing one will be an undertaking to say the least.

This monster looked more challenging than the Mauler. I crushed the mauler because it was brute trying to beat me. My build negated its strengths, letting me exploit how bulky and slow it was. This monster didn't look quite as easy to stop.

With that in mind, I shot towards it. The monster raised the harpoon gun and fired towards me. I moved my arm to deflect it, but Althea's harpoon hit the other harpoon midair. Althea's bullet split the spiker's harpoon in half, the pieces spinning before lodging into the ceiling and floor.

Another shot later and Althea kept pace, firing each shot out of the air. I neared the spiker in seconds my ascendant mana roaring stronger than ever. The voice spoke in my mind, telling me to tear and maul my opponent. I silenced it, containing the sudden rage. A calm, cold focus was a far better tool for killing than red hot fury.

Once reached the monster, it sent out a wave of electricity like an emp grenade. The electromagnetic pulse didn't do shit to me, but Kade, the rifle guard guy, had the electronics in his gun fried. As I reached within ten feet of the spiker, it sent out a bolt of lightning towards a ticket booth and into its feet. It jumped sideways, the metal on its feet pulling it towards the ticket booth.

It landed sideways fifty feet away. The move defied gravity, throwing me off for a second. That second was long enough for a harpoon to be fired right at me. The bullet

landed straight into my neck, drilling through my armor and the back. It lodged a foot deep, the massive spear making a mortal wound. Well, mortal for most.

As a burst of steam streamed from the spiker's rifle, I grabbed the end of the spear behind me and pulled. It felt like pulling out a needle. Not so bad. The spear tore into me a bit as I pulled, but I stayed standing. The bolt hadn't even done a fifth of my health bar.

I grinned with my armor, teeth forming with my mouth spewing tendrils of ascendant mana. I charged towards the monster once more, deflecting the next spear coming towards me. When I neared it, electricity flowed into the arc reactor before firing into the metal frame of a large window. It jumped up, flying sideways through the air.

The invisible pull looked just as crazy the second time, but I was ready for it. I reached out both my hands, ten feet short of the monster. The ascendant mana in my veins roared to life, pulsing like an endless wrath. My telekinesis grabbed the monster's feet, slowing its pull before tackled into the ground.

I growled as I stomped my heels into the ground, the jerking of telekinesis harder than if I pulled it with my own hands. Like an invisible rope, I stretched out my right arm before pulling the monster closer. With each pull of my hand, it came an arm's length closer. The monster stabbed its fingers into the ground, even using its spear for extra grip. It didn't matter. I was too heavy and too dense. It couldn't stop me.

It pointed its rifle at me, but it changed the angle of its firing a second later. The monster's spear clanked against one of Althea's diverting her harpoon upwards. His spear deflected downwards, stabbing into the ground beside it. The monster then shot a bolt of lightning into the metal spear and grabbed onto it.

The telekinetic strain tripled as my feet dug into the ground. The monster's feet even pulled towards his own magnetized spear. The monster clanked in an extra bolt from behind its back, the harpoon popping into the barrel. He pointed it towards me before I released my telekinetic tether.

The monster whipped in the air as it fired. The bolt slid into the rock roof as I sprinted towards him. The feet of the monster planted onto the spear, dragging it across the ground. I leapt towards the creature before it reached out its left hand. A blinding light flew towards me, consuming my vision in white.

An odd sensation took over for a minute. I couldn't make my limbs move. They moved on their own, tensing with the absolute limit of my strength. The light kept consuming my vision, and as my muscles strained, I could see my stamina bar depleting. For the first time since investing into endurance, my stamina had become something worth noting.

The spike of energy was greater than my armor could absorb. The leftover tendrils of lightning created enough strain on my body that my stamina couldn't keep up anymore.

A few seconds later, and one of the muscles in my calves snapped. The popping of a hamstring followed. The blinding light ceased a second later.

I fell to my knees, exhausted and heaving for breath. I glanced up, and arc reactor had melted on the back of the monster. The molten metal already killed it, the flesh of the creature bubbling inside its suit. I stood up a second later, my stamina and health regenerating rapidly. I glanced back at the others. They stared back with glazed over eyes.

I shouted, "Come on guys. Surely you guys can help me next time."

Kessiah cupped her hands around her mouth, "We thought you were dead. That thing just exploded."

I wiped off some broken rock off my shoulder, "No I'm fine. Suicide bombers can't really hurt me. I'm too tanky."

I glanced at my health. It was at 2/3rds now, so they monster must have dealt a bit over half my health. It wasn't a bad outcome considering how high level the monster was. I pointed towards the stadium's entrance,

"Come on guys. Let's go. I'll be full health in a minute or two."

I walked forward into the stairs of the stadium. I gained another 44 levels from the spiker, so I put all my remaining points into constitution. The increase in weight and power flooded my system like a narcotic. It was subtler now though, probably because I was already so heavy. I mean five more pounds is hardly noticeable if you're already a ton.

I gained more than that though. The extra weight from constitution made telekinesis far easier as well. I was quite a bit heavier now, and pulling on the spiker may have been possible now. Letting go was a better choice tactically speaking, but having the option should the situation arise was nice.

Glancing up from my screen, I noticed the hallway we walked down. The stairs leading into the stadium split into two divergent paths, each leading to different parts of the stadium. During an actual game, you'd be able to hear the roaring of the crowd echoing through the tunnel. I shut down oppression as I reached the end of it, the light from outside leaking in.

As I walked outside, the first thing I noticed was the open sky. The stadium cover had been left open for some reason. The rows of seats stretched for hundreds of feet down, the stairs creating little segments on each stair case. This was a football stadium, one with a grass field at the center. There was still grass, but the eldritch had created a something else too.

There was a large hole at the center of the stadium. The gaping expanse lead deep down until the edges of the pit were black. The walls of the pit were slimy, red, and fleshy. A few writhing, giant insects darted on the walls, searching for food. The lining of the tunnel stretched out from the entrance, a few tendrils of meat reaching the walls of the stadium.

At the center of the entrance, several named ones sat around the center. One was like a humanoid mantis, with cleaving, sharp arms and wings along its broad back. Another was covered in feathers made of steel with two wings along its back. Another was far larger than either of the others, covered in giant bat wings.

The rest of us reached behind me, Kessiah stretching her neck to see. She mouthed, "What in Schema is going on?"

The sickle guard guy, Aatrox, said in Torix's voice,

"This is a portal reaching into the eldritch. It's grotesque, and it serves as an important obstacle for us."

I glanced back at the guard, "You can talk through those guys?"

"Of course. Free will is something only the naivest summoners participate in. These creations, they are tools. Nothing more."

Based on how he treated his other creations, I highly doubted that was the truth.

"Back to the matter at hand, this is a physical manifestation of an eldritch rift. It's the beginnings of a rift. You all are here to crush it before it spreads further."

I glanced at Aatrox, "How in the fuck are we going to do that?"

Aatrox lifted a finger into the air, mimicking Torix's body language,

"It's not a matter of us. It's a matter of you. These portals are much larger and more frequent in fringe worlds. Once they've opened, you can only close them by entering the portal and killing the rift keeper."

I frowned, "So it's basically just like a dungeon?"

"In essence, yes."

I spread out my arms, "Why does Schema make the dungeons the way they are then?"

From the rift at the center of the colosseum, a white centipede squirmed out. Large as bus, it snatched one of the insects feeding against the wall of the rift. The smaller insect squealed before the centipede pinned it down, injecting liquid nitrogen into the creature

before feasting on the bug. As the icy cold met the bug, the sound of its insides freezing matched the sounds of its screams.

The bug squealed like that for a solid minute, the icy centipede's mandibles slowly munching away at the creature's face while it was alive. The insect squirmed, struggling to escape, but the centipede didn't care if it was dead or alive. It was like the tinier bug was just a packet full of food. Once the centipede had grabbed onto that packet, it would start feasting until the packet was empty.

Once it finished, the centipede glanced around at the entrance of the rift. Its beady eyes met the named ones, but the centipede seemed satisfied. It was like a full lion. You didn't have to worry about it if you didn't mess with it anymore. It squirmed back into the tunnel, leaving icy spots where its feet touched the ground.

Torix murmured through Aatrox,

"If not full, that creature would escape into your world. I doubt most earthlings could handle such a thing, no?"

I nodded, "Yeah. Most people would get fucked."

Althea frowned, "Those places are bad. Very bad. My memories are fuzzy, but I remember my parents mentioning those things. It's hard to fight inside the portals. You lose your HUD and all connection with Schema."

I raised an eyebrow, "You lose connection with Schema? Holy shit...No wonder fighting against a fringe world is so hard. Why would you bust into a portal and try to beat the rift lord? You don't get experience or anything, and you can't see your health bar, and shit...there's all kinds of reasons not to go in there."

Torix nodded in Aatrox's body, crossing the guard's arms,

"Indeed. For most people, it is a death sentence, especially considering how much people tend to rely on Schema's assistance for most fights. Rifle men rely on him to aim. Fighter's rely on him to streamline the use of their skills. Even mages rely on him to help ease the casting process. On the other hand, you and Althea don't have to worry about those drawbacks."

Althea turned towards him, "What do you mean me and him? I thought it was just him."

I turned to her, "What do you mean just me? Fuck you."

Althea turned to me, "Of course it's just you. You're the, '*look at me, I live for battle,*' person. I just want this to be over with."

I rolled my eyes, "Ok, have some perspective. You honestly think I want to crawl into a giant entrance into a different dimension? Fuck that. I don't want to, but I will because I choose to. That's what makes us different from animals. Animals go by instinct. People, we can do more than just live from our instincts. We can live for our future."

I raised my arms into the air, "Besides, do you want to be at the mercy of all this bullshit forever? There's a light at the end of this shit covered tunnel." I pointed a finger at Althea, "You can either stay in this shit covered tunnel, or you can get with the fucking program and move on."

Althea sighed, "Ok, ok, I'll go." She glanced up at Aatrox-Torix and spit her words like venom, "Please tell me the next time you want something like this. Nobody likes awful surprises."

Torix shrugged, "And you'd never have come if I hadn't gotten you this far. Unlike Daniel, you tend to avoid unpleasantness."

I narrowed my eyes and frowned, but Torix continued, "That means at times you need a push, Althea. Daniel, on the other hand, needs someone to curb his fervor. If you two could find a balance between each of your approaches, then perhaps you would both be more effective. Regardless--"

The Torix pointed with the guard's arm at the center of the stadium,

"It's time for a little dive into the unknown. I'm sure the experience will be...enlightening."

Chapter 57: Mountains of Madness

I pointed at the three named ones, "So we kill them, go into the tunnel, clear out the eldritch, then escape before the rift closes?"

Torix shook his head, "Close, but you won't have to escape at the end. All that happens is the tunnel converts into a normal dungeon once the rift keeper is killed."

I sighed, "What level should we be expecting from it then?"

"Nothing higher than level 1000. It will likely be another of the angels, like Gabriel."

I raised an eyebrow, "I thought angels were a human thing?"

Kessiah grinned, "Come on. You know by now that most myths have some truth in there."

I frowned, "You're telling me angels and heaven are real?"

Torix shrugged the guard's shoulders, "Your world is at the dead center of a rift. There have been signs of their presence in the past, throughout your history. Many of your myths are based on these signs, such as the Greek mythology or Lovecraftian fiction. They saw the signs, but they couldn't prove they existed using the standard logic, so their imaginations filled in the gaps."

I blinked a few times, "What part of the Greek mythology and stuff is real then?"

Torix shrugged, "Very little, besides the imagery. It's amazing how mortal minds latch onto the visions of truth far more than thoughts of truth. Seeing is believing, as your kind puts it. Sentients neglect truth proven from logic. We all like to wait until the truth can no longer be denied before accepting it."

Kessiah leaned onto the shoulder of the guard, "I read a little of that stuff too. The powers were correct, but the Greeks looked at them as gods. I guess something like that would be godlike compared to a normal person."

My mind was swimming with conspiracy theories as I said, "Did a strike team from Schema come and eliminate them?"

Torix replied, "Yes."

"And did they leave Stonehenge and the pyramids?"

"Of course not. Why would they reorganize giant piles of rocks? That's something simple minds would think of."

I deflated, "Oh, yeah of course. Anyways-" I turned to the portal, "You think the angels or whatever are in there?"

"Indeed I do. You've seen what lies underneath their shells. They deceive those that worship them, grabbing tribute and sacrifice. The eldritch are oppressive, and seen throughout the history of your world. The Spanish inquisition, the holocaust, there are many examples of them interfering with your world."

Althea murmured, "From what I've seen from Daniel, it doesn't seem like *humanity* needed much to make them do all that. It's more like they just tipped your war hungry race over the edge."

I waved her off, "Alright, but is there anything I should know about the angels before I go down there?"

Kessiah leaned another hand onto Aatrox, her weight resting on him. The guards started straining as she mumbled, "Nothing more than you already know. They're tough, especially the upper level ones. You're lucky that Gabriel hadn't turned into an archangel yet. That's when he gets tough."

Althea frowned, "Uh, you make it sound like you fought him before."

"That's cause I have. The angels are always looking for ways to get into other worlds. You can't kill them here. The only way to handle them is over on the other side. You have to get them while they're in their home turf, and even I'm not that crazy."

I sighed, "Honestly, it doesn't sound like we're ready for it. I'm not that crazy either."

Kessiah leaned up, pushing the guard so that he stumbled sideways, "This is a teeny, tiny rift though. They haven't fed enough to be able to kill us, and besides. You and Althea are crazy powerful for your levels. You both have a lot of eldritch in you, so you won't be de-buffed like we would be. In fact, I get the feeling you'll actually be stronger there than here."

I pursed my lips, "Alright, I'll give you guys the benefit of the doubt. You haven't steered me wrong yet."

Kessiah patted my back, "You bet...Damn you've grown. What the hell. You're almost as tall as me."

I met her eye with my own. I grinned, "It won't be much longer now and I'll be looking down on you instead."

Kessiah grinned before pressing a finger into my chest, "Don't get to cocky little guy, or else I'll have to put you in your place."

I smiled back, my armor forming teeth, "We'll see how far I've come and how far you've fallen."

She pressed her finger against me, pushing me back and turning me around. As I saw the rift, she said,

"Wait till after you get through that. I'll be waiting little man."

Althea gagged, "Will you guys shut up already?"

Kessiah leaned over Althea, "Is somebody...jealous?"

"What? No-"

Kessiah grabbed Althea and started tickling under her sides. Althea burst into laughter before jumping away. Kessiah grinned again,

"See you both when you get back. You'll be fine. Daniel's strong, and you'll find out that you are too."

Althea blushed, "Thanks."

I walked out into the stadium stairs, "Come on. Let's go fuck some named one's up."

We paced down the steps, my feet thumping on the floor and Althea's nearly unheard. A couple dozen steps later, and a named one turned towards me.

It was the one with bat wings covering him. He outstretched his wings, exposing a torso with the ribs jutting out of his skin. His face opened, his cheeks splitting. The others each outstretched their wings, the mantis's buzzing and miss metal feathers flapping.

They flew towards us as the bat person leaned forward. He latched his hands into the ground, and an energy beam charged in his throat. One of Althea's spears lodged through him a second later, killing him.

The two-winged ones dived towards me. The ascendant mana poured from me before I lifted my hand and forced it down. The mantis thing shot down before smashing against several chairs. Metal feathers launched into me, her talons opened to gouged me. I put one leg back and grabbed her talons.

When her feet met my hands, her claws shattered against my metal. I gripped her feet, and her body flew past. I didn't budge an inch. The bones in her legs broke as her body kept wanting to fly forward. I clasped my hands, breaking her toes. I pulled her downward, slamming her against the concrete.

The metal feathers ripped from her wings and back against the stairs. I placed a foot on her back and jerked her left leg. The joint ruptured from the socket, the skin splitting. Blood exploded from her wound before I stepped onto her chest. Blood shot out of her mouth before I slammed her leg into her head, cracking her skull.

Two clubbing's later, and she stopped struggling. The mantis man lifted himself up, buzzing away before Althea shot a bolt between his twitching eyes. I leapt forward as he fell. I lost levity before reaching the mantis. I pressed my heels into his back, sending him to the bleachers. As I landed on them, the chairs beneath us crushed like tinfoil before the green goo inside the mantis detonated under my feet.

The cracks rippled through a portion of the bleachers as I stood tall again. I had just jumped onto him as he fell and used my weight against him. I glanced at a hand. There wasn't anything unsteady about the outstretched fingers. There was no fear. I clamped my hand. It was good to not be afraid.

I ran towards the entrance of the rift, smashing chairs underfoot. I leapt up and into the green grass at its center. As I landed on the ground, my feet sunk into the earth. The ground didn't feel hard or sturdy anymore. On my metal feet, it was akin to sand. Something that didn't give enough stability for me to use my full strength.

With little telekinetic fields around my feet, that softness wasn't near as bad. I pushed on my feet, digging them into the ground as I shot forward. As I reached the rift, one of the person sized insects crawled from it. I tackled into it, sending us both flying into the rift. We kept moving before I smashed the monster against the other side of the rift.

The green goop exploded once more before I grew claws from my hands. As I slid down the wall, I stabbed my fingers into it. It stopped my fall, the fleshy wall being hard as stone. I glanced up and Althea jumped into the rift right after me. Her arms reformed into two titanic arms, the fingers thick as most men's forearms.

Those fingers pierced into the stone wall with ease before I grinned,

"You ready?"

Althea nodded, the look of battle across her face. It made her eyes narrow, and her jaw turn hard. The focus, the energy, that was something I loved about fighting. It wasn't like I was just standing still waiting to die. It's when you're closest to death...that's when you feel the most alive.

I glanced down, and the tunnel turned black at the bottom. I let myself go, falling into the abyss. As the gravity pulled me down, I hit the black fog. As the fog encompassed me, a burning sensation covered me. It wasn't a painful kind of burn though. It was a pleasant burn. Have you ever had scratches from briars? When you go to shower, it's going to burn. It's the kind of burn you know you need though.

That sensation wrapped around me before something else disappeared. It was a subtle feeling, like losing a nagging feeling you forgot was there. As I fell further, the fog disappeared. Out into the world I came.

It was a beautiful hell. I flew upwards now, like gravity flipped. That let me fly up into the sky and see what was there. Around us was a field of spikes. Metallic, cerulean, and ominous, the spines dripped a thick red fluid that all kinds of darker blue insects devoured. They fought for the fluid, like a swarm of ants.

In disparate spots, portions of the bugs would disperse from one of the icy millipedes. They drilled out of the ground and dragged other insects into their burrows. The ground was gray, the kind of gray you see in a rotting corpse, but every part of the ground teemed with life. The shades of blue and white flowed together, almost like a river of paint.

As I fell towards the ground, I glanced up at the red sky. There was a pillar of energy firing off into the clouds, reaching high up before splitting into white tendrils that reached around in every direction. The invisible forcefield was where all the life ended, like this was a different world being forced into our own. The red sky and air floated into and out of the sphere, as if just outside of the sphere was a different dimension. Hell, maybe there was.

I didn't have time to think about it as I landed against several cerulean spikes. The rods of metal broke against my metal skin with a brittle cracking. The insects dispersed from the points of impact, scared shitless I'm sure. I pulled at oppression, revving the aura up to full strength. Glancing up, I spotting Althea flying over. I shouted,

"Don't come near me."

"I know. I'm not going down there. It's disgusting."

I glanced around, and all the insects crawled towards me. They seemed to know I was an enemy. I glanced at my health bar, but there was none. I frowned. That's the feeling that went missing, Schema's influence. It didn't matter much for me though. I could operate off feel anyways.

Some of the smaller insects curled up and died before reaching me, oppression draining the life from the tiny creature. The larger ones reached me in droves, but I smashed them with ease, drilling through their shells with my telekinetic wrath. A few minutes later, and I was bathing in the blood of the insects. I destroyed the insects against the blue, metallic spires around me. I broke the spires, and I wielded them as weapons.

The bugs, they couldn't hurt me. I was too tough, too hard, and too vicious. The droves turned to hoards that turned to groups then single insects. Before I knew, I cleared out an area the size of oppression around me. Glancing around, my armor would reach out and pierce insects, draining them. It was field day for my armor. After all, it enjoys a feast.

Althea's voice ebbed above me,

"You're the guy that just runs down there and starts killing bugs. Do you see what I mean?"

I stomped on a bug, the shell caving before ripping a spine from the gray ground and gouging another beetle above me,

"Unlike you, I can't fucking fly. I would try talking things out." A bug leapt at my face, the mandibles clawing towards my nose, "But these things don't seem like they're that into negotiation."

Althea fired harpoon after harpoon at the beetles before one of the centipedes shot out of the ground. With tiny, red eyes, it glanced at me before glancing at all the carcasses. It hissed at me, trying to scare me off.

I banged my chest before spreading my arms wide.

"Come on you fuck."

The centipede shot towards me, the ends of its legs ending in shining claws. As they tapped against the earth, ice spread from below the monster. It vomited the liquid nitrogen at me, but I caught the liquid with my telekinesis.

With a pull on my hands and shoulders, the liquid pulled into a sphere as I launched the liquid back onto the creature. As it met the shell, the ice spread atop the monster.

It must have had specific parts of its body designed to hold the cold liquid. It wasn't immune to the cold altogether. It reared back before I ran up and grabbed it with a telekinetic link.

Once set onto the creature, I jerked the monster towards me. The invisible pull surprised the creature, my feet digging into the ground. Once it flung towards me, I stepped forward and spun on my heels.

A heavy right straight shot towards the monster's head before tearing through half the centipede's body. The cold liquid landed on the metal of my armor, but it only hissed for a moment before evaporating. It really wasn't that bad.

I shook off the cold before glancing around. No more insects were coming towards me anymore, so I walked around for a few minutes and absorbed the eldritch around me. At least that's what I thought they were. I couldn't be certain if these were the same things after all.

At that moment, an odd sense of familiarity returned. My HUD didn't return, but I did receive notifications.

Data upload present. Current total level growth: 28. Upload speed: 1 attribute point per minute.

So the data worked like a phone's data line. You could still get the benefits, it just took a long time. I guess that's why Schema didn't bother with the HUD. My health and stamina bars were only useful if they were up to date. Otherwise, they were useless.

My armor on the other hand rippled across me with delight. Maybe here there was more ambient mana in the creatures, letting it get more of its fill. I grew horns from my back before retracting them. Controlling my armor was easier here compared with Schema's universe. Ascendant mana was more powerful as well, though harder to control.

The way the air smelled here was different as well. It was sweeter, like it made me wild and want to just go and tear into something. Althea seemed to be like that as well. Her firing rate of her rifle was far greater than in the other world. At the same time, she didn't seem as tame now. She was more like when we first met, someone who desperately wanted control.

At least, I don't know. It felt that way. She flew in circles around me, keeping her distance but keeping lookout as well. All around us, there were mountains, like this was a spire valley. That's what I named it then, Spire Valley. It seemed fitting.

On top of one of the mountains, several things moved in the distance. They seemed like they were feeding on something. There were no signs of movement or life on the other mountains, so I pointed and shouted,

"Come Althea. Let's go find this Rift Keeper."

She glided towards the mountain before I slammed my feet against the gray ground. It was harder than dirt on Earth. Instead of giving like a thick mush, it held firm against my steps. It let me sprint even when the engine of my ascendant mana roared.

We passed through another field or two of the spires, each of them resulting in subsequent slaughters. Nothing about these creatures was difficult to deal with. They were dungeon monsters, through and through. It didn't matter to me if we had Schema's help or not. If I retained my enhanced body, I could handle beings like these with ease.

The mountains in the distance closed in after the third field. Along the mountains were blue, winding trails. As I closed into these glowing paths, I found blue magma. Unlike normal magma, this blue gunk froze everything near it. All around the exposed bits of magma, baby centipedes were collected. They nibbled at the blue, some of the smaller ones a deep red.

As I saw bigger and bigger ones, they grew whiter in shade. This was how they gained their icy abilities. They feasted on the cold when they were young then ate the spire drinking bugs. It was a weird ecosystem, but it wasn't so outlandish that I couldn't comprehend it.

That was my impression of the eldritch world so far. It wasn't that the world was malignant or evil, the world was just different. It was a brutal, savage place, but it wasn't something humanity couldn't master. I hadn't seen much of it so far though.

Before starting the climb, I shut oppression down. Althea flew down towards me before we had a quick lunch. We both carried packs on our backs, mine much smaller than hers. She pulled out the steel legion's rations and water. She poured the water on the dried husks, revitalizing them. As the food grew, the meal heated up as well. By the time it reformed, it smelled pretty good, kind of like a microwave dinner.

I finished eating before she started. From my satchel, I pulled out one of Torix's rations. I lifted it over my face and dropped it towards my armor. My armor split, letting the packet burst against my face. It soaked into my skin, a sort of intravenous cocktail. Weird, I know, but I could eat much faster this way.

As Althea ate, I practiced telekinesis. I fine-tuned my control by juggling three rocks nearby. Whenever I picked something up, I had to handle whatever weight I lifted. When working with these tiny stones, I could afford to use the fingers in my hands and muscles. When working with something larger, that just wasn't the case.

I had to make sure I lifted using my legs or back. Otherwise, I would try to lift a boulder with my pinky finger one day. My bones would snap like twigs. Er, or bend like metal bars. I didn't really know what I was made of anymore.

Deep in my focus, Althea ate for a few minutes before she spoke,

"This is what a fringe world looks like."

I frowned, "Well that's disappointing. I imagined they would look a lot worse."

She sighed, "Of course you would." She glanced around, "It's hell here."

I rolled my eyes, "You can't get out of hell. This is hell if you're near the bottom of the food chain. All you have to do is move yourself to the top of it. Then, it's not so bad."

She nodded, "Yeah. You're probably right. When I was kid, monsters like that gave me nightmares. I'd shake so hard."

I walked over and sat on a stone, leaning towards her,

"When did you get taken from your homeworld?"

"When I was about...4-5. I was young. I didn't know my parents, but I can sort of piece things together from spare memories here or there."

"You probably aren't even that scared anymore."

"Yeah...It's so...I don't know. Weird?"

I leaned onto one hand, letting the other arm relax, "What do you mean?"

"It's just...The thought of coming here was terrifying. Now that I'm back, it's almost like I'm in a home I never knew I had. I feel better here than over there."

I glanced at my relaxed hand, pulling the armor off my face,

"Hmmm...It is weird, because I do too." I glanced up at her, "It's like I was made to be here."

She laughed a sardonic sort of laugh. It wasn't out of happiness. It was out of spite.

“Yeah, I *actually* was made to be here.”

I nodded my head, “Yeah, I never could gather what the lab was like, or what they did to you there.” I raised my palms to her, “Not that that’s a problem or anything. You don’t have to tell me shit.”

She waved a hand towards me, “No, no. It’s not that big a deal. We’re on a life or death mission. Telling you some of that stuff isn’t a big deal.” She finished her meal before setting the tray to her side. She glanced off towards the fields of metallic spires below us.

“I...I wasn’t the only one there. There was a bunch of us. What they did exactly, I don’t know. They wouldn’t let us look into lab rooms or anything during the experiments. They would knock us out before performing the experiments as well. No point in keeping us awake and having us squirm after all.”

She bit her lip,

“That’s the thing. It’s not what happened to me that bothered about it. It was watching what happened to other people. I had a friend called Sally. We would slide notes to each other when we walked past each other. I looked forward to those notes. I treasured them. They meant the world to me.”

She glanced back at me, “I watched Sally turn inside out and eat two of the scientists.”

I glanced down, sighing. I glanced back up, but Althea wasn’t crying. Her voice was hard as steel,

“They fumigated the room with sedatives. When they finally got Sally back together, she smiled through the glass at me. The look in her eyes wasn’t right. She patted her stomach in there, and smiled like a pleased child. The voice, the monster in her head. She let it take over.”

Althea seethed, “I’m never letting that happen to me. Never. When you tore my armor off and ruined the sedatives, I thought I was gone. I didn’t even care if I died. All I wanted was to stay normal...”

She glanced down and took a deep breath, she looked back up at me,

“I heard about the voice in your head from Torix. He laughed when he mentioned it, but my blood ran cold when I heard that. Don’t let it take control, Daniel. If you ever let go for too long, you may never be able to pull it back.”

I grinned, “Don’t worry. I already have it under control. It isn’t taking me over anytime soon.”

She blinked a few times. She reached out a hand, but she stopped the limb halfway through the gesture. She pressed her hands into a fist,

“I think it already has you.”

I raised a hand, my fist being level with my face. I glanced at it,

“See, that’s the difference between me and you. You see someone stab someone with a knife, and you think the knife is evil. Me?”

The mana raged from my palm,

“I see a tool, only it’s misused. Whoever wielded the tool is evil. The tool itself is neutral. This armor, all the stuff that comes with it, I choose how I wield it. I can either surrender, or I can conquer.”

I tapped a finger against my chest, “In the end, I choose if this is a gift or a curse. I choose, no one else does.” I grinned, “You get to choose too. Tell me Althea, is being an immortal shapeshifter a gift or a curse?”

She glanced up at the red sky, grinning despite what she said earlier,

“I’ll choose to make it a gift.”

I grinned before standing up. I reached out a hand,

“Now let’s go kick some ass.”

She grabbed my hand and stood up. I turned towards the mountain and ebbed the ascendant mana into my runes. I shot forwards, Althea leaping into the air behind me. With her ability, she was far faster than I. Learning to fly would be quite useful, in more ways than one.

I’d save that for later. I tore up the hill, tearing out clumps of the ground while Althea soared above. Once we ascended higher, the air thinned and cooled. A gray ice appeared as well, the snow smelling like lemons. The ground turned hard, like a dense stone. It didn’t give underfoot, holding up against the weight of my heels.

With firm footing, Althea and I reached towards the apex of the mountain with the white spire atop it. As we reached it, several things floated around the mountain top. They were icy jellyfish but with a few differences. Around the edge of its bell head, innumerable spines jutted from the inside. The mouth was like an iron maiden’s inside.

The tentacles stretched out from the middle of a jellyfish’s cap. The little limbs whirled around beneath it, bulbous orbs covering the tentacles. When a limb banged against a rock, one of those swollen spheres of liquid busted. Ice crawled along the rock.

As I stared at the spectacle, no message appeared. I forgot Schema wasn't here to help with analysis. From what I could tell though, avoid the tentacles and teeth. Pretty basic. Several of them floated towards us, but Althea nailed them with several spikes. Her fire rate improved, bolting four of the five monsters against the wall before they even reached me.

Once it neared me, the translucent body of the monster glowed bright before a wave of sound shot towards me. The sonic wave trembled the air, like a cannon of sound. The wave past by me, busting my eardrums before a shotgun blast of ice shards imbedded into my armor. The tentacles whipped towards me. I weaved between them, slicing at them with telekinetic fields at the ends of my fists.

They sliced through, sending the tentacles falling to the ground. As the monster tried passing by, I reached out and grasped it with telekinesis. Making sure the weight of the pull rested on my back, I lifted up which forced the creature downwards.

Being as light as it was, the force of my throw sent it tumbling towards the ground. As it landed, the monster splat. What they had in offensive potential, they lacked in defense. I turned towards the others on the wall, and they were covered in harpoons.

I grinned, "How are you firing so many bolts?"

"I made some earlier so that I could use them now."

I slammed my hands together in a clap, ebbing a slight shockwave, "That's what the fuck I'm talking about. Good Job."

She shrugged midflight, a smile on her face. Maybe putting more into the whole fighting thing helped her cheer up some. I didn't really know. Regardless, we reached the top of the mountain where the white energy beam spiraled from.

Surrounded by the red sky and clouds, I frowned at where the energy poured from. It beamed from a stone pillar, covered in runes reminiscent of the runes from BloodHollow. Around the pillar, a spiral staircase made of white stone went deep into the mountain. I pulled oppression in, turning the aura off as Althea landed behind me.

She glanced up at the spire of white, "What the fuck is this?"

My eyes narrowed, "A straight shot to the dungeon boss."

We walked down the stairs, Althea dragging her hand against the stone. As we descended deeper, the sounds of an insect's shuffling filled my ears.

"There's going to be bugs. Lots of them. Be ready."

Althea sighed, before clenching her unformed fist, "Let's go smash them or whatever you'd say."

We reached a doorway covered in runes. As I glanced at them, they unraveled a bit, like a knot untying. I approached the doorway before leaking my ascendant mana into it. The mana poured through the runes, lighting them red before the spire behind us turned pink in color. I glanced at Althea, but she didn't know what was going on either.

With a loud crack, the door slid. With the sound of sliding stone, the doorway crept open before I paced into the room. Within was a deep dark abyss. The ground and walls moved, as if alive. Something stored in glowing capsules was moved on the back of creatures, carrying it towards the queen of them all. It glanced at us, the massive, twitching eyes setting its sights.

It was a giant scorpion with a normal woman rising from the top of the creature. Beautiful, black hair with a curvaceous figure, the monster grinned with an enchanting smile. It whispered to me, singing songs of lust and power. It reached out with a clawed hand and eyes like emeralds. I grinned back, my smile laced with bloodlust.

It saw my sanity despite its charms. With a bitter grimace, she reached out, pointing at us. As she did, the floor and the ceiling moved. It was as if the entire room was folding in on itself. Althea shifted beside me, her bones cracking out of place before she rasped in a warped voice,

"I'll be outside. Use your aura."

She climbed up and out of the stairs with monstrous hands. As I turned towards oncoming horde, I escalated oppression to its full might. I clamped both fists and grit my teeth. I was ready for what was to come.

And so, there was a sea of monsters.

Chapter 58: What You Believe

The sea of insects expanded, until all I could see was a wave of fluttering wings, eyes, and limbs. As they came closer, the bodies piled onto each other. A surge of them came crashing towards me, like the whole body of insects was a shifting liquid.

Before the wave of monsters hit me, I slammed my hand into the stone beneath me. Spikes from my armor ripped out of the brick ground, impaling into the floor and wall of insects. As they tried ramming through the barricade, they tore each other apart. The bodies mounted, their weight building. The ground beneath me cracked. Seconds later, it shattered.

I pulled my arm and rushed up the stairs, running from the insects. As I ran up the spiral stair case, the insects poured in. A few mandibles and claws nipped my back as my feet

smashed into the ground. The violent echoes of the footsteps drowned in the outcry of hissing and clicking behind me. A clawed arm latched into the side of my shoulder, but I pushed onward, tearing the limb from the insect.

The light of the stairs appeared before I jumped out of the staircase. Althea stood beside it, her stomach swollen and her mouth elongated. With a disgusting retch, she vomited a gallons and gallons of acid down the stairway. As the acrid stench of corroding flesh filled the air, the hiss of melting shells turned louder than the bugs own hissing.

As they melted I breathed out a deep breath before lunging to a knee beside the steps. With a quick shove, I lodged my hands back into the stone. My armor grew into the stone, digging deep into the maze of brick. Sharp spines elongated out into the stairway, testing the limits of my control and focus. Without my enhanced abilities here, there's no way I'd be able to keep my armor so extended.

But I did have those enhancements, and I meant to use them. As the acid wore off, the insects came back. Pushed by the insects behind them, a wave of beetles and worms slammed into the sharp swords imbedded in the walls. As the beetles died, I pushed myself even further. Another tendril from my armor built out of my knee and sopped up the mess of bodies.

The last tendril consumed the bodies of the insects as they came, gorging on the remnants of their bodies. Althea fired her cannon into the trap, piercing through dozens of insects with each spear. Even as I ate the corpses, they piled up within a minute.

I grit my teeth, forcing my armor to hold steady and eat more insects. The ascendant mana rippled from my armor, bending the air and world around me. My hands shook with fury and struggle, the tide of insects coming without the slightest hint of the onslaught waning.

Althea's shots grew more distant as she struggled to unload more and more ammo. She would take out a piece of her arm and fire it. To fire again, she had to wait until the harpoon regenerated once more. The process was exhausting, painful, but most of all, effective. A second after her bolts landed, they would detonate in a grenade of needles. She killed them in hordes with this method.

My trap killed even more, but blood piled beside my feet. Most of it was from the insects, but part of it was my own. I had clenched my fists until blood poured from them, tearing through my armor. I tensed so hard, blood poured from my nose, dripping into my armor before evaporating in the torrent of ascendant energy. Even my teeth cracked at the sheer volume of exertion.

Yet I kept calm, composed and cold. My mind was asylum in the storm. Harder than iron and fierce as fire, my focus was a never-ending flood. No amount of pressure could stop me. I was a man made of metal, in mind and spirit. Most held their will with strings. I

held my will with cables of steel. My body fell apart as the mana required to hold the trap turned into more than I could create.

The torrent dimmed for a moment, just long enough for me to catch my health pool back up. Althea had torn up a portion of the stone steps and chunked the rock down the stairway. Ten seconds later and my resolve strengthened. The squirming, giant insects ate through the piled-up stone before bursting out of the trap once more.

Althea's ammo type changed on the fly. Instead of lobbing single spears, she launched numerous pellets. The bullets took down dozens of insects at once, turning them into mush. It looked like her armor piercing abilities weren't affected at all by the size and shape of the bullet. Whatever it was that gave her that ability, it ignored a few rules of physics.

Glad it was on my side, I grinned with my helmet. A minute later, and the torrent turned into a steady stream. Not needing it anymore, I retracted the trap back into my armor. As I did so, several insects came towards us, but Althea reformed her left arm into a monstrous forearm and shoulder. The hulking limb smashed several beetles, her fingers spread out on the ground.

She lifted her biotic rifle and unloaded four more shots, giving us a few seconds of relief. I took a deep breath,

"Hell yeah, Althea. Kicking ass and taking names."

She grinned, the deformity of her left arm reaching her lower left cheek, "Thanks."

With a biotic rifle right arm and giant monster arm for her left, she wasn't particularly pretty. Seeing her take control of herself and use her potential though, that was priceless. Her powers made her nigh unstoppable, but only if she was creative. She usually avoided using them, probably from some long-term hatred of the abilities.

I didn't know how they came to be, so maybe that process was terrible. She did seem more aware of her appearance too. Her powers deformed her, and that may make her a bit anxious to use them. I could understand. I didn't agree though.

I didn't have time to dwell on those thoughts. They popped in my mind, appearing and disappearing like some sort of wisp. The insects came back, but without the outpour of before. A worm covered in thorns, large as a dog, leapt towards me. I sidestepped, stomping my heel and slamming my fist into the worm. It sheared in half, the telekinetic points tearing it apart.

Another beetle flew towards me, but I grabbed it in my palm. It cracked its skull on my palm before I enlarged a dozen spikes through its body. Using its corpse, I smashed a praying mantis the size of a man. Althea laid the rifle on my shoulder, firing off three rapid fire sprays. A dozen insects died before I grinned at the sight of the rest of them.

The ascendant mana floated off my armor, filling the runes as I ripped and raged among the insects. I kept my steps steady, each movement like rhythmic pulse. It was nothing like the blind wrath when the voice took over my mind. I was colder than the blue magma under our feet. Every movement was a vicious yet compact. Every strike was violent yet dense.

I never wasted a movement, all my skills molding me into a killing machine as I blended the wave of insects into a thick, chunky smoothie. By the time the queen finally got the picture of what was going on, the corpses of insects piled at our feet. Althea heaved for breath, exhausted and ready to sit still. Despite my gut feeling, the queen gave us a few minutes of respite.

Althea reformed back to normal, wiping the blood from herself. My armor soaked the blood coating me, the splotches of blue and green looking like they evaporated. Glancing at my status, I earned a breakthrough in boundless storm surprisingly. It reached 175, turning it into a monstrous ability.

In fact, I never controlled my armor with so much clarity before. It was an intuitive response, like I just understood how to wield it. What gave me control of my armor had been a skill called dominion of soul, which the skill been assimilated by Boundless Storm. From what I could tell, Boundless Storm's level reflected the skill level of all the skills assimilated by it.

In other words, any skill boundless storm 'ate' would gain an enormous boost in effectiveness, even if I didn't train it directly. I never used mana to extend the range or complexity of my armor either. It was likely a result of being part of Boundless Storm now as well.

I didn't have time to dwell on any of that. So far, I'd gained forty levels in total since coming through the rift. I had twelve more to go after the next twelve minutes, but the data upload slowed things down.

The data upload didn't stop me from selecting my current points however. I increased my constitution up to a total of 870. Within the next hundred levels, the constitution would reach one thousand. After that, willpower was next. With that in mind, I hit the select button.

A flood of ascendant mana welled up as I balled myself up, breaking my armor. Standing back up, my fingers grazed the ground longer than I thought they would. When I let my arms relax, they didn't touch my sides. My shoulders had become broader. Strength probably caused the change, making me broader.

Glancing over at Althea, she changed as well. Her shoulders relaxed, like she wasn't as worried that someone would sneak up and kill her from behind. She grew taller as well, letting her seem less petite. I still towered over her now, over a head taller. She wasn't short anymore, compared with normal people at least.

Testing out our new limits, we shifted around a bit. The sound of crawling from inside the hive grew, but I wasn't worried. Althea and I far exceeded the strength our levels indicated. We could fight monster's hundreds of levels higher with little trouble.

When the queen crawled back out, I realized we would need to fight something hundreds of levels higher. The woman was still atop the scorpion, but she had grown a shell and wings along her back. She crashed into the stone ceiling, tearing it apart before spreading her new wings.

They glittered a bright, sky blue. Between the radiant blue wings, floating orbs went from wing to wing. The display of light tried to distract me from seeing what was happening below. At her belly, four eyes formed with a crooked smile growing beneath them. Icy mana oozed from the jaw, as if her entire body was made of liquid cold.

The light blue color spread across her, making her shell sharper and more jagged. Before she finished her transformation, I charged as Althea shot out bolts. Three spears stabbed through the monster's eyes. I reached it and threw a punch like throwing a baseball. As my fist landed, my hand tore through her shell, exposing the icy insides.

A bit of the glowing blue gunk sprayed onto my left arm. It sizzled, going numb as the scorpion mother lashed out with her right claw. I deflected the blow by lifting my left arm, sending her right arm above my head. A piece of my armor fell off, along with a chunk of my health. Not worried, I drilled a right hook into the under belly of the monster.

My hand crashed through the shell, tearing through it like paper. Before the monster's insides splattered onto me, I created a telekinetic barrier over me. Using another field, I swiped off the cold liquid before ducking under the next swipe of the claw. With rapid precision, the scorpion mother pinched a claw towards my right arm. Her strike connected.

The claw broke my arm, snapping the bone while bending the armor around it. Blood sprayed from the limb before a bolt of bone pierced her claw. Two more bolts followed, making the limb fall limp. My limb followed suit, but I grinned at the spectacle.

The queen crawled away, "Why do you smile, invader?"

I twisted my arm back into place, the bone healing in seconds. Another few seconds passed, and my hand was fully functioning. I cracked my neck before rolling my shoulders. I stepped towards her, grinning with my armor forming jagged teeth. Ascendant mana poured from the mouth, tendrils of crimson leaking from the armor.

The air around me warped before I stepped out, gripping with my hand. The queen screamed out, her broken arm being pulled by my telekinetic tether. I stepped back and jerked with all my strength, the stone around me cracking. Her limp arm jerked out of socket, the joint cracking as she howled in pain.

Unable to resist the pull, her insect legs scuttered as she neared me. Her beautiful, flawless face neared me. Using both my hands, I yanked her shattered arm like a tug of war competition. She dragged towards me, her little feet digging into the stone. A second later, and two more bolts shot through her front legs.

She caved forwards, her face falling towards me. I grinned as I lunged toward her face. I grabbed the back of her hair. The monster shivered in fear, tears falling from its face. Her feet tried writhing away as I said,

“Tell me, who’s the monster now?”

She roared back, her jaw splitting as elongated teeth jerked out towards me. I smashed my fist against her mouth, snapping her teeth. The roar petered out into a whimper before I slammed its face into the ground. I put my shoulder into each slam thereafter, creating cracks in the ground. I grit my teeth, crushing the monster’s skull against the ground.

Slam after slam, my hand converted her head into slush. By the time I finished, the fissures in the rock webbed fifteen feet outward. I stood up before draining away her energy. There was no core remaining, so I turned to Althea,

“Come on then. Let’s go.”

She sighed, wiping a sheen of sweat from her brow, “Ok. Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

I pursed my lips, “You know what, let’s just wait for a few minutes. No need in rushing into a death trap exhausted.”

Althea fell backwards, landing like a starfish. She glanced at the sky, “Thank you. I don’t know what it is about this place, but it makes me feel exhausted.”

I shrugged, sitting down in front of her. I crossed my legs and leaned back, staring into the sky. A few minutes passed before Althea sat up, no longer breathing hard. She grinned,

“Thanks for the break.”

I pushed with my hands, letting me lean forward. Without touching my hands to the ground, I pushed myself up while giving Althea a telekinetic lift. She balanced onto her feet,

“Woah, tell me next time before you do that.”

I shrugged before turning and jumping into the staircase. The stone cracked underfoot before I walked into the giant cavern. Far fewer insects crawled around, their natural

instincts taking over once their queen was dead. This gave us free passage through the cavern.

Without the insects there, I noticed quite a few oddities. There were a few buildings spread around, odd, elongated marking spread over them. They were made of a dark, gray metal that reflected white light regardless of the color you shined on it. Above us, streams of the cerulean magma lit the cavern in a cascade of blue beams. It was a surreal scene.

Althea ooh-ed and ahh-ed with me, just as taken in by the scenery as I was. I grazed my hand against one of the asymmetric buildings, and the metal was even harder than my own armor. With a quick, compact hook, I slammed my fist into the side of a building. My fist caved inwards, the bones cracking. Odder still, there was no sound ebbing off the metal.

I frowned, wondering what the fuck it was. It was like a city of some sorts, hiding away from all the turmoil just outside the mountain. Of course the insect queen fucked all that up, but it still made my mind wonder what had happened here.

After inspecting inside the buildings, I couldn't find anything inside them. They were eerily empty. At the center of a hill at the center of the open expanse, the pillar of light beamed from a dungeon core. It was as if the latent energy within it was unleashed.

The aura of red had almost taken over the entirety of the once black body of the thing. As if corrupted, the red aura reached out in horns of energy. Below it was a pillar supporting the core. Runic markings spread all over the pillar of dark gray metal. They glowed with a light like the beginning of a universe. It was blindingly bright, but my eyes cooled at the sight of it.

I could've stared at the core with a content ease forever if I had chosen too. It was warmer than a campfire on a cold night or the love of a kind mother. I wouldn't fall into the trap it offered though. With a brutal spike of willpower, I ripped my gaze from it. I ran up and jumped up the pillar, climbing atop it before reaching for the core.

A spike appeared through my palm. A bit of pain followed by shock followed. I glanced behind me, and Althea cried, "Get away from it."

I raised an eyebrow, "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

She raised her rifle, "I said get the fuck away from it."

I rolled my eyes, "How are we supposed to leave here without the core? That's right, we can't. I know the light's pretty and all, but come on."

When I looked closer at her, she wasn't drooling over herself at the sight of the light. Her eyes homed in on my hand, as if it was reaching towards a painful death. I frowned, letting my hand drop down. I hung off the pillar with my left hand,

"Alright, I'm not grabbing it." I reached out with my right hand, "Tell me what's wrong. I'll listen."

Althea lowered her rifle,

"That's what made me into what I am. A core like...a core like that."

Chapter 59: Creation

I dropped from the pillar before slamming into the ground. The echo rippled through the chamber, my feet digging into the stone. I glanced up,

"What do you mean made you into what you are?"

Althea's hands shook, like literal fear was crawling across her skin. It was like watching a war victim who couldn't handle the sound of gunshots. I walked towards her before raising my palms to her,

"Hey, calm down. Focus. You can do this. You're a fierce, strong woman. Not a little girl anymore. There's no reason to be afraid."

She closed her eyes, and sighed. Her hands steadied,

"Yeah, ok. Just, when you reached for it, it all came rushing back and I didn't know what to do."

Her arm turned to normal, her combat fatigues folding against the touch of her silver skinned hands,

"I uh...Don't touch those things. If you touch them too much, then you won't be normal anymore."

I crossed my arms, "Alright, please give me some details. How do you know all this?"

"Because that's what the lab put on me. They would put the uh...the energy that's pouring off that, they would infuse that with me. After enough exposure, I wasn't the same. I started to have nightmares, then those nightmares would come to life...You know, how my body...deforms."

I nodded, "Yeah, so you're scared that shit will happen to me too?"

She nodded. I shrugged, "I doubt it."

“Why?”

I tapped my armor with a knuckle, “Because of this. It’ll just absorb the energy. Torix didn’t even tell us about this. I’m guessing he didn’t want to have to negotiate with me about it.”

Althea nodded. She shook her arms for a second before raising her rifle and firing several spears at the pillar. They made a makeshift staircase.

“Use those to climb the pillar. Sorry about the freakout. Just...bad memories.”

I nodded, “Well I wouldn’t apologize too much. It could definitely be a good thing for me to have a bit more fear.”

Turning towards a spot of noise, Two beetles cannibalized one of their own, fighting over the corpse. They ripped it apart as I sighed, “Besides, this place can’t be good for either of us.”

Althea raised her rifle, firing two more bolts at the beetles. The insects died while she nodded, “Yeah, let’s get out.”

I turned and jumped up the spaced-out steps that Althea made with her spears. She could control how deep her spears pierced, something I hadn’t known about till just now. It gave her some useful utility in the future.

Once I reached the top of the steps, the spire of white light was blinding. The core rippled, the horns grasping for anything that dared touch it. I tried using a telekinetic tether to pull it out. My magic couldn’t even begin to get through the cloud of energy pouring around the core. Gritting my teeth, I reached out my hand, my armor smiling without me doing so as well.

When my hand touched the energy, it was cold. An icy numb that was like needles piercing deep down to your bones. The needles couldn’t get into my bones anymore though, since the bones were mostly eldritch eating armor by then. My armor began feasting on the energy, disrupting the flow of energy pouring out of the dungeon core. With a quick jolt, I shot my hand into the flow of energy and grasped the core.

The frigid numb crawled up my arm, into my shoulder, even etching a few inches up my neck. My armor caught up with the sudden flux of energy, gorging with an open appetite. A few moments later, the horns of the core scratched my armor. The core voraciously gored my hand, attempting to tear my limb to pieces. With my flesh and body being tough as it was, the core did so with a grand struggle.

The core stopped turning after a few more seconds, like gears in an engine breaking. Once my hand gripped across the whole thing, I pulled out the core. It screamed, the noise paralyzing like an ambulance’s alarm blaring right beside your ear. I kept pulling

before the core ripped out. I fell backwards before catching myself with telekinesis on the pillar.

I let myself swing downwards before my feet planted into the pillar, the telekinesis supporting me like a rope. The core's red vibrancy died down, the red giving way to black as the core of it expanded. By the time I lowered myself from the pillar, the core looked like a normal red core from any other dungeon. Well, besides for the steam and intense heat radiating from it.

Glancing up, the flow of energy radiating above destabilized. Wobbling like a guitar string, it shifted back and forth. With each vibration, the fluctuating flow turned more and more chaotic until it could no longer sustain itself. The energy snapped.

Once the energy disappeared, the roof collapsed along with the pillar. With a surprising finesse in my movements, I shot out a series of telekinetic bursts. Each wave hit boulder after boulder of rock, deflecting them away from me. Althea ran towards me, getting inside the safe zone I was creating.

A bead of sweat poured down my forehead before I barely deflected the last boulder falling on top of us. The shell of rock that made the top of the mountain was gone, piles of the blue magma pooling up in the crater. Glancing up, at the sky, a perfect square formed. It changed the red sky to rock. Another square appeared, outlined by blue energy.

Hordes of these squares appeared in sync moments later. They webbed outwards from where the beam of white light had crashed against the sky. Within seconds, a cave formed around us. The air changed in scent and flavor. It was harder, more ordered. The ground grew softer, like normal rock. Before I knew it, the giant cavern closed in, becoming a much tighter corridor.

It was surreal watching the matter warp with such ease. Althea gazed at the wonder as well, her eyes glazed over at the spectacle, just like mine. We were now in a cave, much like BloodHollow. The blue magma traveled in streams overhead and underfoot. Sheets of clear crystal let us see them, keeping the blue magma from pouring on top of us.

Glow worms hung from the roof, mixing the blue light with a green glow. The transition was beautiful, like watching order crush chaos under its heel. A moment later, a finger appeared out in the center of the air. It hung on nothing before pushing downward. An almost casual rip in dimensions appeared beside us.

From it, the overseer I found talking with Torix walked out from the portal. With giant hands, the enormous figure, and with his *hair* made of electronic cords, he nodded,

"Impressive. I stand corrected. The lich was correct."

Althea and I couldn't even comprehend him. Everything happened so fast. The Overseer glanced at us,

"Excellent work, harbinger. Being able to stabilize an opened rift...impressive."

I shook my head, clearing my head. I glanced up at the overseer,

"Uh, yeah. Of course. Glad to help..."

The overseer opened a menu screen just like ours. Instead of being blue though, it was red with glowing white outlines. It was like the edges of his menu screen were drawn in with liquid light.

"I will add this feat towards your total reward after Yawm is dealt with. You will receive Schema's favor for clearing out the infected, killing named ones, and clearing out the opened rifts then."

I nodded my head, my focus coming back after the initial shock subsided,

"Why wait till after I kill Yawm? I could use the rewards to help kill Yawm."

Four other screens appeared, the overseer multitasking,

"Most of the rewards are related to galactic status and protection. They will not assist in destroying Yawm."

"Oh." I glanced at Althea. She kept her head low. I turned my gaze back towards the overseer, "What-"

The overseer spoke at the same time, but his voice overwhelmed mine. It wasn't an interruption, however. It was more like whatever he had to say was obviously more important than whatever I had to say,

"That...armor of yours. It does offer quite an advantage when paired with an ambitious mentality, doesn't it?"

For once, I wasn't the one asking questions.

"I suppose..."

"I read up on your file. This was supposedly the creation of an eldritch...A shell for someone else that you stole?"

"Stole is a strong word I think. It's more like I stole it from him before he stole it from someone else. A free for all if anything."

The overseer glanced at the rock walls of the cavern. He nodded, taking his time before speaking once more,

“In time, you will become one of the many swords that Schema has at his disposal.” He glanced at Althea, “You may be as well. Keep this in mind, younglings.”

He glanced upwards at the glowing lights of the cavern’s roof,

“There’s plenty of beings that despise Schema. They believe him cruel, uncaring, and unkind. In a way, they are correct. Schema is a force of nature, like wind or rain. The question isn’t whether or not Schema is bad or good. The question is if you choose to work around him. Imagine an example of other natural forces.”

He waved a hand. A hologram appeared around us, lifelike in its detail. A valley was present with two rustic houses. On one side, the house was built out of sticks. On the other, it was made of stone. Above the stone house, a windmill spun.

“Do you see these homes?”

Althea chimed, “Yes sir.”

“Now watch as I introduce rain.”

The rain poured in a torrent. The insides of both homes appeared, a man and woman in each of them. In the stone home, no leaks or drops of water poured in. The wind battered against their house and windmill, powering their stone mill as they sat beside a warm fire. Behind their house was a well. The view of the house panned above it, showing how it was filling up.

“This home uses a well to wield the water of the rain. Their windmill is powered by the storm’s wind. They will rest easy, protected by the sturdy walls they built, in each other’s arms. The gentle crackle of the fire and the pattering of the rain of their roof will be a symphony of ease to their ears.”

The perspective melted before the other home appeared. Wind leaked in through cracks in the walls. Leaks let water pour in from every nook and cranny. With no fire, the man and woman froze, each of them balled up. They weren’t together, they were alone. Their house was built too low on the plain, at the bottom of a hill. Therefore, a portion of their house was flooded.

They shivered, alone and dirty.

“Two families given the same circumstance, yet one triumphs among adversity. The other wilts into nothing. One family took the time to work until their future was assured. The other did just enough to live. The two of you can decide if Schema is the wind keeping you cold and the rain that chills your bones.”

The image melted, showing us the warm, orange light of the fire,

“Or you turn Schema into a force that grinds the grain that you bake to bread and the rain that waters the crops you turn to plenty.”

The overseer turned to us, the hologram melting back into the backdrop of the cave surrounding us,

“How I do love telling stories. Farewell, and good hunting.”

Althea and I watched as he stepped back into the black abyss that was a tear in dimensions. As quickly as he came, he left, leaving us there.

Althea nodded, “Wow. He sounds a lot like you.”

I nodded, staring at where the overseer was, “Yeah he does...Hell yeah.”

A moment later, and another tear in dimensions appeared. Instead of a finger, a spearhead tore through this dimension. Instead of being a black abyss, the portal opened into a world of violet light. A sentinel stepped out, standing two heads taller than I. It glanced down at us as the dimensional tear closed behind it.

It slammed its spear, a line appearing in front of us. It spread open, revealing an area just outside of the dungeon's entrance in the field. No longer was it a fleshy, disgusting crevice. It was an orderly set of stairs leading towards a different doorway. The sentinel pointed at this dimensional opening,

“Leave.”

Not wanting to argue, Althea and I stepped outside. The wind flowing through the stadium brushed against us. The soft feel of earth and grass pressed against our feet. The warmth of sunshine bristled against us. A series of notifications appeared in the corner of my screen. I glanced around, finding Kessiah and the guards still standing at one of the entrances to the stadium.

Kessiah put her hands on her mouth,

“Well that was fast.”

I cupped my own hands around my mouth, “How long were we gone?”

“You guys weren't even gone for fifteen seconds. You jumped into the portal then walked out after a few seconds later.”

I lowered my hands and pursed my lips. It looked like the eldritch portal might have dilated time a bit. Like the hyperbolic time chamber or some shit.

It's uses were no doubt interesting, but that was food for thought later. Althea and I ran towards the others, the dungeon core still in my hand. We jumped up through the stadium bleachers before reaching the others.

Kessiah grabbed me under her arm, a tattoo made of elegant lettering in a language I didn't know creasing. Kessiah picked me up, hugging me as she said,

"See? Told yah you could handle exile. You're gonna be fine."

The stone beneath her cracked. She set me down,

"Damn. You got way heavier didn't yah?"

I spoke, "A bit. What do you mean you knew I'd handle it?"

Kessiah glanced around like she said something she wasn't supposed to. She tapped the edges of her hips, her violet skin radiant in the sun,

"Well, the cores inside of rifts are notoriously difficult to take down. Anyone who can, they gain a title, Rift Closer. We figured you'd be able to, considering how your armor works."

I raised a fist to shoulder level, "That's what the fuck I'm talking about. I don't know what titles are though."

Kessiah pointed above her head. Her name appeared, along with two other lines of data below it. The middle line was her title, King Killer. The one below that showed her level.

"They kind of act like status symbols. My title is in the middle of the tiers. There's lists of them if you want to check them out on message boards. Some people obsess over which title is better, and the tier list is constantly changing."

Althea raised an eyebrow, "Sounds like you know a lot about them."

Kessiah grinned, scratching the back of her head. Her white hair flowed between her fingers,

"Yeah. Guilty as charged. I check them out from time to time. Rift Closer is a kind of wildcard title. It means you have some unique ability that lets you close rifts. Whether that ability is useful in combat is a different story altogether though. It's hard to tell at a glance, but paired with a high level, and the title can really hold some merit."

I peeled the armor covering my face back, "Well, cool. Sounds pointless though. Why try to appear powerful when I can simply be powerful?"

Althea chimed, "I'm sure plenty of people thought the same thing about charisma builds. You can't get more power by killing monsters with Charisma really. You can get power by talking though, and I think that's powerful in its own way. I'm sure titles are like that."

Kessiah pointed a finger at her, holding her hand like a gun. She fired it at Althea while saying, "Bingo." Kessiah lowered her hand, continuing,

"It's useful as fuck when roaming around the galaxy too. Imagine Yawm walking around with such a high bounty on his head. You see his title, Sentinel Slayer, then his high level, and 99% of people turn the other way."

With a bit of intuition, I thought about making my title and status appear overhead. A little notification rang out beside my ear, letting me know it appeared. It may be useful in the future. After handling that, I clapped my hands,

"Alright then, you guys ready for the next dungeon?"

Kessiah shook her head, "We gotta kill the rest of the guards here. They may not be the smartest things, but leaving them behind isn't the smartest idea."

Althea cocked her rifle, the steam hissing before she armed a bolt into the chamber of it,

"Then let's go."

We set off towards the outer layer of the stadium. Using my perception, I sensed for anyone nearby as we walked. I would use hearing, smell, and enhanced sight for finding the monsters stalking around the arena. One by one they fell, each of them easier than the last. The experience they offered was much lower now, partially because none of them were over level 800 and I was a higher level too.

It didn't mean I didn't gain any levels though. After killing the guardians of the rift, the rift's monsters, and the scorpion queen, I was sitting at a comfortable level of 740. It just so happened that today we were walking home. It was a one of those days where Althea was feeling chatty. She and Kessiah were telling simple stories about everyday stuff.

During one of Althea's stories, Kessiah gave out the dungeon cores we needed. It was a good time to stock up on any bonuses we had since everything had slowed down. As they chatted away, I absorbed the dungeon cores and began grinding out my stats. They left me behind while I stared at my status screen.

The last time I'd maxed out my dungeon cores was level 563. With the genesis of potential perk, I could get half of my level's worth of bonus attributes and bonus skill points from cores. That gave me a solid boost of 88 attributes on top of all my levels ups. With that in mind, I poured my points into constitution before the message I'd been waiting for appeared.

Star Matter(Have 1000 points in a single attribute before level 1000, Constitution over 1000) –You have become a center of mass. Embrace your frame, and move even stars. Every eldritch killed over level 1000 adds another year of life. Increases living time without air by 200%, and grants immunity to cancer. +10% more density, weight, and height per 1000 points in constitution. You may choose to add 1/10th of constitution to any attribute of your choosing, besides constitution or endurance. You may now unlock a unlock a class.

The first thing I noticed was how a lot of the benefits were similar with the endurance perk. These perks weren't designed with the idea of someone getting more than one. One of the interesting differences came with the last remark, a message about getting a class. It didn't mention anything about getting a class though. I'd research it for a bit before asking Torix again. I could sit down and read through my obelisk for a bit about it.

The other benefits from the perk were far more translucent. Even with the overlapping bonuses, the perks were worth getting if only for the increased scaling they offered. The extra 1/10th on any attribute was worth chasing for all by itself.

Which attribute will you select for the 1/10th addition? Strength, Will, Intel, Luck, Char, Dex, or Per?

For a second, I thought about putting the extra 1/10th of an attribute into willpower. I got a huge bonus for willpower, and the stat was one of my key stats. After a few seconds of number crunching though, I discovered that I may be able to get four of these level 1000 stats before I passed the level 1000 stat mark.

It sounds crazy, but most people would be able to get at least two of them before hitting level 1000. That is, if they knew about the perks. Since I invested so heavily into endurance and maximized my total stat count as much as possible, I'd be able to get four instead.

With that in mind, I put the extra 1/10th of the attribute into strength. After that, I began placing all my excess points into willpower. If I pulled this off, I'd connect the two attribute chains of my stats while getting myself four of these level 1000 perks. My endurance and willpower would both feed into constitution. After that, constitution would feed into strength.

Strength would then feed into...well, I hadn't decided yet. I'd decide once the option was there. With all that stat stuff in mind, I allocated the rest of my attribute points into willpower. After that, I finalized my decision.

Weight, will, and strength surged through me like an electric jolt. My armor snapped once more, bursting as I molted from my previous, tight shell. A layer of muscle built on my frame. My shoulders grew broader, my hands larger. My structure turned thicker,

making me look compact despite how tall I was. I shook my head as my helmet split open before regenerating.

The muscle within my armor enhanced, turning thicker. The cells contracted with greater force. This surge of strength was a dangerous and delicious cocktail, something that was short and fleeting. The high faded before I sat in the resounding radiance it left behind.

I turned my hands, inspecting them for differences. They were similar, but my knuckles were larger along with the bones of each finger. While not oversized for my body, my hands were larger than normal. They were kind of like clubs at the ends of my wrists. The difference didn't stem from constitution though. It was purely strength.

While constitution made me bigger and heavier, it didn't change my proportions. Strength did. Strength made my hands bigger, my shoulders broader, it even changed my jaw. While I wasn't outright alien, it did make me look different. Almost like humanity if we had a few more million years to evolve, physically speaking at least.

After noticing all these changes, I glanced at my status screens. Glorious.

Level 740

Strength – 507.4 | Constitution – 1000.7 | Endurance – 1077

Dexterity – 176.2 | Willpower – 604.7 | Intelligence – 205.4

Charisma – 60.1 | Luck – 85.6 | Perception – 123

Daniel HillsideTotalsRegenBuffs/DebuffsHealth

68,811/68,81119,619/minOppression Damage-

**15,000+40%hp/minStamina27,390/27,390384/secElemental Res – 98%Harbinger of
Cataclysm.987 Billion/56.6 Billion69.4/per min(conduit)Plasma Res – 98%Phys Dam
Reduction – 98%Rad Res – 98%Phys Dam Bonus – 5921%Mental Res – 98%Total Damage
Bonus 20%Boundless Storm**

My stats were high. So high, they almost blew my mind. My strength had increase dramatically along with my constitution. Health and health regen increased slowly but surely. The amount of ambient mana I received from the rift was higher than I anticipated as well. It was a much higher amount than clearing normal dungeons.

My physical damage bonus was insane as well. It seemed more like a way of measuring general strength than physical damage. With that being the case, I was now strong as

fuck. When I clasped my hand into a fist, it tensed with the pressure of a hydraulic press. It blew my mind how powerful I'd become, and so quickly.

It was all because of my armor when I thought about it. My armor gave me the extra edge that always kept me one step ahead of Schema's curve. It was like Schema's system was balanced around the idea of someone having only the stats that Schema gave them. If you had even a marginal amount more, then you could use that slight bonus to snowball into more and more bonuses.

If I was the snowball, I was tumbling down the mountain fast and hard. With that in mind, I caught back up with the others. As I ran, my feet shook the ground a bit, even if I tried making my footsteps quiet. If I let them smack against the ground, they straight up broke into the concrete. It was really weird.

It was like the rock wasn't as solid. It wasn't like water or anything, but like a thick, brittle putty. If I pressed against it, my hand would sink in some. At this point, I was heavy enough that figuring out gravity magic would be downright diabolical.

It made me bubble with excitement as I caught up with Althea and Kessiah. Trotting up, I lined up beside them. As I did so, Kessiah turned towards me. Well, it wasn't towards me anymore. I was taller than her now.

She frowned,

"What the fuck? How in the hell are you taller than me, little man?"

I grinned, the satisfaction clear as day on my face as I peeled my armor off it,

"Ahhhhh, it feels good to hear that and know it's ironic."

Althea giggled before Kessiah's frown deepened. For someone so old, she still had a pretty petty side to her. A stubborn, petty side. Kessiah crossed her arms,

"We'll see when we get back to the camp. I'm not letting you get out of the spar now."

I slammed my fists together, "I look forward to it."

Kessiah grinned, "Looks like I need to beat some more fear into you again."

I shrugged, "We'll see."

We chatted as we walked, a bit friendlier after Althea commented on how ridiculous the two of us were being. By the time we reached the camp, the three of us were having an animated conversation about our builds. Althea already gained the level 1000 perk as well. She invested very, very heavily in the stat total, to a ridiculous extent even.

Her next goal was dexterity, so that she could fire and move with more precision. According to Althea, it was a standard rogue set up. Kessiah kept pretty standard, investing almost entirely into constitution and strength. She knew all about how the stats 'fed' into each other. It was why she decided to become a warrior.

Of course her skill layout was entirely different than mine. I focused more on striking hard and fast, with compact hooks and straights. I would take advantage of opportunities if they arose, otherwise I stuck to the basics. Kessiah had quite a bit of her latent power hidden behind her mythical skill, Blood Arts. It was the official name for her hemomancy.

If I could, I'd bring it out of her this next time we fought. We reached the sewer nearest towards the camp before raising out of the ground. Once we'd had short rendezvous with Torix, the four of us went towards another intersection bridge.

The day was waning, the orange glow of a sunset peaking over the horizon. That orange light bathed us in light, the wind keeping us cool. The ground was cool on my feet too, the sense of touch going straight through my armor. Kessiah and I walked up beside each other before Torix turned towards me,

"I'm amazed you wish to be destroyed soundly once more."

I shrugged, speaking with a quiet confidence, "We'll see."

Kessiah grinned, "Good. I can't wait to humble that confidence of yours."

A magic aura passed by us, going far away and around us. It was the same noise trapping magic Torix used anytime we had secret conversations. He imagined our fight would be destructive enough that we might attract a follower or two if we didn't silence the sound some.

On the other hand, Althea had a bag of popcorn. She tugged on Torix's sleeve, so he snapped his fingers. A chair of black mana formed beneath her and him before Torix waved at us,

"Now give us a good show."

His voice echoed from several hundred meters away. They were giving us quite the breadth for the battle. I'd give them a damn good reason for it. I clasped my fists, my ascendant mana roaring in my veins, pulsing through my runes. The energy radiated off my runes, a thick mist radiating off them. I grinned with my armor forming a jagged grin of its own.

From between the teeth, the same ascendant mana poured outwards. It strengthened until the air hummed around me. I stepped forward, and the ground cracked underfoot. The telekinetic lining wrapped around my fists like invisible steel. The sensation of fear

crept up my back. Kessiah decimated me last time we fought. Even if my mind forgot, my body remembered.

I grit my teeth. A grin traced my lips as adrenaline laced my blood. My hands shook, but it wasn't with fear anymore. It an absolute, delectable excitement. It was a fight I knew I couldn't win. A fight with no holds barred. I could unleash my full potential. Every tactic, every dirty trick, every ounce of anger and hatred, I needed them if I was going to win.

Kessiah shouted, "Don't burn through your mana too quickly."

I pulled my fists up, setting into a stance. It was amazing how fighting against the weak made you pick up bad habits. I felt rusty, almost like I hadn't been on the edge in a long time. Staring at Kessiah, there was a bottomless abyss. I walked right along the cliff's edge, darting the line when I faced her.

She said, "You ready?"

The ascendant mana roared in my fists. My grin widened,

"Always."