

New World 61

Chapter 61: Final Frontier

Kessiah blinked, “Uh... You sure got up from that fast.”

I nodded, “I mean yeah, of course I did. Remember, my health regen is crazy high.”

Torix tapped his chin, “It’s astonishing when seen in person, however. It’s nothing like I imagined it. The process is much more...grotesque.”

I shrugged, “Better to be disgusting and alive then beautiful and dead, right?”

Torix glanced at Althea, “I suppose.” He glanced at the cracking, dry skin on his corpse hands, “I suppose I can’t argue. I’m not necessarily the epitome of beauty either.”

He turned towards Kessiah,

“But this vixen over here tried killing you.”

I rolled my eyes, “Yeah right.”

Kessiah stared at the ground, scratching the back of her hair.

Torix’s eyes turned from a deep blue to a bright purple,

“Using your mythical skill against a friend who is over 1000 levels below you. How far will you sink?”

Oddly enough, Kessiah blushed, her violet skin turning purple on her cheeks. She frowned,

“Uh...I’m sorry. I channeled the spell in the heat of the moment. Once the spell’s been cast, it’s done. I can’t stop it.”

I shook out the tightness in one shoulder, “Who cares. You failed. Good job trying though. How low did my health get?”

Torix frowned, “Less than five thousand.”

Exasperation welled up, clear as day on my face, “Why are you complaining then? It’s fine. I’m more interested in how in the hell that Blood Arts stuff works. Looks pretty damn awesome.”

Torix shook his hand towards me, “Don’t. It isn’t useful for someone with arcane blood. You’re much better off putting in the time and effort it takes to master magic than using her methods. Besides for that, it’s hereditary.”

I frowned, “Well fuck. That sucks. Can I get an explanation on how it works?”

Kessiah propped her weight onto one leg, “I trade a bit of my blood for the blood of Baldowah, an Old One. He’s kind of like a god of war or something like that.” Kessiah frowned, “The ichor dried up fast though since my body can’t sustain it. It’s a last resort.”

I raised both my fists into the air, “I managed to get out the last resort. That’s what I’m talking about.”

Kessiah grinned, “Yeah, you can’t handle more than one hit though.”

I grinned back, “Yeah, one hit now. Wait till later.” I glanced at her arms, seeing bruises on them along with a few fresh cuts, “Besides, it doesn’t look like you came out unscathed either.”

Her shoulders flopped, “I don’t have health regen like you. It takes me a while to recover from the fights.”

I cupped my chin, “Alright, so my takeaway is that you’re actually a burst fighter. An assassin of sorts. If we fought for real, you’d use that technique right away. If that was the case, I’d be overwhelmed in seconds. If I can just last long enough for it to end, then I’ll win. Is that right?”

Torix grinned, “Excellent analysis. Indeed, that is quite correct. Good luck sustaining through the onslaught Kessiah leaves in her wake. She can do in seconds what takes other warriors minutes.”

Kessiah pointed at me, “Yeah, but I’m going to need to get a skill like that Boundless Storm you got. It makes fighting you up close so hard.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Really? You could just smash me with that mythical skill though.”

Kessiah bit her lip, “Yeah, but the fact you can beat me in any way already...It’s humbling.”

Torix raised a hand, “I concur. Having already bested Kessiah without her unleashing her true potential. That by itself is impressive. You’ve come quite far. After you’ve settled down, come back towards my study for tutelage.”

I clapped my hands, “Sure thing. Just have to carve out these runes first.”

Althea walked up. She pressed together one finger from each hand, glancing at me,

“Would you mind carving a few plates from your armor?”

I raised an eyebrow, “What for?”

“I was hoping to make a rifle out of them. Maybe the runes would help me with my rifle. I uh, I don’t know. Just trying to get a little boost is all. You know, close the distance.”

I grinned, “Sounds like good practice. I can show you how to carve them later if you’d like.”

A slight grin traced her lips, “That uh...sounds great.”

She stepped back before Torix opened a portal beside him. He walked into it while saying,

“Remember to stop by and visit after you’re done with your runes.”

I gave him a tiny salute with a hand, “You got it.”

We dispersed, ready for a bit of relaxation after the mission. Whenever we reached back to the camp, more people sat about then before. Without the need to close off the quarantine area, the workload had decreased. More and more lazy bums just sat around beside other lazy bums, chatting away. It struck me as foreign, like a dog walking on its hind feet.

They were so close to giant monsters that were clamping their teeth at their throats. How they didn't feel anxious about it was absurd. Most of them barely reached level 100, meaning even a single zombie kill would make a huge difference. Like, a fifty level plus kind of difference.

Didn't seem to bother them though. It reminded me of soldiers before a war. Instead of practicing their aim or working on their physical fitness, they just sat around playing cards. Since I'd been going hard nonstop for months, it looked weird.

As I passed by, I was an oddity to them as well. Whispers of awe, fear, and admiration floated around me in disparate bursts. After my speech a week ago, I curried quite a bit of favor. Combine that with my new fancy-shmancy title, and I was an outright inspiration.

Taking advantage of my new status symbol, I trotted up to the center of the camp. Work benches lined up in a giant square, kind of like a public square for ingenuity. The social pressure was supposed to help with productivity or something. Hard to slack off with prying eyes after all.

Using that, I surged my ascendant mana before lifting a hand with a sharpened spike coming out of my palm. For a second, there was a surge of fear. When I slammed my fist into my thigh, that fear dissolved into confusion.

Grabbing the puncture wound, I tore out a piece of my armor before setting out on my carving. The result was always better after a practice carve or two anyways. Making a few new pieces for Althea's rifle would be perfect.

After working on the runes for so long, I could add in more than one single meaning to the inscription. I would make out the runes with multiple meanings. Of course, making two half-baked messages was far weaker than a single strong one, so this was difficult. I found a way around it though using a double entendre. In other words, a set of words with more than one right explanation.

Just like with normal words, the runes carried multiple meanings. If I layered these meanings together, I could generate multiple effects without diminishing their effects. A quick example in English would be like this: new obesity study looks for larger test group. It could mean a larger number of participants in a study. It could also mean the participants aren't fat enough.

Making these in a different, almost transcendent language was difficult though. If the meanings didn't at least synergize or align with each other, they would disrupt the flow of mana. Since this was my first time making Althea's inscriptions, I figured trying something a wee bit less ambitious was ideal.

I stuck with making the plates help with her ammo consumption. Althea's lack of infinite bolts seemed to be her primary problem in combat now. Even adding just a few more bolts in combat would make a huge difference.

With that in mind, I connected my thumb, index, and middle finger into a single, sharp horn. This form gave me superior control when carving. It was tidbit I picked up after watching Torix use mana to scorch out his runes. My ascendant mana hummed with a violent power as well, my control of them being superior to what it once was. I could handle even delicate tasks with it burning in the background.

With these new innovations, I carved out the rune that represented waste, misuse, and carelessness. The word dived deep into the meaning, bringing out all the pain that comes with being carefree. The consequences, the regret, even the semblance of loss, those emotions all surged from the rune. The neatness and precision of my carving had improved with practice and my levels, causing the change in potency.

Combine that with the extra strength, dexterity, and perception, and I was a certified carving machine. As I carved with care and intent, several other guards began working nearby. It seemed my own will to work gave them the heart to work on their own tasks as well. That was good. We would need them versus Yawm, in one way or another.

Keeping myself focused, I carved out the rune that represented what cannot be. It represented not even the oblivion after death, but the oblivion after you are forgotten. When a king's legacy is forgotten, that is when he truly dies. This rune captured the essence of our menial, meaningless existence. It was a nihilist's dream.

Shifting midway through, I combined the rune with another, even greater rune. This new rune cherished the meaning of our existence. It gave purpose and life to that which was once useless and dead. The rune empowered the things we gave value, holding them near and dear like the life of a loved one.

After finishing the letter, I encircled the passage with the rune for unity. Written in much smaller lettering, the rune barely spanned a fifth the length of the other three inscriptions. At the end of the

letter, I extended the last line of the last letter. It was like a fancy signature. This encircled the entire passage in a wire thin line, granting a portion of the runes meaning to the other letters.

Doing this prevented the letter from interfering with the current passage, but passed on a part of its power. After handling this, I envisioned Althea's rifle. My memory came to me, clear as crystal and glass. Using it as a reference, I bended the plate into the side panel of Althea's rifle.

With my thumb, I pressed out holes at the ends of the plate. This gave Althea useful hooks to keep the shield and runes attached to her plate. Before I finished, I placed my hand on the plate, surging my ascendant mana into the plate. The torrent poured into the greedy rune, letting it charge until it was completely saturated with the might of mana.

I opened the jagged mouth of my armor before removing the armor on my thumb. I biting down on it, opening a wound. I wiped a smear of the blood around the rune before it discharged. My blood leaked into the hungry metal, not to be absorbed, but to make it alive. This allowed it to hold onto the mana, kind of like the wax that seals a letter.

When Althea needed to use the rune, she just had to connect her mana and guide the plate for her use. With this combination of engravings, she should save around 1/3rd of her bolts. At least I hoped she would. This was my first time trying this out after all.

With that finished, I set the plate beside me before placing my left forearm against the table. Of course I reinforced the shitty, rickety, just pathetic wood of the table with a telekinetic field. It was like I was setting my own arm on my back, though a bit heavier. Odd, but very effective.

Speaking of which, that reminded me of another odd sensation. Ever since unlocking the level 100 dexterity perk, I didn't have a dominant hand. The difference that produced was larger than I thought it would be. For instance, try brushing your teeth with your non- dominant hand. You'll be jabbing the shit out of your mouth. If I tried doing it with my right hand though, I could do it with ease.

Writing, eating, all of that wasn't strange or unnatural for my right hand anymore. Tasks that were difficult and arduous before became simple. This was a perfect example. Trying to write with my right hand was hard as hell before. carving the runes was far more difficult. Without that handicapping me now though, I tapped my chin, brainstorming for a bit.

It didn't take too long before I thought up a few interesting combinations. I decided on my favorite one before beginning my carve. The passage was more intricate than Althea's blending several

characters into one. With an elegant touch and an eye for detail, I zoned into the project, relishing in each detail.

From the curves of the lines to the angle of the arches in the letters, I carved with precision. A minute or two later, and the rune looked wrong. It wasn't right, too perfect and too contrived. When I fought, I fought with a cool anger. I kept composed, calm, and cruel. While the rune was calm, it lacked the fury and fire of battle.

I quit carving for a moment and urged my armor to heal the markings. What I needed was more. More pain, hatred, rage, and more fervor. The message I carved was about an icy wrath, a malice and molten rage tempered by an intent to harm. The rune when carved with such precision was like a cinder. I needed no cinder.

I needed fire.

I brought forth memories of my father. I bathed in my hatred of his malignance. No. That wasn't enough. I dug deeper. From the abyss of my mind, I brought forth a bleaker, blacker hatred. The hatred I had of the powerless child that did nothing but cried. It surged with a wild wrath, like starving wolf having his meal stolen.

That child wept pointless tears, tears that would do him no good. Scars and bruises and hurt, that little child hid within his own torment. He could of told his teachers. He could have taken a knife to his father's throat. He didn't. He sat there and withstood the abuse. Not like an unsung hero, but like a quiet coward.

That rage and hatred, I wielded it. The boy forged in fires of his own self-loathing. Tempered by that fire, that child grew into a man made of metal. Haunted by the powerlessness of his past, he fought for his future. He fought to never be so powerless again.

Relentless, unyielding, and uncompromising, that hatred burned scars deep into him. They were no weakness. They became his greatest strength. Using that strength, a strength born out of humiliation and agony, a monster was born.

And so, I surged with the ascendant mana within, letting me carve through the armor in a fit of the very emotions that made me strongest. It drove me forward. It let me ignore my own suffering, turning the pain to power. Like a ichor of a dark god, I let the ferocity consume me as I etched in the runes.

But at the core of my being, I remained calm. I kept composed. That rage gave great strength, but it would steal my mind if I allowed it. I would never allow it. I crushed the anger, beating it into submission. I turned the untamed into the tamed. I bound the unbounded.

With chains of my own choosing, I shackled that inner turmoil. I turned it from something wild, something malicious, something that could not be controlled, into the most stable part of my being. Like the eye at the center of a boundless storm, I decided where my path of carnage would carry me. I decided what I left in my wake, for I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul.

I carved the new runes onto my arms, my legs, my palms. In the spur of the moment, I carved two more runes. One across my back, going off feel and using my extreme flexibility. The other across my chest.

Once I finished, I forgot to maintain my telekinetic field on the table. It snapped, flopping me face first into the ground beneath me. Since so many people walked here, there wasn't any grass anymore. That meant a face full of mud.

It squeezed in between my helmet before I pushed myself up, lunging off one knee. I pulled back my helmet, shaking my head to sling the mud away. Even odder than the fall, sweat poured down my dirty face. Without even noticing it, I was literally steaming. I didn't even notice, but without my runes, channeling my ascendant mana caused this.

That's probably why the surge of emotion during the carving process was so intense. Reigning all that in made for some interesting results though. I glanced at the runes on my arms and legs. They were jagged, rough, like serrated teeth. This wasn't the result of sloppy craftsmanship though. This was entirely intentional.

It was like the rough strokes of a calligraphist. In all the chaos, there was a certain kind of order. Menacing and powerful, like the hulking frame of a monster. No, this was a thing that ate monsters. It was me.

Glancing at my notifications, I saw another element that worked in my favor.

Breakthrough! Carving into Oblivion(lvl 72)—>(lvl90) Breakthrough maximum level reached.

I didn't even see the notification when I was carving. My guess, I was too in the zone.

Now I was out of that trance, I was eager to test the new runes out. First though, I reached behind me and felt the rune on my back. It didn't feel like I could do something like that. The rough metal grated against my armored fingertips, just like the etchings on my arms. Thinking about it, I must have looked like a freak as I did it.

Glancing around, I one hundred percent did. Several steel legion guards still stared at me, wondering what the fuck had possessed me. Considering the guards still looked at me like I was inhuman, I must have really given them something to see during the process. The ominous red mana ebbing off me mustn't have helped either.

I shrugged, knowing I couldn't really do much about it. Picking up Althea's plate, I walked off towards her tent. There was no point in dwelling on how weird they thought I looked. Or, well, how weird I actually did look.

Without wasting any time, I passed through the camp, ignoring the whispers around me. A minute later, I walked up towards Althea's tent. I gave it slight tap, but she didn't answer. I gave another tap. After a groggy groan, Althea walked outside.

In a tanktop and shorts, I could see her blue gray skin, almost like dull silver. Her purple hair still looked crazy, but silky and flowing, unlike dyed hair. I never paid much attention to what Althea or Kessiah looked like, mainly because I knew I was only 17. Or 18, I didn't know what normal day it was now. I was almost certainly 18 now.

Anyways, that meant I could lose my shit if I was around a sexy girl. I'd already seen Althea naked, but the circumstances prevented it from sinking in. Wearing casual clothes, Althea looked good. I mean really good. That could have easily have been the hormones talking though. Either that or my preference for a sort of messy hairstyle in girls.

That's how Althea's hair was at this point. She had just woken up, looking tired. When she saw me, she raised an eyebrow,

"What is it?"

I handed her the plate, "Here it is. It might save you some ammo when you fight. I didn't know what else to give you, considering your bolts already pierce."

She frowned, taking the plate and inspecting it. She lifted it overhead, turning it as she tried deciphering how it was supposed to be used. I noticed.

“Turn your arm into the biotic rifle thingy.”

She nodded, altering her arm into the interlocking plates of bone that composed her rifle. From her other arm, a spine of bone fell out before she cocked the rifle, letting out a hiss of steam. Putting the bolt into the chamber, she pointed it at the ground,

“So what do I do?”

I grabbed the biotic rifle, surprised by how brittle it felt. With a care I didn't think I needed to use, I placed my plate of metal onto the rifle.

“Now you just grow ropes or whatever to latch around the holes I made. It should give you a solid grip. Kind of acts as a shield and an ammo saver. Figured you could use it.”

She grinned, “Wow...This is super cool...Why did you make it with holes? You could have just made a barrel or something for my rifle.”

I shrugged, “Eh, I thought you wouldn't want something like this being hard to remove. Even if you morph your hand into a giant monster arm, this plate will stay on. Figured the more open design gave you a bit more freedom.”

She blinked, creating white strips of tendon that latched the plate onto her rifle. She aimed and fired a bolt. With a bit of steam floating off the barrel of the rifle, her grin grew,

“I can't believe it. It costs half as much to use bolts.”

Without my helmet on my face, I scratched my nose, “Heh, try morphing your arm.”

She expanded her arm, the plate remaining locked. She might as well have smiled ear to ear. Her monster arm deformed as she went in and hugged me,

“Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

Utterly shocked at this sudden hospitality, I glanced around, making sure Torix and Kessiah weren't playing a prank on me. No one busted out to laugh at my reaction, so I assumed they weren't here. I had my arms up in surprise, mainly because I almost leapt back when she had hugged me. A second later, I gave her a second-long hug,

"Uhm. No problem. Glad you enjoyed it."

She glanced up at me, raising an eyebrow,

"Are you...uncomfortable?"

I glanced around, suppressing a blush with sheer power of will,

"Hell no. Fuck you."

She grinned again,

"Wow. You're blushing."

I blinked twice,

"No, I'm just not used to being in contact with a murderous eldritch lady."

She lifted me up, her strength well beyond what it should have been for her size, "Join the murderous eldritch club."

She dropped me, letting my feet smash into the soil. I rebalanced myself, standing upright. Althea continued,

"If you saw what you came back from after Kessiah hit you, then you'd know what I mean."

I shrugged, "Eh, it couldn't be worse than some eldritch I've seen."

She walked back into her tent, setting the plate on an office table she dragged in there,

“I wouldn’t be so sure. She tore you apart. Your limbs were just so bent out of shape. Blood was everywhere. When you came up, your armor reached out in little tendrils. I don’t know if it ate the blood around you or not, but it helped you heal that’s for sure. Then you snapped your legs back into place. Bleck. gross.”

I smirked, “You got to do what you got to do.”

She smiled, “Yeah, I guess so. It’s was kind of cool watching you shrug it off. Anytime someone stares at me after I transform, it burns my soul. I don’t know why, but I hate it when people look at me.”

“Why?”

Althea shrugged, “I don’t know...probably because I think I’m gross too.”

I spread out my hands, “I mean, I can see their point.”

She frowned at me, but I continued with a devilish smile, “Doesn’t mean I agree though.”

She rolled her eyes before tossing me a fork. I caught it, snatching it out of the air and bending it. She opened one of the drawers under her desk and pulled out a few cans with her fingers. She made her hands larger than normal, letting her grab three cans in each hand.

The reformed before she tossed me one. This time I caught it without crushing what she threw me. She smiled,

“Want to have lunch? It’s boring doing it by myself all the time. It’s fun having company.”

I glanced around, looking for someone else. Finding no one, I turned towards her and pointed at my chest, “Uh...me?”

She grew pointed claws at the ends of her fingers. After piercing the top of a can with three of her fingers, she rotated her hand with laser like precision. Her fingers sliced through the metal with ease before she pulled off the top.

“Yeah you. Kessiah’s fun sometimes, but it can be hard to relate about her stuff. And Torix...” She shook her head, “I’ll have lunch with Torix when I want to listen to another lecture.”

I laughed a little, “Yeah, it’s like he’s in love with the sound of his voice sometimes.”

“I know right? It’s ridiculous. Yesterday I asked him about how to optimize my rifle, and you know what he told me?”

I walked into the tent, making telekinetic pads under my feet. The force of it compressed on my sides, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. I leaned back against the tent, making another telekinetic field to withstand my weight.

“What did he tell you?”

She raised her hands, “He started stuttering before going on a tangent about how magic is better than technology. By the end of the conversation, I just wanted to say, ‘You don’t know anything about rifles, do you?’”

She lowered her hands, taking a spoonful of some canned beef stew, swallowing it, “I didn’t tell him though...I didn’t want him to feel bad. He’s just trying to help.”

I shook my head, smiling a bit, “I would have just told it to him straight.”

She nodded her head, stirring the brown broth in the can, “Yeah...I think so too.”

I reached out a hand towards her. Althea glanced at me, confused at first. She pointed at her stew, “You want this?”

I nodded, but she pulled it towards her,

“Hell no. This is my favorite brand and flavor. It tastes like heaven compared with those rations.”

I pointed at a can in the drawer, “What about that flavor?”

She glanced at it before I snatched the can from her hand. She reached out for it, but I put a hand on her forehead. The ascendant mana poured into my hand, generating heat that warmed the stew. She stopped struggling for a moment before I handed it back.

She narrowed her eyes, staring at me with suspicion before taking another spoonful. She perked up,

“It’s good. Really good.”

I nodded, “Yeah, you’re supposed to warm stews and soup up before eating. Well, for the most part.”

She glanced at the can, trying to find that information, “Really? Here I thought these were just puzzles with food for rewards.”

I busted out laughing before she frowned at me,

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. Sometimes I forget you’re an alien from who knows where.”

She pointed the fork at me, “And sometimes I forget you’re a human from Earth.”

I poured the soup down my throat while crushing the can. I swallowed it before raising an eyebrow,

“You seem like you really like food. I remember finding some cooking books here before.”

The inklings of a blush formed on Althea’s cheeks as she glanced down,

“Uh. Yeah. Just trying to figure this cooking stuff out. It uses names for all kinds of stuff, but I don’t know what any of it is. I mean what is paprika? I have to look it up, then I have to figure out what a teaspoon is, then I have to figure out what tea is. It’s exhausting.”

I set my empty can on her desk, “I can teach you how to cook.”

She rolled her eyes, “Yeah, sure. You know how to cook.”

I crossed my arms, “Well, I’m not Gordon Ramsey or anything, but I can teach you the basics.” I raised my right hand, “Like what a teaspoon is.”

She narrowed her eyes, “I don’t believe you.”

“I can prove it. I’ll come by tomorrow and make us lunch.”

She laughed, “Really...Ok, I’ll bite. Let’s see if you can make something edible.”

Uncrossing my arms, I raised my palms at her, “I’m not saying it’s going to be amazing or anything.”

She pointed a finger at me, “No, no, no, you can’t worm your way out of this one.”

“Not trying to. I’m trying to set up some reasonable expectations.”

“Hmm, ok. I doubt it’ll be better than this canned stuff though.”

I grinned, a quiet confidence lacing my words, “I can make better stuff than off brand beef stew.”

“If you’re lying, I’m firing a bolt between your eyes.”

I laughed, “Your standards for taste are just incredibly low. And I mean low.”

“Ok Daniel, I’m looking forward to it.” She glanced down, tearing open another can. “Thanks for the company, but I’m pretty sure Torix will hate you if you keep him waiting much longer.”

I smacked my forehead, “Oh fuck. Yeah, I gotta go.” I walked out of the tent while waving a hand, “It was fun. We should do this again sometime.”

With a slight smile, she nodded, “Yeah. I’d like that.”

After walking across the camp again, I reached back into Torix’s home. As he lived in it longer, the place turned more and more eerie. There were trails of upturned earth surrounding the place, probably the burrows that the beetles used. I remember overhearing Kessiah and Torix’s conversation before being tossed by one.

Combine that with the shattered windows inside the building, and you had a certified evil lair by now. I walked up towards it, using my telekinetic fields to not break through the housing. The force of compression was weird, but better than breaking every building I went into.

Once I reached into the building Torix had added tables and tables laden with tools. Clippers, snappers, breakers and beakers, hammers and scissors of all shapes and sizes, the tables were chock full of creepy, metal tools. At the same time, everything was neat and organized which just added to the ominous effect.

I didn’t really care by now though. I walked into the room with my footsteps damn near silent. I was reorienting the weight of my body against my sides and shoulders. Since my armor was so hard, it didn’t make much noise when even the weight of my heels pressed against it.

This allowed me to sneak up to Torix, who was hunched over a table and dissecting one of the plague insects. I tapped his shoulder, “Sorry I’m late. What you up to-“

Torix whipped out a hand, a block of black mana forming around me. He pressed me backwards about a foot before slamming himself into the wall. With pieces of drywall falling with him, he fell onto his table before glancing back up at me,

“Oh, it’s you apostle. Excuse my sudden assault. I thought you were an intruder.” He glanced to his side while cupping his chin, “I knew I shouldn’t have told the beetles to handle you as a non-threat.” He glanced back up at me, “You almost gave me a heart attack.”

I reached out a hand, which he took to help him back up,

“If I had one that is.”

Once upright, he lifted a hand. The wall reconstructed while the metal pieces reoriented back into their precise placings. Turning back to me, he grinned, “Have you been working on your sneaking skills?”

I shook my head, “Not really. I’m using telekinesis.”

Torix raised an eyebrow, so I continued, “I’m placing field under my feet and redirecting the weight against my shoulders and sides. Makes it so that I don’t crush through floors.”

“Ahhhhh. I understand now. Creative and effective. Good. I believe you’re ready.”

“Ready for what exactly?”

Torix smiled, making his signature evil grin, “To wield gravity.”

Chapter 62: Not Alone

I clapped my hands together, “Hell yeah. It’s about time.”

Torix nodded, “Indeed it is. You’ve progressed at a rapid pace for the most part...though considering your effervescent flow of mana and the kind of mana you wield; your progress is only slightly above average.”

I shrugged, “Eh, as long I’m moving forward, that’s what matters. No point in meaningless comparisons.”

Torix frowned, “Ah...I suppose your right. Then onto the gravity magic.”

Torix created a chair made of black, writhing mana for the both of us. As I sat down, his hand shook for a moment. He grinned, “You’ve gained quite a bit of mass recently, haven’t you?”

I grinned, “Eh, a little. I can stand if you’d like. Hell-“ I stood up before waving the chair of mana away. I then sat midair in a squat before curling my armor around my legs. After that, I created supports for my back. I leaned back into my chair, pressing against a telekinetic field on my back. At the same time, I created another wide field on the floor around me.

The result was that I looked like I was sitting on nothing in the middle of the air. It wasn't too difficult to maintain either, though it did take some genuine focus. Torix raised an eyebrow at the sight of it,

"What is this? Hmmm...you used your armor to lock your legs in place then leaned back into a telekinetic field...Ah, then you dispersed it around you. An interesting application."

I grinned, "Yeah, with my willpower being as high as it is, I can keep track of more things at once now."

Torix frowned, "But wouldn't it be simpler to stand?"

I made little armrests with my armor, laying my arms down on them. I raised my right hand, "For sure, but let's think of this as training. One of the most important parts of having high willpower is just being able to handle more stuff on my plate. Any second that I'm not taking advantage of that is a waste."

I leaned onto the hand with my head, "It's kind of like if I had 10,000 strength, but I never end up using more than half of it. If I never need the upper half of my strength, then it's just wasted stats. If I never use my extra willpower, then I'm wasting it."

Torix cupped his chin and nodded. Sitting in thought, he pondered at the ceiling for a bit.

"I can see your point...I agree." He raised a palm, forming a chair of mana for him to sit on, "Now, enough pleasantries. Let's begin your course in gravitational magic."

He pointed a finger, and a blackboard appeared behind him. After coughing in his throat for a bit, he spoke,

"The way you're redistributing your weight is very similar to how gravity magic operates. The difference comes from constituting force that's being manipulated. You are rearranging the kinetic force of the earth's pull, but you aren't actually shifting gravity."

He pointed at the blackboard, flipping it sideways. In a checkered pattern and colored blue, lines appeared on the board. Torix put two fingers together, a ball of metal materializing in his hand.

“Do you see this grid? This represents both time and space. This metal marble in my hand is a blob of mass.”

He set the metal ball onto the blackboard. Like putting a bit rock on a trampoline, the blackboard bent downwards. Torix pointed at the depression caused by the ball,

“This depression is the influence that gravity has over both space and time. It warps it, bending it like no other energy can.”

Torix spread four fingers into the air. Four smaller metal balls appeared in-between his fingers. He rolled one towards the depression of the large ball. The ball rolled passed the ball before pulling back and circling it. Like a planet orbiting another planet, the ball fell into a steady orbit around the larger ball.

Torix continued, “I’m adding in some additional force to account for friction. In the absence of it, these objects can orbit for an indeterminate amount of time. Now, whenever manipulating gravity, you can’t manipulate the object at hand.”

Torix raised a hand, and one of the orbiting ball stopped moving.

“This isn’t gravitational manipulation. This is simply forcing something to stop with kinetic energy. Telekinesis in other words. In order to manipulate gravity, you must ignore the object, and see past it.”

With a flick of his wrist, he sent the ball orbiting again. Gripping with his hand, an area of the blackboards collapsed downwards. The circling ball’s orbit widened until it fell into the collapsed area.

“You must interact with this field that surrounds all matter. This dimensional fabric composes our universe, and bending it requires tremendous intuition, effort, and time. Over the coming months, we will enact a three-step program that will allow you to do so. ”

With a wave of his hand, the entire demonstration dissolved.

“First, you must learn to sense the field. Second, you must learn to mold the field. Third, you’ll master techniques to abuse what you’ve learned.”

I clapped my hands, “Alright, let’s do this. How in the fuck am I going to sense the fabric of our dimension?”

Torix raised a finger, “By leaving it.”

I frowned, “Ahh man. This again.”

Torix flicked a finger, snapping my nose.

“Yes, this again. Do you remember visiting the rift?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“There was an oddness in the air. A feeling like things weren’t quite normal.”

I lifted my head off my had, “I thought that had to do with leaving Schema.”

“Partly, yes, but the difference also comes from the difference in dimensions. The very laws of physics operate differently within that universe. Time, gravity, the most natural laws are different.”

I remembered how time slowed down whenever we were inside the eldritch dimension. I grinned,

“Ahhh, so if I can get a good grip on the difference between the dimensions, that’ll let me identify this uh...dimensional fabric and whatnot.”

Torix raised a finger, standing from his chair, “Precisely. During the next rift closing, you and Althea will be tasked with staying there for a week. I’ll discuss this with Althea after our meeting.”

I frowned, “She’s not gonna like that. Not one bit.”

Torix waved my concern away, first with his hand then his words,

“It’s a part of her training as well. Recently I’ve identified what it is that made her different from the other experiments of Yawms. The eldritch dimension acts as an excellent place to learn this balance as well.”

Torix met my eye, “Of course I understand if you wish for greater safety during a prolonged expedition. I could have Kessiah monitor you both if you’d like.”

I cupped my chin, thinking about it for a second,

“I’ll think about it for a few days. For now, I think having Kessiah with us is a good idea. A follower could show up if we’re inside the portal for a week. Without her help, we’re fucked if that happens.”

Torix nodded, “I will inform her of the task then. I’m going to be trying to figure out a way of purging these insects from the victims. You may self-study for the remainder of this week.”

I raised an eyebrow, “Really? Alright. I’ll see if I can’t come up with a regiment of my own then.”

“Then off to it apostle. Time is of the essence.”

I stood up from my impromptu chair, grinning, “Roger.”

I walked towards the door out, but I stopped, then turned and asked, “Hey, have you ever heard of a legendary skill?”

Torix already turned towards his work, “Only in stories. Let’s not waste our time discussing legends and myths.”

He didn’t sound like he wanted to continue discussing it, so I stepped out of the house. Before I went off and brainstormed for a bit, I opened my status and allocated my tree points into my current path, Cosmic Soul. It was half as large as Obliterator or Genesis of Potential, but it would no doubt be powerful if I could just get the points needed for it.

My recent breakthrough in carving had given me enough points for the first upgrade of it. With that in mind, I allocated the points. The notification popped up along with the message.

Some beings exist with nothing to their name. They wish not for progress, preferring the pits of stagnation. You aim to expand your presence. You aim to temper your soul and forge it in fire. +25% learning speed of soul related skills. +25% learning speed of oblivion related skills. Ability gained! [Cosmic Soul(Tier 1) – The size of your soul is limitless. +20% scaling and handling of soul related skills.]

For all the hype around the name of the tree, I sure as hell didn't know what it did. Remembering the lunch I had planned tomorrow, I set out into the town. I figured finding some supplies would help, mainly seasonings and canned goods since they didn't go bad.

So with that in mind, I went out towards the town. After passing through the quarantine zone, I walked through the zombie infested wasteland. It was an eerie place when walking through it by myself. The corpses were long gone now from the original infestation. Only bones covered in ragged clothes remained.

Either that or they'd turned into the trees and forest that Yawm seemed intent on keeping contained. I knew good and damn well that I'd make him pay for his patience. By the time he escaped whatever world tree bullshit he was doing, I was 100% sure I'd be a force to reckon with.

Before that though, I needed some paprika and cumin. I entered an old grocery store, finding little to eat. All the perishables were gone, along with the clear majority of dogfood. The zombies smelled what was in the bags before tearing into the them. Based on the bite marks at least. The only things left were the canned and glassed goods.

The seasoning aisle and the canned goods remained nearly untouched. After walking back and forth for a minute, I picked up a plastic carrying cart. I placed all kinds of seasonings in the basket. Pepper, basil, oregano, dill, some cloves of garlic and rosemary, I took one of them all. I filled the basket to the brim with these seasonings before moving onto the canned goods.

After that, I collected this specific brand of lemon flavoring that came in a powder packet. I swear you couldn't tell the difference between it and real lemon juice. It worked in place of it exceptionally well. With it, I grabbed some olive and canola oil. After that, I grabbed a bag of white rice before heading out. The rest of what I needed for a decent meal, I would need to forage.

Before I left, I set all my supplies onto the ground. I had two basket fulls with my arms stuffed too, so I went out and grabbed a shopping cart. Whenever I put all the stuff in, I started leaving. It was one of those fucking shopping carts with a squeaky wheel though.

The piece of shit kept getting caught, running around in circles, and just being generally disagreeable. After about fifty feet of listening to a banshee squeal in wheel form, I lifted the shopping cart into the air. I held it there with a single arm before snapping the metal beams keeping the wheels on the bottom. I stretched the metal tube and made a sort of shopping cart backpack.

After using another shopping cart to make a top for it, I was ready to get a move on. There was a local greenhouse near our old high school. After crossing town and avoiding zombies along the way, I reached it. I didn't want zombie mush all over the food after all.

Once I reached inside, the place was overgrown. Plants of all sizes hung from the rooftops and struggled to get out of confined space. Tomatoes, potatoes, beans and greens, daisies and tulips, the place was stuffed with all kinds of produce and flowers.

I walked in through a hole in the glass lining. My steps quaked the ground a bit as I selected the best and ripest fruits, vegetables, and produce. It was a lot of fun just running around and getting stuff for something simple as cooking. Fulfilling a basic need like this...there was something innately satisfying about it.

I kept it simple, collecting tomatoes, cucumbers, and fresh herbs like mint and lemongrass. After filling up my shopping cart, I ran back towards camp. I kept my steps light using my telekinesis before reaching out towards the camp.

I'm sure I got a few weird stares as I walked by with a shopping cart full of shit on my back. It didn't bother me much though. I was too absorbed with the task at hand. After setting the shopping cart into my unused tent, I headed out towards the forest surrounding Springfield.

There was something deeply nostalgic about running through the forest. I played outside often when I was kid, almost always as the sunset. I would avoid going home after school because my dad was a pain in the ass. These trees became a familiar home for me in that sense.

Once I reached the creek, I sat beside a pool of water and let my feet cool in the water. The sound of the creek, the sweet breeze, even the tiny fish and minnows darting in the water...It was a nice, relaxing moment. This whole evening had been refreshing.

I wouldn't dwell in this nice lull though. That's how you end up stagnating. A few minutes later, I stood before dashing through the forest. Using my sharp eyes and keen nose, I ran around the forest and followed a few trails. After finding a pile of deer shit, I knew I was close. I surged my ascendant mana and charged towards the nearby sound of a deer.

Except, it wasn't a deer. Standing there was a person in a lithe, mecha exoskeleton. This wasn't a heavy suit either. It was practical, a few wires and connecting cables set on top of a black jumpsuit. The jumpsuit was covered in a hexagonal pattern. I thought it was a nanofiber mesh, like Kessiah's pack.

The helmet of the thing's was long, like the xenomorph off alien. Two cameras pointed in off directions, surveying his surroundings. Some type of thrusting jetpack was on his back, along with two folded wings. They unfolded whenever the thing turned towards me. In his hands, he aimed a short machine gun with a green laser pointer at me.

He opened fire. Blue bullets slammed into my front as a stream of blue fire exploded behind the alien, propelling it into the air. I lowered myself while leaving a hand up. Before he could get distance, I slammed a wave of telekinetic power on top of him by pulling my arm down. It was enough force to stop him from getting further away, but he wasn't put onto the ground.

I lifted both my arms and surged my ascendant mana. After gritting my teeth, I slammed him downwards with all my strength. Like a bird being crushed by a falling cinderblock, the alien rushed towards the ground. When it hit the forest floor, a few loud popping sounds echoed through the forest. I overestimated the force increase my ascendant mana had made. My bad.

I walked up to him before lifting him with a hand. His legs were broken, one bone sticking out, covered in blue blood. I frowned, inspecting the long head and size of the creature. It couldn't have been more than five feet tall, straight puny compared with my now hulking frame. Its gun wasn't much better than a human's gun either. The plasma bolts just didn't have the piercing power to do meaningful damage.

FearFighter Scout(lvl 341) – A member of the FearFighter faction in deep space, this is one of the preliminary scouting members. The FearFighters are mercenaries that use fear tactics instead of brute force during operations. Often times they are preferred by clients that are preferring a more subtle approach in their mercenary needs.

This means assassination, deprivation tactics, and other means of keeping a client safe are employed. While not the largest or most well-known of the mercenary guilds, they are perfect for protecting middle to smaller sized parties that aren't interested in conquering areas. The fact that their prices are middle of the pack as well means they are quite affordable.

This specific member is relatively new, with the average FearFighter hitting the mid-450 range in levels. Of course high level members exist, but are often rare when compared with far larger

factions, like empires. This enemy holds no threat to you, but bad blood is something most would rather not have against any mercenary faction.

Lots of useful information here, but I was at a loss. I tapped my chin, wondering what to do. Taking him to Torix was the likely option, so I slung the alien over my shoulder and turned towards our camp. In the corner of my eye, something moved in the distance. A few more blips in the corner of my eye snapped. By then, I wasn't alone. A green laser pointer appeared on my chest.

Then another. And another. Twelve more laser pointers later, and they had surrounded me. I couldn't help but smile, the ascendant mana pumping through my veins. As the crimson tendrils of my mana streamed upward, my armor grinned. The deafening sound of gunfire rained down a moment later. Ready and waiting for the first strike, I snapped the neck in my hand.

It was time to unleash the tempest.

Chapter 63: Makings of a Class

I stomped the ground and activated oppression. High pitched screaming echoed out around me along with a hailstorm of hellfire. The trees wilted in seconds, turning to dust. The bushes and birds and bees disintegrated, exposure to the aura killing them in an instant.

Amidst the rain of blue bullets, I noticed something odd. Oppression was different, not quite like before. Controlling it was easier, like I didn't have to think about the intensity or range. Figuring out the difference would wait for later. The ascendant mana in my blood raged before they finished unloading their bullets. The blue gunk fell off my armor, hissing and steaming.

Plumes of heat blurred the air before I grinned with my armor. They'd burned through a fourth of my health, but the bullets wouldn't be able to outdo my regen. I turned around, glancing at them,

"Looks like these bullets are designed to melt eldritch over time. Most of those monsters lack health regeneration from what I've seen. It's a good strategy."

The bullets fell from my armor, clattering against the ground,

"It's just, I'm no eldritch. I'm something different altogether."

One of them stepped forward and swung a knife towards my throat. I ducked under the swing and stepped forward. Dragging my fist behind me, I launched an uppercut into his stomach. His armor

held him together, but my telekinetic implants let me create a hole in his skin and armor. A thousand needles from my armor shot into his body as he flew away.

His body split into pieces, first from the needles slicing him apart, then from the force of the blow. Blue blood splattered across the aliens and me, like smashing a smurf full of blueberry cobbler. A blade scraped against my back, so I unleashed a torrent of spikes behind me.

It wasn't as difficult to mold my armor as I remembered it being. The swords of armor skewered the alien before two other FearFighters tried reloading clips into their guns. I pushed my two hands together, creating two telekinetic fields to smash their heads together. As their skulls slammed in front of me, my hands clapped with enough force to generate a shockwave.

Their heads crunched before the wave passed through them. They fell to the ground, the electrical joints and gear short circuiting. I turned around, finding three other members left. One of them sprinted away, the other two starting up their jetpacks.

I stepped forward, reaching out and clasping with my hand. A telekinetic tether formed between me and the guy running away. I pulled him towards one the guys jetpacking away, slamming them together. The jetpack member careened off course before slamming into a tree trunk in the distance. His body crumbled under the force of his propulsion.

I charged towards the falling guard as that happened, reaching him before tackling him to the ground. His body popped underneath me, blood splattering once more. As the final scout escaped with his jetpack, I decapitated the head of the guard beneath me by wrenching it off.

The ascendant mana flowed in a torrent as I launched the skull towards the fellow guard. The skull collided with his jetpack, destabilizing his line of flight. He flew in circles before slamming into the ground and exploding. These members were so poorly trained it was almost comical.

Killing them still presented a problem however. I didn't want the FearFighters or whatever else to be an enemy. Hiding the bodies became a priority. I walked over and picked up a chunk of a body before sighing at the gruesome work.

Like a living nightmare, the arm in my hand melted into my armor over a few seconds. I stumbled backwards before landing in a pile of mush behind me. My armor soaked in the corpse, sending a chill down my spine. I lifted my hand, staring at it. The armor shook, pulsing with hunger. I frowned. Up till now, I never absorbed the corpses of normal people. It was always some variant of eldritch.

I didn't even think it could eat the corpses of normal people. It horrified me, almost like a diluted version of cannibalism. It did present a convenient solution towards my current conundrum, however. I didn't know if killing like this left evidence of who I was behind. If they figured out, I wouldn't be able to know what kind of problems it could cause further down the line.

So with my teeth grit, I walked around and cleaned up the corpses. After that, I tested oppression once more. It was like summoning a force from me, not quite like mana or moving an arm, but it was in the same vein. I hadn't been able to use it before because I was unaware of it, like having a hidden talent and never knowing about it.

Oppression's range fluctuated bit, allowing me to change the shape of the aura. It had always been unleashed in a growing sphere, but now I could alter that shape. After a few minutes of trying out different things, I discovered an ability to condense the aura. As I did so, I opened my menu screen and checked out oppression to see what had changed.

The Charging Calamity –Gives unique ability IV Oppression | Current Damage: (15,000 + 48% of health/min) within a maximum of a 240 ft/73 m radius. Counts as physical damage to enemies and allies.

The range and scaling of oppression had increased, by 20%. The reason clicked in an instant; it was cosmic soul. The tree had given me the ability to handle oppression with greater ease. I molded my armor once more, stretching the tips of my fingers into long blades. Stretching them out was simpler and easier than before. Cosmic soul helped with the abilities that my armor granted me.

I shut oppression down before running through the forest again, lost in thought. I still searched for a deer as I pondered what my armor was. From what I could tell, and from what cosmic soul told me, my armor was just a change in my soul. If I controlled my soul better, then I could wield the abilities my armor gave me better as well.

Suddenly cosmic soul was an exciting prospect. My armor's abilities were already very powerful. Making them stronger may make them overwhelming. I'd discuss it with Torix when I got back, but first things first. I had a deer to kill. I wasn't about to let this fifteen-minute fight get in the way of the two hours I'd put into making the lunch happen.

So I dashed through the forest, keeping closer to the town. There may be more of those scouts around, though they were likely a group testing to see how hostile the environment was. I wasn't going to take that risk though.

One thing I learned from all my near-death situations is that most battles take place before you meet in person. More important than raw power was the circumstances surrounding the fight, the time put into practicing, the raw effort to line things up in your favor. All those factors made a bigger difference than level.

Yawm and his followers had forgotten that. I already vowed I'd take full advantage of that weakness.

First came deer though. I found another wilderness trail, this one littered with bits of brown and white hair. Tiny signs showed themselves to me, but I could distinguish them. They became more and more prevalent once I homed in on a scent of a deer this time. I would rely on my sense of smell this time instead of sight.

My change in tactics helped me this time. A deer glanced at me in the distance before darting away. I out sped it, tearing through the briar brambles and underbrush. It kept weaving around obstacles, but I tore through them. This cut down on my travel time, letting me reach it in seconds. Once I reached it, I used telekinesis to snap its neck.

The deer's legs dug into the ground, still trying to escape me. With the central nervous system severed, it could no longer make a coherent escape. Seconds later, it ceased movement. I reached lunging onto one knee and giving it a quick thank you. This wasn't like killing an eldritch. The deer meant me no harm, so I tried being grateful.

I'm not the most spiritual guy, so it wasn't long before I went to gutting the deer. I tore out two bits of my armor, making them into hooks. I attached them to the tree, and I hung the deer by its feet. I sliced a cut down its belly and field dressed the organs. After clearing out the innards and taking care with the nastier ones, I dug a deep hole and buried the organs. Otherwise, a bear would smell them and come running.

After that, I slit the deer's throat, letting the blood drain out of it. Using a bit of telekinesis, I squeezed it from toe to head, speeding up the draining process. Once the blood no longer dripped from the deer's throat in excess, I left a marker on my minimap for its location.

I was aging the venison, letting the muscles cool down and relax. If you didn't do this to wild game, the meat would be harder to chew than strips of leather. Any excess blood dripped out during the process as well, making the meat taste less gamey. Considering how much meat there was to be had, this was the least amount of effort required for it.

Optimally, I'd rather wait a day or two before cutting into the meat. This would do well enough though. With that handled, I left out towards our current encampment. As I passed through the trees, there was a chill in the air. It was the first inklings of a cold fall coming. Glancing up, a few trees changed in color, the green leaved turning orange and red.

Winter was coming. Time was passing. Yawm wouldn't be stuck for much longer, and the knowledge of his eventual resurgence hung around my neck like a noose. By the time I reached the encampment, I calmed my anxiety. I could do this, no, I would do this. Using the rift's time sink would help as well, letting us make up for any lost time. Enjoying a few meals with someone wasn't a cardinal sin after all.

With that in mind, I paced back up into torix's home. My telekinetic pads kept my from breaking the house down before I reached him again. He still sat and dissected and insect, jotting down messy notes into a journal beside him.

I stepped in front of him and waved. He glanced up, setting down his knife,

"Ah, you're back. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

I shrugged, "I met some scouts out in the surrounding forest. I ended up uh, taking a few out."

Torix nodded, "Did you catch what they were called?"

"The FearFighters."

Torix nodded, "Ah, a bit more militant than the steel legion, though far less widespread. You dispatched with the bodies?"

I nodded. Torix continued, "Then it should be fine. They aren't the worst enemy to have on a galactic scale regardless. The real question is why they are here."

I shrugged, "Seemed like they weren't here to take over or anything crazy. The scouts were pretty weak honestly."

Torix frowned, "Then they're likely protecting a group of non-combatants. Why non-combatants would land here is beyond me, but they will likely reveal themselves soon."

I nodded, walking back outside, “Who knows. Maybe they’ll help us against Yawm.”

Torix shook his head, “I doubt it. It’s much more likely that they’re here for research of some kind. Either that, or maybe it’s a group of bounty hunters looking to gather research specimens. Althea was one of those bounty hunters once upon a time after all.”

I shrugged, “Time will tell. Before I go, have you ever heard of a class?”

Torix rolled his eyes, “Back to myths and legends again I see. Yes, I have heard of classes before. Only bits and peices in old texts. Nothing substantial.” He turned back to his note, “Good hunting, Daniel.”

Once again, Torix blew off any discussion about the topic. If I wanted to learn anything, I’d have to learn it on my own. I made a mental note of it after leaving him. With those thoughts in my head, I went back out towards the forest. Figuring out how to control oppression and my armor had become my weekly goal. I’d focus on training them, honing them down till I could wield them effectively in combat.

So after reaching a hundred feet into the forest surrounding Springfield, I reached out with oppression. Up till now, controlling the distance of it correlated with intensity. If I wanted the full force of oppression, then I needed to move it out to the full distance. Now I could control the intensity without having to increase the distance as much.

The scaling had improved some as well, making the ability better overall. After molding my armor for a few more minutes, I opened up my current skillset. One of my newer skills was called Gorger of Mana, a skill used to drain enemies of their energy and essence. I used the skill with my telekinetic enhancements, allowing me to shoot needles inside someone’s body.

The telekinises let me pierce someone’s skin or armor. The Gorger of Mana skill allowed me to spread the needles. Pulling out my fist once the needles were in ripped the opponent’s insides out. Ever since Boundless Storm, this had been the most development my style has gained. I didn’t have to change how I fought. It simply made my fighting better.

What made Gorger of Mana such an interesting skill, however, wasn’t how it interacted with my telekinesis. It was how it was a unique skill already. Way back in Baldag-Ruhl’s cave, I’d gained a skill called Dreadnought Brute. It allowed me to fight one on one with one of the red bears. The skill was made by combining five other simple skills into a single kind of combat.

Gorger of Mana was made without combining any skills. I learned it all at once. Any mythical skill required three unique skills to make. If I could get several other unique skills, I could make another mythical skill on par with Boundless Storm. From what I could gather from the level 1000 perks for endurance, I may be able to combine three, maybe five mythical skills into a legendary skill. Even though I researched on my obelisk a bit about them, there was nothing on them, so I couldn't tell much about them.

In other words, I would have to figure out all that shit on my own about legendary skills and classes. Even Kessiah and Torix didn't have one of those, so I set that as my goal. Hopefully, having a class or legendary skill in conjunction with a level higher than 2000 would be enough to kill a follower or two of Yawm. Either of those goals would take months, maybe years. Figuring out would be tough to tell.

Considering Boundless Storm was more of an innate fighting style of my own, developing other mythical skills would be tough. I had to find some sort of direction for them, otherwise I'd never be able to get them.

With that in mind, I planned out a few mythical skills that likely existed. The first was a runic warrior kind of one. Carving runes, using the language, channeling mana through them, and even crafting gear for other people could make a mythical skill. It would be something like a blacksmith and runic mage kind of thing.

Another likely mythical skill would be a gravitational mage. My ascendant mana gave me a powerful difference from most mages. It was already a unique skill all on its own. If I could combine that with gravity magic and my telekinesis magic, I could make a mythical skill out of that too. Up till now, these two other mythical skills would give me a total of three mythical skills.

Why would I care for so many mythical skills? Well, so far the hierarchy of skills worked like a pyramid with five normal skills for a unique skill then three unique skills for a mythical one. It only made sense that a class would be made of several mythical skills, hopefully only three. It might require a legendary skill as well. Hard to say. What I did know was that these new abilities with controlling my armor and oppression opened up the gateway for finding one of those new mythical skills.

If I could gain a few more mythical skills after that, then maybe I could gain a class. Fighting off Yawm may not be so impossible after that. Getting Althea at least a mythical skill would be huge for us as well. In fact, making her a rifle from my armor would be a boost to her power. Bolts from my armor would be massive gain as well.

The metal of my armor was much harder than bone after all. Combine that with a few runic carvings, and I could give Althea a massive boost in power. That tied perfectly into developing the runic warrior skills I needed as well.

I didn't want her leaning on me like a crutch though, so I'd show her how to make them on her own. It ensured I wouldn't have to get into the habit of making her equipment over and over. She didn't take as much damage as I did during fights though, so she wouldn't need replacements as often. Getting Kessiah to tear strips out of my armor would help as well.

With that in mind, I headed out towards the encampment, leaving a patch of dead trees and wildlife behind in my wake. Once I neared the encampment, the sun already set a while back. I reached the central crafting area and began my work.

Configuring a rifle would be difficult without a reference, but the steel legion had a few in stock. They call harpoon cannons by the name equalizers. After researching them in Schema's logs, I figured out why. Versus armored targets and vehicles, the piercing rounds were hyper effective. They operated much like rpg's did before schema came in.

The inner barrel was set with a set of spiraled grooves. When the bolt passed through the barrel, this made the bullet spin. Behind the rifle, a giant block of iron was placed. Whenever the cannon was fired, the block of iron would absorb most of the force generated by firing the weapon. In other words, it acted as a momentum sink.

This stopped the rifle from dislocating the shoulders of soldiers. Althea didn't need one anymore since she'd become so strong. That made the assembly much easier. Outside of that, the ammo compartment was oversized to handle harpoons instead of bullets. Every part of the weapon was made thicker as well, allowing it to handle the extreme forces generated.

All in all, it would be a serious pain in the ass to build. With that in mind, I got to work. The moving parts were the most important aspect, since they handled most of the shock of firing. Althea could grow her arm into the weapon with her abilities, letting her compensate some of the structure of the weapon. It would feel more natural that way as well

Adjusting the way the gun was built would be the starting point for that. I began a blueprint in my head, conceptualizing the key differences needed. First, I decided on removing the trigger. There wasn't a need for it since Althea would grow into the rifle. Second, I added a bayonet on the barrel. Adding a grip on the side of the barrel would help with hip fire as well instead of putting the grip below the rifle.

These differences would make the rifle lighter, easier to handle, and give Althea a few options for close combat. With that handled, I began production. Of course I could tear out a piece of armor and blacksmith it into shape. I could work the metal and make it into an excellent piece of gear with hours and hours of effort.

Fuck that. I had better things to do. Instead, I expanded my armor into the shape I needed. I began with the barrel, being the easiest piece to conceptualize. I stretched the barrel from my palm, growing it over the course of fifteen minutes. It took time to keep the barrel straight and smooth. I ended up having to try several times.

Once I got the hang of it, I made the barrel about two meters long. By then, I strained to keep the armor in form. I reached up with my other hand and pulsed my ascendant mana through it. Strength surged into the limb, enhancing my slicing strike. My armor cut through the barrel, a clean-cut forming. From there, I needed a few tools.

First was sandpaper made with bits of diamond instead of sand. Sand wasn't hard enough. The steel legion had the daimond paper on hand though. It turns out that tiny pieces of diamond are a lot easier to get than big ones. Especially when they're artificial.

Then the grind started. I ground out the imperfections, smoothing the inner lining of the barrel. It was hard, requiring some serious finesse. I needed to grow my finger and hand to comical proportions to reach deeper into the barrel. It was perfect for learning precision control with the armor.

What followed made that look like child's play. I carved out the inner spirals of the barrel. That itself wasn't the hard part. I brainstormed for a bit, and I found out a phrase or two that would help the bullets drill more. It would reduce friction and contact with the barrel as well.

With ascendant mana pouring into my arm, I cut into the barrel's inside. The simple inscription changed from a simple process into an undertaking. Hours passed, and sweat beaded off my forehead as I etched the patterns into the spiral barrel.

The passage was a combination of two runes. One represented ease, flow, and taking the path of least resistance. The other rune symbolized motion, change, and movement. They melded into the incarnation of fluidity, like a river turning a jagged stone smooth. It was the perfect combination of runes for enchanting the bolts.

As I finished the inside of the barrel, the sun rose. Althea and I wouldn't have lunch until midday, so I ate a ration from Torix before continuing my carving. On the outer portion of the barrel, I carved another combination of runes.

The first rune represented stability. It was like the surface of the moon, always facing earth with an unchanging surface. The next rune was far more intricate, representing the power of finality. Locked within the symbol was the enormity of a supernova and the glory of a good death. These runes came into a message like the reaper whispering in your ear.

It chilled my spine a bit staring at the barrel. It looked more like an artifact of great power, like the flute of a god with all its intricate detail. Glancing at it, I couldn't help but smile with satisfaction. There really wasn't another word to describe it. It was exquisite, like glancing at a painting infused with history.

The power of the runic language pulsed through the barrel as I charged it. By the time I finished charging it, the might of the runes glowed. After slicing into one of my fingers, I sealed the power into the barrel. With the sun hovering midway over my head, it was time for the lunch with Althea.

I headed back towards my tent, setting the barrel inside it. After that, I ran back towards the forest and got the deer. No bear crawled off with it, so I counted my blessings before flaying it. Once the skin was ripped off, I sliced meat from the deer in long chunks. The muscle cooled and relaxed a few hours ago, letting it fall off the bone.

Either that, or the density that constitution gave made the meat seem soft. It was good enough for me. I packed the meat into the skin before slinging it over my back. I left the rest of the deer for scavenging animals.

With the meat in hand, I headed back to camp. After picking up my grocery cart full of packing supplies, I walked on over towards Althea's tent. As I walked, something fell over my eyes. It was my hair. It had grown in length, reaching well below my ears and down to my neck. By the time I reached Althea's tent, the sensation of my hair surrounding my head infuriated me.

I didn't have time for it though. Once I reached Althea's tent, I knocked on the side of it. No noise came out. I frowned, knocking once more. A quick groan ebbed from the tent before Althea snapped,

"Who is it?"

“Daniel.”

“Oh shit.”

The sound of fumbling feet and clothes being put on rumbled from within the tent. A minute later, her voice muffled through the tent,

“Uh, can you come back in like, ten minutes?”

I sighed before setting the shopping cart onto the ground along with the deer skin and meat. It was a weird sensation, waiting on someone. I could be doing something productive instead. That’s when I remembered my hair.

I figured I could cut it while I waited. I walked a few blocks away, finding a house with a mirror in it. Almost any house has one, so it wasn’t hard to find. After peeling my helmet back and inspecting myself, I noticed a few changes.

First off, I was way taller. I had to lean over to get a good view of the mirror. Even when I walked through the house, I had to duck beneath doorways. Otherwise, I’d bump into them. Well, probably crush through them, but you get the point.

Besides for that, a bit of stubble had formed on my cheeks. Hell, I always wanted a bit of beard. This wasn’t the kind of stubble a forty-year-old man had though. This was assuredly the kind of stubble you get at the cusp of manhood. It didn’t look good, so I made a razor with my armor and cut it off.

Besides for the beard, my hair covered most of my face. My skin was straight up gray. A vibrant and alive sort of gray, but still gray. There was a scar running vertical down a lip I don’t remember having last time I looked. A couple other scars traced down my neck and face, most of them just small Knicks. Nothing to eye catching.

My hair turned black too. It matched the gray skin at least. Grabbing a chunk of my hair, I cut it with a razor formed from my armor. After about ten minutes later, and I’d done a damn good job. It was close undercut, though not too edgy or anything. I just didn’t want to look like shit and have my hair out of my face and eyes. So far, mission accomplished.

Glancing closer at the mirror, I didn't look too shabby. Who knows. On a good day, with the right lighting, and with a sharp suit, I might even be handsome. Hard to do with the armor though. In the end, I still looked like an ashen warrior. Not the most welcoming sight.

It would do though. I walked out of the house and went back towards Althea's tent. I knocked on the entrance, and she made me wait another minute or two. I spent the time flipping stones with telekinesis. Interrupting my trance, Althea finally unzipped the tent, letting me in. Glancing inside, I could see what took Althea so long.

She was...well...beautiful.

Chapter 64: Final Call to Action

At least by post-apocalyptic standards. It looked like she'd borrowed a dress from Kessiah or Torix, considering the quality. It was stylish, fitted dress made of black fabric. A pretty normal garb though a slight split up the left leg and a split down the chest gave it an edgy vibe. It showed a little more skin than normal. She still had on a pair of leather shoes instead of heels. It made it obvious how uncomfortable she was in the dress.

I grinned, "You're beautiful."

Althea blushed, glancing down at her feet. I continued, my grin turning mischievous,

"But, yunno, maybe a tad over dressed for the occasion. It's just lunch after all."

She glanced up, a subtle smile tracing her lips. She shoved me, more playful than forceful, "I don't get an opportunity to dress up often. Cut me some slack. Besides, what's with the haircut? I'm not the only one to dress up."

I hadn't even thought about it, but it was a good point. I'd prepped myself a bit for the lunch as well. We'd crossed into date category by now. I shrugged,

"Well fuck...you got me there." I turned and picked up the supplies. Althea's smile turned into a deep frown at the sight of the deer skin and bent out of shape shopping cart.

She crossed her arms, "What is this?"

"Lunch, it's just unmade."

She leaned towards the deer skin and sniffed. Leaning back, she put out a palm to it,

“Yeah, that smells terrible.”

I laughed, “Of course it does. It hasn’t been cooked yet.”

I walked into the tent, making telekinetic pads for my feet. The oversized tents had been something you’d expect a family would own, room for several people. Althea moved several small utilities into the open space since the last time I’d been here. A small, electric stove, a giant block of granite she’d polished, even a sink with tiny plastic wrap beside it filled with water. It looked like a tiny bath she liked soaking in I guessed.

I walked over and set my supplies onto the block of granite. The rock already busted through the tent, reminding me why I kept my feet from doing so as well. It did the job as a cutting board and prepping area for the meat, however.

Before I got started, I glanced around the room, exploring for a few seconds. I’d never glanced that close to the inside of the place. It felt rude, since she never really invited me in. Now I had the perfect excuse to see inside.

There was a place she slept and lounged in, a bunkbed carried into here. The blue sheets were unmade, more like she didn’t know how to make a bed rather than just being messy. I didn’t comment, knowing it was rude. The other painful part of the place was the books and magazines scattered about. They were unfolded, along with quite a collection of clothing.

That was the problem with her whole place. She just didn’t know how the hell to organize anything. It made a piece of my brain writhe in discomfort. I wasn’t someone with ocd, but I still hated inefficiency. This place was marred with it. It wasn’t filthy though. She didn’t leave food out or dirty dishes everywhere. From what I knew about cleanliness, that was the deciding difference between being filthy and just being cluttered.

Still, prepping the meal would take some time, so I got started. Under a nearby lamp’s light, I set the vegetables, herbs, and seasonings to the side of the granite block. I set the meat of the deer out onto the boulder. It looked like was very recently polished, making it squeaky clean. It was perfect for a cutting board.

After that, I grabbed a few packs of the lemon powder and olive oil. I set them beside the meat. After growing out a knife from a palm, I broke the object. After washing it and my hands in some soap and water Althea had nearby, I grabbed slabs of meat. With my right hand holding them down, I started slicing the meat down the grain of it.

It's a pretty simple way of making tough cuts more tender. You slice the meat in the same order as the fibers of the meat. This breaks some of the tougher fibers, making the meat take better to marination. With how precise and quickly I could move, this process took about two minutes. A few slabs of meat later, and the cuts were ready.

"Althea, do you have any paper towels or something like that?"

"Uh, oh... Yeah, of course."

Althea was waiting for me, looking closely from her bed. After looking in a burlap bag beside her bed, she handed a bundle of them to me. This let me grab the olive oil with my hand without getting blood on it. Taking another bundle of paper towels, I grabbed a glass bowl behind the block of granite. Althea had gathered a few cooking dishes and stuff for me, making this process much simpler.

I took the glass and poured the oil into it. After that, I mixed in the packets of lemon substitute. From my experience with cooking, this worked better than real lemon juice. The packets mixed into the oil better, because lemon juice had water in it. After that, I washed my hands in the sink.

Reaching back to the granite, I grabbed a few pinches of lemongrass and mint to throw into the marinade. I took a bundle of cilantro, and reached out a hand towards Althea.

She stared at me, confused. I shook the bundle, and she reached out a hand before I pinching some off.

"Taste this and tell me what it tastes like."

She tried some, nodding as she chewed, "It's good. I can't really describe it."

I frowned, "Does it taste like soap?"

“What, no. Why are you asking?”

I turned back to the marinade, pouring some cilantro in, “Some people say cilantro tastes like soap. I didn’t want to ruin the meat for you, so I checked before adding it.”

She blinked, “Oh.”

I mixed in some pepper, salt, and dill from there. After stirring it with my hands, I dipped the meat into the solution. Making sure to work the marinade into the tiny cuts I made, I squeezed the meat until it was saturated in the solution.

After that, I walked over towards the sink and washed my hands with soap. I made sure to wash the bottle of soap as well, because leaving bloody gunk on the bottle was disgusting. Cross contamination was a serious problem in restaurants, and I wasn’t about to let it happen under my watch.

After that, I walked over and cleaned the granite with a few antibacterial wipes I had on hand. I let the antibacterial solution soak in, cleaning my new knife in the soap as well. After that, I cleaned the boulder with water twice, making sure to get the antibacterial stuff off it. Otherwise the salad would taste like complete and utter shit.

After preheating the oven, I set the vegetables onto the granite, lining up the tomatoes, cucumbers, and herbs. After grabbing a wooden bowl from behind the granite boulder, I cubed the tomatoes and sliced the cucumbers into thin slices. Tossing them into the bowl, I grabbed oregano, thyme, and a bit of basil and tossed them onto the salad.

Skill unlocked! Cooking(lvl 1) – Some craft symphonies with sound. For you, the ingredients are your notes and the meal is your chorus.

After that, I poured a bit of olive oil and lemon juice onto the vegetables. After adding a generous portion of salt, I stirred with a wooden spoon grabbed from behind the granite boulder. Althea had piled up as many kitchen wares as she could. It looked like she just grabbed a whole aisle of them and piled them behind the boulder.

I chuckled a bit at them before Althea frowned at me,

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing. You just took a whole store’s worth of kitchen stuff. It’s kind of funny is all.”

She blushed a bit before watching me stir the salad. After I set that aside, I handed it to her with a fork,

“Taste it and tell me what you think. I can make something else if you don’t like it.”

She grabbed the dish from me, tasting it with an almost ravenous look on her face. After the first bite, she recoiled back for a second before taking another. A few bites later and she set the dish onto her lap. She threw her hands up,

“This tastes so good. How is this so good? I tried eating this green stuff before and it tastes like dirt.”

I busted out laughing, “That’s lettuce, not cucumbers and tomatoes. If you don’t rinse lettuce off, it keeps some of the grit on it. That makes it taste like dirt.”

She blinked, “Why didn’t you ever tell me you were a chef?”

With an irrepressible grin on my face, I went back to work on the granite table top,

“I wouldn’t say I’m a chef. I just know my way around a kitchen. No one cooked for me when I was younger, so I learned to cook for myself. It was fun, so I just kind of kept at it until I had a couple of dishes I liked. This is one of them.”

I pointed at the venison, “Most meat is expensive for example, so I have to get the tougher, leaner kinds of pork.” I gestured a hand out to my side, still holding the knife, “The thing is, they’re barely edible if you don’t learn a few tricks for eating them. After that, I just wanted something lighter like a salad for the meal. That-“

I picked up a pack of rice, “And something like this to fill me up.”

As I poured some water into a pot, Althea frowned, “Do you need any help?”

I shook my head, staring at the pot as I put some cumin and powdered garlic into the pot, “I said I’d make you lunch, not have you help. Sit down, relax. I’m here to feed you, not to make you feel bad.”

The sounds of her adjusting herself and grazing on the salad ebbed through the room for another minute. Once I finished adding some salt and pepper to the pot, I poured a dash of the canola oil in. Olive oil made the rice taste like shit, even in small amounts. I don’t know why, but it does. Trust me.

Breakthrough! Cooking (lvl 1)—>Cooking (lvl 25)

It was a pleasant bonus for using my skills. At some point I would want to get breakthrough’s in all my previous life skills. That would have to wait till later. After seasoning the rice’s water, I set the venison into the preheated stove. With that finished, I cleaned up the area. Althea stood up and walked up to the granite. I was about to wipe it down, but she pushed my hand down,

“Let me. Please.”

I grinned, “Alright, sure.”

I handed her the bundle of paper towels I was about to use. She set them on the nearby sink before stretching out a claw from her finger. She sighed before slicing through an ultra-thin slice of granite. So thin, light leaked through the plate she pulled off it. Her hand didn’t struggle with the cut though. Combine her overwhelming strength and armor piercing, and feats like that were normal.

Not normal for me though. I spread out my hands, “How in the fuck did you do that?”

She shrugged like nothing was out of the ordinary, “You know, armor piercing.”

I blinked, “Is it that strong?”

She nodded, “Depends on the stuff I’m cutting through. Steel or metal in general is much harder to cut, because it’s like cutting through you. You have too much health, so I can’t do enough damage. Once I can do enough damage though, I can cut through whatever it is like it’s nothing.”

I frowned, “Jesus...It’s crazy to look at.”

She frowned, “Yeah, I know. A bit freakish.”

I waved my hand, “No, I mean like crazy awesome.”

She glanced up at me, almost like happiness was trying to crawl out but she wouldn’t let it,

“Really?”

I nodded, “Hell yeah. It’s cool. I wish I could cut through my armor like that. It would make carving out the runes so much easier.”

She grinned, “Yeah, but the runes are so hard to work with anyways.”

I turned back to the stove, setting a timer for 30 minutes, “You just have to get used to them.”

She shook her head, “No. They’re really hard to get. All those extra perks let you understand faster than you think you do. I could stare at one all day and not get a thing from it.”

I weighed my hands back and forth, “But I can’t cut through granite like paper. Trying to get there, but it’s tough.”

She rolled her eyes, sitting onto her bed. She crossed her legs and leaned forward,

“When’s lunch ready. Smells great.”

I made another invisible chair, sitting near Althea, “Eh, about forty minutes.”

Looking surprised yet again, Althea chimed,

“How did you learn to do that? That’s straight up like Torix.”

I glanced down, “Oh, the chair thing.” I glanced back up at her, “It’s a mix of telekinesis and molding my armor.”

She nodded, fascinated by the casual display. A minute passed, a silence passing but never turning awkward. Althea had that effect on the people around her. She was one of those kinds of people you could be quiet with, pass the time, and it never dawned on you that things were awkward. A pleasant calm would come to pass.

After I placed the rice into the boiling water, Althea started back up the conversation, “So uhm... how did you get so good at all this stuff?”

I raised an eyebrow, “What do you mean?”

She fumbled with her hands, “I uh...I don’t know. You got good at all these different things so fast. Maybe if I knew how you did it, I can do it to...or something like that.”

I grabbed my chin, organizing my thoughts for a moment. I glanced at the orange lamp in the corner of the tent, “I think it’s really just three things. A bit of discipline, motivation, and making goals.”

She leaned towards me as I continued, “I make tiny changes every day, and after a month or two, it makes a huge difference. That’s the discipline part. Making goals gives me a direction to focus my thoughts. Otherwise I’d be making changes without any purpose. Motivation is trickier though.”

I leaned against a hand, like I was floating in the air, “I just think of where I could be in five years. If I focus and push myself every day, what’s the best outcome possible?”

She frowned, “You kill Yawm then have to fight in an endless war forever. Life still sucks.”

I shrugged, “Eh, I disagree. Once we kill Yawm, there’s a whole galaxy out there to explore. You think this food is good? Wait till we go somewhere in space and have a chef make us something. Or, or, what about finding a developed world, where Schema has been around for ages. They probably already have the dungeons and stuff sorted out.”

I turned to her, “Not everyone has to fight there. I’m sure there’s plenty of people who would love having a chef cook them delicious food. You could be that chef. You could open a restaurant, start a family, whatever you wanted.”

My eyes turned harder and less hopeful, “But you have to want it, and I mean really want it. Not some half ass kind of want, I mean a desperate, ravenous, all-consuming kind of want. Right now, we’re trapped on a dying planet called earth. Either we kill Yawm, or we die here. I know you hate fighting. I know you hate endless war. Hell, I know you want to live out a peaceful, calm life. I understand that. I really do.”

I turned back to the meal, “But peaceful days and meals like this are numbered unless we stop that festering sore named Yawm.”

Althea nodded, glancing down. She sighed before looking back up at me, “Yeah...ok.”

The first word was meek, like a half resolution. Her words gained strength as she spoke them, like something was pushing her. It was like she saw a light at the end of the tunnel, something to aim for. She nodded,

“I’ll make a plan with Torix. Maybe set up a schedule for training with Kessiah or something like that.”

I stood up from my seat as the timer went off, “Sounds good.” I walked over and pulled out the glass from the stove. Turns out that venison cooks the same as pork, so I grabbed a few dishes from the boulder pile. After that, I set them on the tent floor, setting up the meal with reasonable portions.

The conversation turned lighter after that, Althea asking questions about my cooking. The light chat was a pleasant contrast with lead laden conversation from earlier. The entire time we talked, I hoped my words went through to her. Getting Althea to train and use her powers with all her might was damn near necessary to beat Yawm.

A combination of Kessiah’s blood arts and Kessiah’s assassination was our best method of killing a follower. Sure, Torix and I could hold the line against an army with his summoning and my tenacity, but we’d falter eventually. We needed Kessiah and Althea to get their heads in the game. Either I pushed her to change, or this world would eat us alive.

After how many speeches I’d given Althea, I was getting frustrated with her. Coming into a messy room, lounged in for weeks, then seeing her waste her time on wearing pretty clothes...I won’t lie, it tested my patience. After this, I wasn’t going to spend any more time convincing her to try. Either she and Kessiah killed Yawm, or I would dive into another dimension with him. Fun times for all.

Wiping away those cynical thoughts, I chatted until the meal was finished. After that, I said my goodbyes. As I left, Althea almost said something. She didn't finish her words though. Maybe it was something to try and restore my confidence in her. Maybe not. I couldn't tell.

What I could tell was that I needed to finish the rifle I was making her. If she wouldn't improve herself, I would do the job for her. Getting Kessiah to improve herself was simpler. I just had to nudge her in the right direction with a bit of competition and good faith. Torix needed a reminder of how serious the situation was. Althea...well I don't know what she needed to get off her ass.

Before Yawm came out of his world tree, I needed to find out. We had no way of knowing when Yawm would come out. My intuition told me along with a sinking feeling in my gut that it wouldn't be long now. The forest grew closer to the quarantined wall every day. The eldritch evolved as Yawm's minions fed them. As I gathered ingredients for this lunch, I even came across an eldritch or two.

Interrupting my thoughts, a small earthquake shook the ground for a few seconds.

We were running out of time.

Chapter 65: Preparation

Finding the most productive way of spending my time, I set out to build the rest of Althea's rifle. Fortunately, the stock wouldn't be as difficult as the barrel to build. The barrel required tremendous precision. The stock of the gun required some, but not the laser like precision the barrel needed.

With that in mind, I reached the center of the Steel Legion's encampment once more. Setting up on a wooden work bench, I resumed work on the rifle. Making the stock was simple. Before I started, I allocated ten of my dungeon skill points into the Carving into Oblivion skill. Since the breakthrough, I'd reached ninety in the skill. Maxing it out with the bonus skill points from dungeon cores was plenty efficient now.

Once I finished that, I checked my tree points. The past few days, I performed different tasks than normal. That meant gaining different than normal skills. I gained some points from the cooking skill, a foraging skill, and even a few points in Resourceful. After allocating about fifty more points into the tree, I closed my menu. It was time to make a rifle.

With a burst of ascendant mana, I willed my armor to bend. The metal contorted, flowing into the shape of a shitty stock. It turns out that making a five-foot stock wasn't hard. It was downright demanding. With a surprising finesse, I began making the adjustments needed.

It needed tiny grooves for grip, recoil adjusting design, maybe a hollow interior for making. After trying a few times, I gave up with my brute force approach. Sketching it out and getting an excellent understanding of the stock would help.

Making something with the armor required excellent conceptualization of it. Sure, the barrel required greater precision, but it was something very simple. Understanding it inside and out didn't take longer than a few seconds. The stock for the rifle I had in mind though? It would be a feat of human ingenuity if I had anything to say about it.

With that in mind, I asked and received a set of blank blueprints. gave me a few sticks of chalk, letting me draw what I needed. Starting with separate parts, I drew pieces of the gun's design from memory. My intelligence held onto those memories with an iron grip, making the visualization easy. My dexterity made my hand steady. I didn't have an artistic hand, but I could draw straight lines with mechanical precision.

An hour later, all the tiny bits were drawn out, each of them labeled with their purpose. After imagining how they'd fit together, I created the parts. One piece at a time, I made different parts by stretching out my armor. I cut off the pieces then, letting me make them one part at a time. I learned this approach from Torix.

He always mentioned the power of divide and conquer tactics. Nothing is complicated after it's broken down to its base parts. Understand those parts and how they work together, then you're a master. At least that's how Torix says it.

It held true here. I finished setting up the various parts of the stock before a notification appeared.

Skill unlocked! Living Forge(lvl 1) – You form weapons from your own body. +1% to ease of formation and maximum charge of self-composite weapons.

It was a pleasant bonus, allowing me to gain skill levels even from this forging process. With the pieces made, I set out on carving the runic inscriptions onto them. Since the only thing large enough for the runes was the handle, I etched in the basic rune for stability. As I did so, a sense of serene calm and understanding rushed over me.

Engraving the signs onto the piece wasn't like marking something onto the parts. It was like unleashing my understanding of the rune onto the metal. Instead of trying to write out a representation of what I was thinking, I wrote out my complete understanding of my thoughts.

When I finished the marking, it was almost like staring into a memory or living out an experience. The mark carried a depth like Torix's markings, but they weren't foreign. They were entirely my own, like leaving a piece of my life in a symbol. Once I leaned back from my creation, the letters turned out rougher and grittier than I imagined. They looked a little like me I guess.

My guess was that this was because of the level 100 in the skill. After months and months of training, I had two skills reach their pinnacle. So far, the benefits of both were palpable. The next test involved figuring out another unique skill.

Before that though, I finished up the parts of the rifle before heading back towards my tent. Once inside, I put the rifle together. Once it was completed, a notification appeared.

Omen, Cannon of Cataclysm (lvl requirement: 600) – Made by the Harbinger of Cataclysm, this harpoon rifle is composed of an unknown metal, but the hardness and flexibility of it is amazing to behold. Combined with the enchantments for stability, efficiency, and devastation, and even a novice cannoneer can wreak havoc.

The enchantments reduce ammo consumption by two thirds, doubles focus and stability, and triples the drilling speed of fired rounds. Charge limit set by quality of runes. Can only charge with arcane blood. Uses 10 mana per bolt.

Charge: 6,000/6,000 or 600/600 shots left.

The fact that the charge was only 6,000 drove home how amazing Torix's son was. Alfred Worm made a gem that could hold a million mana, well over a hundred times the charge of this rifle. I couldn't even make something 1% as incredible. It put into perspective how ridiculous it really was. I wondered how in the hell he made it.

That's when a realization shot through my mind like whip cracking across bare skin. It wasn't because of Alfred Worm. It was because of Baldag-Ruhl. The runes that fucking hivemind used were what carried the power to form that mana gem, not Alfred's genius. Thinking back on the intricacy of the ritual reminded me of it.

That's what I needed to learn. Not my own runes, not how to wield oppression or punch harder and faster. I needed that knowledge so that when I met Yawm, I could dive into the other dimension. Using Baldag-Ruhl's ritual, I could rupture dimensions and come back. Hell, that's assuming I couldn't just beat Yawm's ass with the runes outright.

Bubbling with excitement, I picked up the rifle and polished it with the technique I now called sandpaper palm. Normally my armor is black, but when polished, it's a deep, shiny gray. It reminds me of the polished magnets you could buy at stores, at least in appearance.

Finishing the rifle up in a few minutes, I carried it over towards Althea's tent. I knocked on it, and Althea replied,

"You can come in."

I unzipped the tent, walking inside. Althea sat over her table, reading an old tome no doubt given to her by Torix. Her room was cleaned, a new, black bookcase holding everything in it. All in all, I was very pleased with the change.

I grinned, setting the rifle at the entrance,

"Here yah go. Made this in case you needed it. Learning to use it should make you much, much more powerful. Enjoy."

I turned to walk out before a set of arms wrapped around my back and lifted me into the air. A pleased giggle sounded through the room, almost euphoric. She spun me around with an astounding ease, like I was light before setting me down. I turned to her with an eyebrow raised,

"What's the big deal?"

She walked over and picked up the rifle, marveling at the polish and detail of the runes. She stared inside the barrel, then she stared at the notification of the gun. She whispered in awe,

"Omen...wow."

She turned to me then ran up for another hug. Lifting me up again, she beamed,

"I can't believe it. Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!"

She said the words so fast they blurred together. She set me down again, continuing, "This is... perfect."

I raised an eyebrow, “Did you need it this bad?”

She nodded, “I did. I’ve been researching stronger combustive materials than just gunpowder. I can produce gunpowder using my shapeshifting. The problem is, the other explosive materials would break the bone of my gun. I’d end up ruining my arm each time I fire a shot.”

I frowned, “Ouch. Sounds painful.”

She nodded, “There’s all kinds of problems that come with it. The recoil, the smoke made from the gun letting air into the chamber, all kinds of problems. This, this’ll do a lot for me.”

She picked it up, forming her arm into the open socket. She grinned, “It’s perfect. Just perfect. I normally just convert my body into the ammo and the gunpowder needed for the explosions. Now, I’ll be able to use stronger stuff. The bolts will fly faster, and they won’t do so much damage to me.”

“It does damage to you?”

“Well, yeah. The bolts and gunpowder costs health, firing the weapon obviously does damage to me. Now the gun will take that damage for me, and I can focus on making just the ammo and powders. Wow. The enchantments are so strong too. I’ll be able to practice now.”

The dots started connecting in my head, painting a picture. Althea sacrificed health for damage. Way back when I gained my first damaging ability, agony, I struggled to use it. It hurt me so bad that I had to adjust to it over a few weeks. There came points where I just didn’t know if I could keep on using it. I ended up doing it, but I couldn’t blame someone else for not being able to go through with it. It just hurt that bad.

Althea may have been in the same place, just stuck on the pain part. I’m sure she didn’t want to invest 60-70 of her dungeon core points just on pain resistance either. Damage skills would take precedence for a sniper after all. The new rifle would help her more than I imagined it would.

I grinned, “Well, uh, good. Glad to help. I gotta go though. See yah later.”

She swung the rifle, aiming down the iron sight, “Leaving already? You just got here. I uh, need your help with using the runes.”

I shrugged, “I have to go talk to Torix.”

Althea frowned, “Oh...Ok...” She grinned at me, “See you later Daniel.”

I nodded, smiling back, “Cya.”

Leaving her tent, I passed by back to Torix. After a quick hello, Torix sent me the files for the images of the runes used by Baldag-Ruhl. As they downloaded, I ate a meal of Torix’s rations and paced back into the forest. Something about the trees let me keep calm.

Once out there, I leaned against a tree and started my study. Compelling was an understatement. Maybe it was because I was ignorant, but I didn’t remember the runes being so impressive. Each of them, from the tiniest scratch to the ones dug deep as trenches, amazed me. The Power within them leaked through even digital photos.

Walking by them so many months ago, I hadn’t even recognized the detail in them. It was like listening to a great composer after trying to make music. You can’t fully understand the complexity of a genius’s work until you’ve at least tried at his craft.

It reminded me of looking at $E=mc^2$. Sure, I got the gist of it, but I didn’t understand how it worked. A physicist on the other hand can, and with that understanding comes a great humility. How can a person understand the height of a mountain until he has climbed one, or some Chinese proverb like that.

Now that I understood normal runes, I understood the differences Baldag-Ruhl made. Subtle tweaks were adjusted, along with new characters I did not know. There were so many adjustments, it didn’t even feel like Baldag-Ruhl had learned the language. It seemed like he invented it.

The excitement filled my belly, making me grin as I tore off sheets of armor from my leg. Flattening them out, I began testing the runes on the metal. The precision and intricacy of the new language flat out decimated the old one. The bizarre changes in the angles and lines of the language made it complex. Unlike the previous rooms, the depth of the carve played a pivotal role as well.

This added another dimension to the complexity. There seemed to be no structure in the runes either, each of them different. At a quick glance, I recognized over three hundred different characters. That list grew and grew and grew. Within an hour of researching the runes, I made a revelation.

No two characters were the same.

The closer I glanced, the more evident this became. Within each rune, extra lines and etchings of depth were added. Unlike with snowflakes or trees, the differences between each character were deliberate. If I write a letter a thousand times, each letter will be different, but I don't mean for them to be. I'm trying to replicate the same letter.

That simply wasn't the case. Even when finding the same characters, the depths were nothing alike and neither were the grooves within those depths. It was like someone had taken a language and fused it with another language, exponentially increasing the complexity of it. Parsing through such dense blocks of information would infuriate anyone.

Torix couldn't understand the language because there wasn't a single language being used. This was an evolved version of the magic runes, combined with another old language from elsewhere. In other words, I wasn't about to understand it before Yawm came out. At least not here.

Once inside the rift, I'd find a sentient eldritch and get them to teach me. Ally myself with one enemy to fight another. They may know the underlying language set into the grooves of each rune. Who knew, I may get comprehension of how this ritual was set up.

Just knowing this information exists was invaluable. Often, I wondered how Schema bent dimensions and reality. Using this dual language while wielding an infinitely more complex algorithm, that could have let Schema re-write reality. If it let Baldag-Ruhl tear dimensions, what's to say it wouldn't let me do even more?

That kind of tampering was far off in the distance though. Maybe when I was sent out towards the eldritch world, I could figure some of it out. I had no way of knowing without getting there. Since we'd be in there for a while, setting myself up for study would be the priority. Torix gave me a library of books to sift through, and Baldag-Ruhl's runes gave me a focal point for later study. Now I needed to set up learning my class.

To make that happen, I needed a plan. After researching how to make plans for a bit, I figured out two core principles for them. First you had to come up with a strategy, then you had to come up

your tactics. A strategy would be like choosing to focus on getting a class instead of leveling. Tactics would be how I went about getting my class.

I came up with the strategy: get a class. Leveling would take a back burner to that for now.

Skill unlocked! Strategy(lvl 1) – Other people fumble around without purpose. You aim your thoughts and your actions towards a goal. You give yourself purpose. +1% to efficacy of strategies. +1% to strategy formulation speed.

Getting a skill like that was a nice bonus for starting on something like this. I didn't let it distract me. I turned my efforts back towards answering a simple question. How am I going to get another mythical skill?

I got lucky with boundless storm. It wouldn't happen again. I had dozens of skills now, and most of them were simple and situational. Coming up with unique skills would require me to try and make them. With that in mind, I used my obelisk to create a list.

It didn't require making the entirety of the interface come out. The list integrated into my current interface, allowing me to manipulate it with thought. I didn't need to click or move boxes. They shifted as I thought for them too.

Staring at my list of skills, I separated them into a few clusters. These clusters were made of skills that were similar or had a theme. A perfect example was a cluster I called movement. It was made of five skills, acrobatics, physical fitness, sprinting, traveler, and jumping. These skills all involved movement. Turning them into a unique skill shouldn't be that hard.

So to get started on that, I did a bit of research on unique skills. I found out a few things. Unique skills did require five normal skills to make them. They could also be made from less skills though. Any skill that reached 100 could be used as two of those five skills needed for unique skills. If a unique skill reached 100, then it also worked like that for mythical skills. A level 100 unique skill would take up two of the slots required for a mythical skill.

The other aspect about unique skills I figured out was just how simple they were to make. They required five skills used together all at once. Even if you had the five skills, they wouldn't turn into a unique skill unless you used them at the same time. This gave me a quite a bit of hope. It meant I wouldn't need to get hundred more skills. I may be able to make a few unique skills with little effort.

Up till now, I made my skills based on what I needed right then and there. I didn't want to waste my time on useless skills for the most part. That was still the case, and it had the advantage of giving each skill a purpose.

With that in mind, I headed back out the city. The first unique skill I wanted was one for the movement cluster I made. It took five minutes before I was approaching suburbia. Instead of running through the street like normal, I ran through the backyards. I could've just plowed through fences and the smaller trees, but instead I weaved my way around them.

It was basically advanced parkour. I hopped fences. I pushed myself over cars. I spun around trees and leapt through windows. It was a lot of fun. Trying to engineer the easiest pathway took a good bit of skill, and using my new, athletic body to accomplish the feats was fun. Of course, I had to support quite a bit of my bodyweight using telekinesis. Hopping a flimsy wooden fence wouldn't work otherwise.

Over the next two hours, I got better and better. My focus honed, and I learned a few techniques for moving past common obstacles. My speed improved, sometimes obstacles making me faster instead of slower. By the time the sun was setting, I could run at full speed without destroying my surroundings. I crashed through quite a few obstacles to get to this point though.

At the apex of my sprint, I jumped through a window and into a house. Before I touched the floor, I pushed myself over a countertop, swinging my legs over it. After landing onto the floor, I took a step and pushed myself up and over a couch. A telekinetic pad stopped it from crushing as I leapt over it. As I landed, I rolled on the ground before leaping up and out the other side of the building.

Landing on my feet and through the window again, I rolled again before pulling myself back into a full sprint without missing a beat.

Unique skill gained! (Requirements: Maneuver through a complex environment without losing speed) Fuses the skills Acrobatics, traveler, physical fitness, sprinting, and jumping into the unique skill Phaser. Gives half of missing tree points from skill fusion (153 total points gained)

Phaser (lvl 1) – A poet paints with the written word. A musician composes with sound. You create art with motion. Fluidity of movement is increased with level of skill.

Making unique skills was a simple and brutally effective means of getting of power. Phaser would no doubt be useful later if not right then. Fusing the skill gave me 153 tree points as well, letting me increase my rank in my current tree. With a huge grin plastered on my face, I slowed down to a walk and put the points into Cosmic Soul. It did not disappoint.

Fight and use every part of your being to do so. Some would let fear freeze them in place. You put that fear behind you, letting it push you forward. You fear the weakling of your past, sacrificing who you were for who you will be. You turn the frozen fear into fire and fury. +25% learning speed of soul related skills. +25% total learning speed of oblivion related skills. Ability upgraded! [Cosmic Soul (Tier 2) – The size of your soul is limitless. + 40% scaling and handling of related skills.]

You understand that you are the manifestation of your thoughts. A being that reflects what lies within outward. Your beliefs become thoughts. Your thoughts become actions. Your actions become your life. You've chosen a life of ambition. +25% learning speed of soul related skills. +25% total learning speed of oblivion related skills. Ability upgraded! [Cosmic Soul (Tier 3) – The size of your soul is limitless. + 60% scaling and handling of related skills.]

Whenever I reached out towards oppression, the ability was different once more. Malleable and moldable like putty, I shifted and controlled the area it affected. I created complex shapes, allowing me to move it. What set it apart completely was the density of it. I could condense the aura, making it stronger.

Trying with all my might, I could make it about half size and double the strength. The feat required intense mental strain, even with all my willpower, but it could be done. Being able to control oppression with a fluid handling would allow me to use it even in groups of allies. It still wasn't quite ready for something like that, but by the time I maxed out Cosmic soul, it would be.

Crossing one checkmark off the list of unique skills I aimed at, I glanced at the next. Getting the skill in only an afternoon made me wonder why no one else tried this. If you could get so skilled so quickly, then why didn't everyone do it? The reason popped in my head like a splash of cold water on my face.

It was the leveling perks and level 100 perks I had. Having so many leveling bonuses combined with so many points in each attribute made gaining skills easy. A normal fighter wouldn't have the precision or control I did, so getting Phaser would be arduous at best. Diversifying my skill set allowed me to take full advantage of these bonuses.

An idea popped into my head. I already knew several people who understood many skills that I didn't. If I spoke with them and gained a few more unique skills, I could be more than ready for the venture into the eldritch rift. Maybe I could get a mythical skill while I was there.

Interrupting my thoughts, the earth under my feet quaked. Only by a bit, but enough for me to notice. I glanced towards Springfield. The suburbia bled into taller buildings that were swallowed by the dark, yellow forests of Yawm. Beyond the sea of sickly looking leaves, a blot of gray fog covered the city scape. The world tree lied at its center, hidden in a miasma of dense mana.

Bright streaks of green thunder arced in slow motion from the center of the fog. They grew in intensity over time, so slow you could hardly notice them. It was like they were frozen in place. It wasn't until the ground shook that they even seemed to move.

They'd become something like the background of a computer, still and lifeless. Seeing them from the same angle everyday made it seem that way. As I stared at the cloud of gray, the fog pulsed like a beating heart. The lightning shifted a bit before a shockwave shot through the air. The ground quaked for a second, then all was still. There was only one thought coursing through my mind at that moment.

Was it time to see the world eater?

Chapter 66: Teaching the Master

Stillness crawled back across the town, like a looming shadow. The landscape froze in place once more. I sighed, relief pouring over me. I shook my head, making the worry slide off my shoulders. Living in Springfield was like living beside a volcano. You could never tell when it was going to erupt.

I needed to be ready for that eruption, so I grit my teeth and readied myself. I headed back towards Torix for a few tips. He may already know several of the skills I needed anyways. As I ran over towards his place, I took full advantage of my new skill Phaser. Hopping across cars, wall walking, and diving through windows was fun as fuck anyways.

Once I reached his house of horrors, I jumped and leapt over several burrows lining the house. Torix colonized some beetles for some reason, probably for foot soldiers who actually worked, unlike the steel legion. After jumping over the burrows, I rolled inside and back onto my feet. I kept running, reaching the basement where Torix hunched over a desk.

He read a tome with a blot of white mana as light floating above him. I jumped down the basement stairs before rolling as I landed. I rolled back up to a standing position as he glanced at me with an eyebrow raised,

“Ahem...why did you roll inside?”

I shrugged, “I just gained a unique skill, and I’m using the fuck out of it. Mainly because it’s a blast.”

He grinned, the dry skin crinkling, “Ah, I can understand that. Mind sharing what it is?”

I turned a palm to him, “It’s a movement skill called Phaser. Helps with getting to places. It could be a useful part of the steel legion’s training, if they don’t get the skill already.”

Torix turned back to the book, “I suppose it depends on the kind of soldier being used. Scouts may have that unique skill as a part of their training.”

I nodded, “I was actually wondering if there were any easy unique skills I could unlock. You’ve been around for a while. You know a ton of unique skills I’m sure. I was going to show you my list of skills and see if we can’t condense a few of my skills.”

He pursed his dry lips, glancing back at me, “Hmmm, I could, but sharing skills is highly personal. Perks and builds can be inferred in a moment’s notice. The sharp eyes of someone specced in perception and intelligence, the pounding steps and broad shoulders of a strength and constitution build, those things are obvious. Skills are what truly sets you apart.”

I shrugged, “Eh, you’ve seen me develop like 90% of my skills. It really isn’t telling you much more shit than you already know.”

He nodded before setting the book down. He stepped beside me as I opened my screen, willing the system to let him see my screen. Torix cupped his chin, nodding and mumbling to himself some. After a while, he nodded,

“I saw three I can point out immediately. You have quite an assortment of skills for how little time you’ve had to develop them. Color me impressed.”

I grinned, “Eh, I think it’s part getting my ass kicked over and over. That and I always try new stuff.”

“Indeed. I’m sure you’ve gained an arsenal of stuff by now with your approach.”

Torix raised a hand, and his obelisk opened. Surrounded by the icy mountain top and scenic view of a mountain, he opened a status screen in front of me. Within it, three boxes with five words underneath each were open. I read them out loud,

“Words of Power, Knowledge Maker, and Strategic Commander...You’re telling me I can already make them?”

Torix shook his head, “No. You couldn’t make any of them. You need one skill for Knowledge Maker and Strategic Commander. You need two for Words of Power. Learning the skills shouldn’t take more than a few hours...”

He turned to me with a sly grin, “With a bit of help from your master of course.”

I gripped a fist, “Hell yeah. Where do we start?”

“Knowledge Maker would be the simplest. All you need is reasoning. For that, a few problems would be enough.”

He opened a hand, raising a black blot of mana. He closed his hand. A second passed before a rippling sound ebbed from in front of me. The familiar black mana reached out from the center of the sound before coalescing into a bundle of black metal pieces.

I reached out and grabbed it as Torix crossed his arms,

“Solve this by removing the center piece. By the time you have, you should gain the reasoning skill.”

I glanced at the pieces of charred metal. It felt like charcoal in my hand, though it reflected light like metal. I frowned before glancing at the corners of it. The each rotated in different directions, kind of like a rubix cube but less tightly configured. After jiggling it for a moment, I found a red sphere at the center. I tapped it, and it banged against my hand like metal. Surrounded by multiple complex pieces, getting the red sphere out looked hard as hell.

I scraped my claw against the red sphere. It didn’t leave an indentation. On the other hand, I scratched the black pieces and they crumbled easily. Without needing anymore thought, I lifted my fist and slammed it into the puzzle box.

The black pieces broke, but I kept the force low enough to keep the red sphere from shattering. After another two hammer fists, I jiggled the red sphere out. After using a bit of telekinesis, I cleaned off the black dust.

Skill unlocked! Reasoning (lvl 1) – While others hunt for a solution, you hunt for the best solution. +1% to application of knowledge.

Walking back up to Torix's reading spot, I handed him the red sphere. He frowned at me,

"Excellent work. Where is the rest of the puzzle?"

I shrugged, "I broke the pieces. The stuff was softer than the prize, making it easy to just break. It's kind of like putting gold into a wooden chest. You can just swing a hammer at the wood then take what's inside."

He glanced at the red sphere, inspecting for damage. Torix shook his head before putting the red sphere in a robe. He glanced up at me,

"I...I suppose it's a creative solution. Did you get the skill?"

I gave him a thumbs up before he stood up,

"Superb. Then let's move on to getting the skill."

We walked deeper into the basement. Torix expanded the building, using the beetles as workers. They dug out many rooms, using some type of yellow adhesive for reinforcing the corridors. We walked down a hallway of smooth earth before pacing into a library. It wasn't large, just four bookshelf's lining a small room.

Torix cupped his chin, tapping his jaw before raising a hand,

"I want you to research something you find interesting. I'll give you three hours to do so. When I come back, we'll discuss whatever it is that you found interesting."

I nodded, trusting his judgment. No point in having him explain the obvious because it would become evident with time.

Trying to learn what he was talking about, I walked around the room. Glancing at the spines of books, I looked for an interesting read. My eyes set on a book titled *Fringe Monsters: A Categorical Account*. The book dealt with all kinds of eldritch monsters. Some of them I'd seen. The clear majority of them I hadn't.

It was like looking at a book of horrors. I couldn't take my eyes off it. The old, yellowed pages of the book wafted the scent of an ancient paper. Not a bad smell, just a calming one. As I read the book, I sat down on telekinetic pads with my armor holding me up. Might as well train as I read, right?

Hours passed, and I gained a smidgen of the book's information, glossing over most of it. In depth descriptions were almost entirely theoretical. I wasn't going to waste my time pouring over them. I figured focusing on the concrete facts would work best. By the time Torix walked in, I already covered about two hundred pages of the material.

"Did you find something interesting?"

"Yeah, a book about the eldritch. There's so many though that I don't think it's too useful. I'll probably never face any of these horrors."

He nodded with a grin on his face, walking out of the room, "Good. Now follow me."

We walked out of the personal study before reaching a much larger room. Full of jars, beakers, and vats of chemicals, the room stung the nose with a smell so sterile and clean, it could burn your nose hair. It took a few minutes to adjust to the acrid stench. By then we reached a series of floating tubes. In each, a different monster floated in suspension fluid.

The pods were similar to the pods used to hold Michael and Kelsey when they were infected. At the thought of it, I glanced down. I couldn't help but feel a burning shame in my chest. The feeling only grew with time, like I understood just how badly I messed up.

As if reading my mind, Torix walked up to a tube, "Remembering your friend's demise? I wouldn't feel too bad about it. The pods they used didn't have a signature system. Any mana from anyone could open them. It's an outdated practice, and they shouldn't have left them like that. These pods will only open to my balance of mana. One dominated by dominion magic."

Torix placed a hand on a tube, feeling the glass, “Your ascendant mana will have no effect.” He turned to me, “You can still break them, however. Do be careful.”

Cheering me up a bit, I turned my gaze towards the monster he was beside.

“Can you tell me what monster this may be? Without using Schema’s notification of course.”

It looked like a catfish, except the whiskers were spears and its tail stretched out many feet past the main body. It could probably dish out a mean whipping attack with the end of it, stunning other fish. Its eyes stretched outwards off its face, like a hammerhead’s face. Combine that with a throat full of sharp teeth, and you had a scary creature.

It was most certainly an underwater species. I searched my memory of reading the book. A few seconds later, I remembered a segment about a fish that could crawl up sheer cliff faces. They stored oxygen in their gills before using the spears on their face move their way up rocky cliffs. With that in mind, I answered,

“Tripofloxerix. The dumbest name for a fish I’ve ever seen.”

Torix nodded with an understanding grin, “A sentiment I can agree with. On to the next sample.”

We went through the lab full of test tubes. Some of the creatures I answered immediately. Others required a bit more struggle to pry the knowledge from my head. Torix wouldn’t let me come up with a wrong answer either. We sat on a specimen until I got it right.

Over time, I developed a few tactics for trying to remember this stuff. The hardest of which required me to remember the page the monster’s name was on using my photographic memory. It was tough. While keeping that memory in my head, I would read the page until I found the name of the creature. It was an arduous process.

Still, I got better at it as time passed. The exercise reminded me of recalling a name by remembering their face first. By the time we reached the last tube, my head was throbbing from flexing some mental muscles I didn’t know I had. It made everything seem a bit floaty, like I couldn’t focus my thoughts.

Pushing past the mental fog, I remembered the page the monster came from. I sat down on my self-made chair and read off memory for a minute before I got what I came for.

Unique skill gained! (Requirements: Critically apply your knowledge and stress your mind for answers) Fuses the skills Biology, Mathematics, History, Reading Comprehension, and Reasoning into the unique skill Knowledge Maker. Gives half of missing tree points from skill fusion (189 total points gained)

Knowledge Maker (lvl 1) – Most forget the lessons they’ve learned. Unlike most, your mind snaps onto the lessons you’ve learned like a bear trap. Increases ability to utilize knowledge for problem solving. Effect depends on level.

The task at hand became easier, letting me hold onto the information without the same focus and struggle. A minute later, I spoke,

“It’s a Ro-Ran. A beetle species used for the colonies and production of working adhesives. Good for building structures, guarding areas, and moving materials...Are these the insects you’re using right now?”

He nodded, “Indeed they are. I’m formulating the details of the fight against Yawm as we speak. We’ll need a sentinel’s spear and you to pull Yawm over. Hopefully you won’t fall into the other dimension as you do so. I’m trying to come up with a plan for getting you back. Using the runes from that eldritch you slew in BloodHollow is an integral part of that.”

I nodded, standing up from my makeshift chair of formed armor and telekinetic pads,

“Can we make our way towards the next unique skill? I just finished that one.”

Torix placed his arms behind him, “Not a problem. Let us go to the next exam.”

As we walked, Torix hummed a happy tune. He kept light on his steps, enjoying the teaching process more than I ever imagined he would. The old, crusty corpse smiling for a change was a nice shift away from his normal guise. While I walked, I didn’t waste any time, putting points into Cosmic Soul. No point in waiting anyway.

Heroes are praised for the strength of character, the might of their body, but not the spirit that fuels their desire. A king who treats his subjects with a gentle grace and his enemies with a heavy hand is

lauded for his intellect, never for the soul that guides his journey. You will teach history the error of its ways. The stories told of your legend will echo the sound of your soul. +25% learning speed of soul related skills. +25% learning speed of oblivion related skills. Ability upgraded! [Cosmic Soul (Tier 4) – +80% scaling and handling of related skills and abilities.]

Your story will speak more than whispers of a forgotten memory. They will boom with the might of life and echo in eternity. +25% learning speed of soul related skills. +25% learning speed of oblivion related skills. Ability upgraded! [Cosmic Soul (Tier 5) – +100% to scaling and handling of related skills and abilities. -50% Mana cost for soul skills and abilities.]

As we paced up and out of the basement, I grinned while activating oppression. The deft handling of the ability allowed me to use it even with Torix walking beside me. The ability handled like a hand or leg, shifting around me with an instinctual grace. Condensing it weighed less on my mind, allowing me to form it to less than half its size in any direction.

After shutting oppression off, I molded my armor a bit. It glided on my skin like liquid, shifting at my command. The metal responded with rapt attention at even the smallest piece of mana. The efficiency of the movement gave it a different feel. Before, molding the armor felt like forcing it out of place, like pushing down a spring. It wanted to return to its base form the moment my mana was released.

Now it obeyed my will like an iron clad order. I raised a hand, shifting the length of each finger on my gauntlet. I toyed with armor as we stepped outside of the house.

The sun already set long ago, and the full moon casted bright light down on us. Ever since Schema took over, the stars shined with far greater intensity. Without street lights or cars making everything bright down here, it let you see how bright things were up there.

It made seeing the stars a joy.

“What is that you’re doing? The armor manipulation?”

Snapping me from my trance, I glanced back down and created a metal flower from my palm. He frowned, “Deft work for a skill so new.”

I shrugged, “It’s a part of Boundless Storm. Makes it easy to use.”

“Ahhhh. Is that why you want unique skills then?”

I raised an eyebrow, so he continued, “To gain another mythical skill?”

I nodded. He looked forward, acting casual,

“Why would you want more than one?”

Torix kept composed, feigning nonchalance that was obvious. His acting wasn’t good, easy to see through as peering through glass. I could see he wanted to share his knowledge, almost like he was jumping out to do so.

“You know, I could teach you my own mythical skill. It’s quite useful, even if you don’t intend on becoming a summoner.”

I turned to him, “Really? I thought you said sharing skills was a big deal.”

He kept his glance staring forward, “There are no unnecessary secrets between a master and his pupil.” He turned to me, “And besides, I should return your honesty in kind. You’ve shown that you are an able and willing student. Even my son, Alfred, couldn’t have matched your scholastic prowess. What you lack in his talent you’ve made up for with the will of your mind. It’s a feat to behold.”

I blushed a bit, turning forward as well, “Well uh, I don’t know what to say...Thank you.”

He grinned, his smile a both subtle and knowing, “Do you know why I wanted a disciple?”

I shook my head. He continued, the smile turning into a grimace, “I didn’t. I wanted my son. If you would allow me to be frank, I wanted to send you to the eldritch dimension when we first met. I wanted you to suffer. I figured it would be a fun experiment too, so I could kill two birds with a single stone.”

I frowned, “Well, you accomplished one of those things.”

Torix laughed a bit before going on, “My thoughts changed over time. After seeing you survive the eldritch portal, I wanted you as a sample. It was fascinating to see such a low leveled and new unknown. After seeing you struggle on, I found myself wanting you to succeed despite a bit of lingering hatred. Everything changed after you saved Kessiah. Not just for me mind you.”

He nodded, “It’s no secret I’ve tried convincing Kessiah to utilize her potential. I’ve done so for ages. She’s quite talented, even for a remnant. Her potential exceeds my own. I saw it as a great shame when she wouldn’t use her powers no matter the circumstance. Unlike me, you convinced her with your actions and conviction. That, and you set her competitive nature ablaze.”

He turned towards the sky, looking at the moon and stars.

“Kessiah was floating from planet to planet, wasting her time like an unfeeling ghost. Seeing your vitality gave her life. When I saw the change in her eyes, I couldn’t help but be a bit envious. I wanted the same energy she had.”

He glanced back at me, “It’s strange. Ever since I’ve become immortal, I’ve felt dead. It was only when I was waiting for death that I even felt alive. When time was scarce, it held meaning. Now it’s lost agency with its passage. Seeing your struggle renewed a bit of that vitality.”

He laughed before staring at his hands, “I haven’t worked this hard in centuries. Imagine that? I’m not terrified, I’m excited. I don’t know if I’ll make it out of this alive, but it’s better than just running away from death forever.”

He met my eye, his voice solid as stone, “I’ll use every bit of my talent, and I’ll push my limits. No more spending years and years gaining a single level. All I learned over my life means nothing if I never use it. I’ll struggle forward, as you do. I’ll find something to live for.”

He grinned, “Because knowledge can fill your head, but it cannot fill your soul.”

I blinked a few times, shocked at the speech. I nodded, “Well shit...I’m glad I could do that for you. I’m also glad you didn’t decide to kill me. Thanks.”

A moment passed before he continued with a sly grin,

“Think nothing of it, disciple. I hope you’re ready to give your own speech.”

I crossed my arms, “Uh...Speech? I don’t really give speeches.”

Torix nodded, “Oh, but you will. Your next unique skill demands it. You won’t face against giant monsters. You’ll be standing in front of several hundred troops and rally them.”

As cliché as it sounds, I gulped. I’d fought monsters a plenty. I told plenty of people to fuck off. Giving inspirational speeches?

Yeah, not my cup of tea.

Chapter 67: Those Left

Sensing my discomfort, Torix grinned with evil on his lips...at least to me it was evil.

“Does the prospect of giving a speech seem so bad?”

I rolled my eyes, “It’s not something I’m used to. I’d rather fight giant monsters. I’m more in my element there.”

Torix turned and walked towards the command center of the steel legion. I followed beside him as he entered lecture mode,

“That is precisely why we’re doing it. The other unique skill I can show you is called Words of Power. You’ve felt it before from Elijah...” Torix coughed into his hand like he was embarrassed, “And, myself as well. It’s a useful power, especially whenever working in the galaxy. Most fighting types won’t even notice you using it.”

I tapped the edges of my armor, “I’m more of a do it myself kind of guy.”

Torix nodded, “One cannot fight against the might of many. It’s a fun idea, but it doesn’t hold up to scrutiny. You need to learn how to speak with others. Especially in the galactic environment. This is actually the perfect opportunity for a history lesson.”

We passed by a pile of bones crushed against the brick wall of a suburban basement. We both ignored it, such a sight being normal by now.

“Earth will become more and more integrated as time passes. People will select their builds and use the strength of Schema to achieve unimaginable feats. Your species will survive without Yawm destroying them. Over time, the dungeons will become training grounds, and the strongest will rise and rule. Governments will form as fragmented factions.”

He spread out his arms, “Wars will come between these factions. Once those wars settle and nations reform, the charisma builds will rise. One charisma build can convince an entire nation of his correctness. They can form cults, mold nations, and lead entire races. A warrior, no matter how strong, cannot match that level of influence.”

He lowered his hands, glancing at me as we walked, “In order to compete in that arena, you will need general competence with your wording and with leadership. The other two unique skills will give you just that.”

He turned forward, “In fact, that’s why charisma is fed by both chains of stats. Within Schema’s system, very few people were willing to invest into charisma. It’s easy to understand the value of strength. Swing harder and faster to crush a monster’s skull. Charisma? That’s a far more intangible attribute with less obvious benefits. Once someone’s gained too much of an edge over you in the attribute, you become their puppet.”

I shivered as a chill crawled up my spine. I shook my head, “Damn. You could have done that to me when we first met then.”

He nodded, “Indeed I could have. I could also summon monsters stronger than you, so I didn’t see the point in having a mindless puppet. Regardless, Schema rebalanced the system so that each chain of stats fed into Charisma after the problem came to its apex. They call it the Great Equilibrium. It was an interesting time, to say the least.”

We reached the steel legions outpost, quality, gray tents bracing against the wind. Almost everyone slept, besides for a few guards and supply men. They kept the camp lit during night using tesla coils contained in glass. Electricity would spark from them in every direction, giving everything a whitish hue. The coils had the advantage of being working defense turrets as well.

Most of the camp was set up within a few empty lots that were side by side. A few of the surrounding buildings were commandeered for use, however. One of those buildings was an old, three story tall bank. This was where the administrative center, armory, and the bombs were located. The bank vault was where the majority of that was held, being one of the few secure areas that wasn’t a dungeon.

We walked through two clear glass doors, passing two guards who gave Torix a salute. He held up a palm to them, letting them relax before we stepped towards a receptionist. It was human girl, almost dressed like someone normal. It was a blast from the past, coming with an ensuing wave of nostalgia.

She smiled at us, though the hairs on her neck stood on end,

“Hello. What can I help you with today?”

Torix answered, “I need to speak with corporal Briggs.”

“Of course, sir. This way.”

She walked off, maybe a bit faster than she should. We walked with her, making her fast pace seem needed. Both Torix and I were taller than her, so her strides had to keep quick or else she’d fall behind. At the rapid pace, we passed two hallways before reaching the vault doors.

The receptionist signaled for the door to open, but I stepped in front of the door,

“Yeah, that won’t be necessary.”

A giant beam of steel had been the lock for the door. I walked over and pulled, unlatching the mechanism. A few hydraulics pieces shifted before I grabbed the vault door and opened it. With a bit of weight to my pull, the door swung with a reasonable effort. It was like opening one of those heavy doors you almost faceplant, mainly because you didn’t know it was going to be heavy.

I did know though, so once the vault doors opened, rows of deposit boxes covered the walls. Steel reinforced the concrete walls, and a machine was placed in the back that looked like a dehumidifier. It probably gave the room fresh air and oxygen, working like a rebreather you see on tv.

There were several desks, along with quite a few valuables. Most of it was sensitive looking tech, the kind that wouldn’t be easy to replace. Besides for that, there were strange looking minerals, stones, and gems placed around. Some of them glowed, others absorbed light. A few were contained in capsules of glass, holding in storms of lightning.

Torix ignored all that and walked right up to a desk near the back. A blue man with hair like tentacles sat over a desk. He looked exhausted, just worn out beyond measure. Bags under his eyes, dark circles, and his face nearly on his desk, he looked like the hunchback of Notre Dame.

Unlike that hunchback, the hump on his back was muscle, and rippled as he moved his enormous hands to write on the paper. It looked out of place, like it shouldn't be. Fingers of that size were meant for violence, not something so precise. There they etched in elegant handwriting on the papers.

He kept writing while glancing up. Once he saw Torix, he set the pen down and stood. With purposeful steps, he reached us and gave a quick salute,

“Good to see you sir. What is it that you need?”

Torix placed a hand on my shoulder,

“Hello Briggs. This is Daniel, my disciple. He needs to learn about the freedom fighters and a few of the surrounding towns. Give him the intel he needs for gaining their allegiance.”

I turned to Torix, my helmet snapping off my face,

“What do you mean gaining their allegiance? The fuck?”

Ignoring my refusal completely, Briggs set off towards his desk and rummaged for papers. As he did so, Torix grinned,

“Well there are three things for the words of power skill that you need. First, the persuasion skill. Second, the debate skill. Third, you you'll need to use those skills along with speech craft, listening, and intimidation all at once. Can you name a better method than by getting us allies along the way?”

I glanced between Briggs and Torix, “Can I just...I don't know. Threaten them?”

Torix shrugged, enjoying my squirming, “We'll keep going through these different kinds of tasks until you get the words of power skill.”

I sighed, putting my hands on my hips. I took a step away from Torix, turning and walking in a slow circle. I reached back to him and lowered my hands,

“Man...fuck. Alright, I’ll do it.”

Torix nodded, “As I knew you would.”

Briggs had several disks in his hand, each them looking like cd’s with pulsing green lines on them. He reached me and held out four them, each held between his fingers. I grabbed them,

“What are these for?”

Briggs stood up straight into a salute, “They are disks of monolith. They’re storage devices supplied by Schema. You can absorb them into your obelisk, sir.”

The obelisk raised from my hand, the glass sphere reflecting the florescent lights. The band of gray steel at its center shined a bit too. I’d always wondered where the fuck stuff went whenever it sunk into my armor. Even with such precise handling of it, I still didn’t quite know.

That didn’t stop me from using it. Whenever I placed a disk onto the obelisk, the green lines drained into it. After doing this with each of the disks, the band at the middle of the obelisk shined green. It drained over the next few seconds. Once it emptied, a notification appeared in the corner of my screen.

Download Complete.

Simply and very effective, I grinned at Briggs, “Thanks man. Good to see there some steel legion members who know how to get stuff done.”

Briggs stuck out his chest some and scratched his nose, “I do take pride in my work after all.”

Torix nodded, “Indeed he does.”

Briggs exhaustion seemed to wane with our words, like he just needed a bit support to shine. He glanced at Torix,

“I was wondering sir, why are you asking uhm...Daniel to do this?”

Torix raised a finger, “Excellent question. He is, in fact, a human.”

Briggs shook his head before refocusing on Torix,

“Daniel is in the unique position of being a figure head for them. It wouldn’t be a stretch of the imagination to say he’s the strongest human alive, or at the very least one of them. That means he can act as a bridge between the steel legion and the other human parties.”

My head raised, “Ahhhhhhhh. I get it. I’m not a member of the steel legion, so they won’t look at me as a traitor. I can just say the legion are a necessary evil to fight off the big bad Yawm.”

Torix nodded, “Something akin to that. You’ll be able to leverage your title of rift closer and your unknown status I’m sure. Get them to accept the steel legion’s help. Draft up a compromise. Something.”

Briggs nodded, “We’ve tried everything sir. Humans seem to be averse to differences in species. It’s rare to see such a hostile and violent species. Perfect for Schema’s system, but not the legion.”

I shrugged, “Eh, stereotypes and racism are for dumbasses. Having people like that on our side will be a bigger disadvantage than benefit anyway.”

Torix shook his head, “There are reasons they fear the legion. They look at them as invaders. It wouldn’t be an unreasonable stance if it wasn’t for Yawm. His interference is an invasion in the truest sense, and unity will be required to beat him.”

I tapped my chin, “And now it’s my job to set everything straight...ok. I’ll see what I can do.”

Torix turned and walked out of the vault, “Finish the task before the next five days. You and Althea need to enter the rift by then. While you and she are training your abilities there, Kessiah and I will organize the effort up here. Once you come out. We’ll stage an assassination of a follower of Yawm. If all works well, Yawm will awaken without anyone but us to greet him.”

I gave Torix a tiny salute with my hand, “Sure thing, professor Worm.”

He grinned as he walked off. I turned to Briggs,

“Must be hard serving him.”

Briggs nodded, “He works me to the bone.”

I grinned, “Looks like he wants another skeleton.”

Briggs let out a chuckle. I pat one his shoulders, “You got this man. Once we kill the shit out of Yawm, I’m sure you’ve got a few promotions lined up. Every step you take now is worth miles in the long run.”

Briggs nodded, raising his chest a bit. Looking less defeated, he gave me a salute, “Thank you sir. Good luck getting us reinforcements.”

I nodded, leaving him in the vault. As I left, I shouted at him, “Any eldritch powerful enough to kill you can get through this door. There’s really no point to keeping it closed.”

Briggs glanced around, before nodding, “Of course sir. Thank you for the help.”

As I walked away, I could see why he was doing some simple-minded stuff. He looked nervous as an unprepared student on exam day. Easing some of the pressure off him was a good idea. Having me handle the diplomatic stuff killed three birds with a single stone. Briggs could work better, we get new allies, and I get another unique skill. Hopefully at least.

With that in mind, I sifted through the new data given by Briggs. Apparently, the freedom fighters weren’t annihilated by Yawm, which was a relief. The freedom fighters were spread out near the creek in the forest. Most of them had left the town and tried making bases of operations out there. Of course there wasn’t too much food out there, so they had to be getting supplies from somewhere.

It was my job to go out there and get them to organize with the steel legion. If they’d allied themselves with another town nearby, then getting them to join was just icing on the cake.

With that in mind, I sprinted off towards the city. I already had a few ideas for motivating the other troops. As I did so, I checked out my other skill trees. I hadn't selected another one after finishing Cosmic Soul.

[Tier 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)]

The selection of choices thinned out quite a bit by now. Both Fearless and Invincible sounded pretty solid, but I decided on taking invincibility. It sounded like something that would help make me tankier, which would synergize with my build.

After placing my remaining thirty-seven points into the tree, I reached through the quarantine zone. It didn't take long before I found a few zombies nearby. Instead of killing them outright, I smashed the host they carried. I wrenched the insects from the mounds of molded flesh. The ball of legs crawled in my hand, but it couldn't get through my skin.

After getting five of them, I ripped off a plate of my armor and wrapped it around the bugs. Making sure it was airtight, I carried it under my arm. Not wanting to waste any time, I pulsed my ascendant mana until it matched my health regen. My new runes filled to the brim, a surge of might filling my bones and blood.

The rush was even better than before. I forgot I carved them again, making them better. It let me use all the hidden potential behind my enormous ebb and flow of mana. Like breaking a damn, it flowed through my veins. The liquid power didn't flow out of the new runes either. There was no mist or steam coming out of them.

Instead, the air hummed like electricity was dancing in the air. A second passed before a spark of carmine colored lightning shot out from my armor. Another spike of electricity shot out of my armor, then another still. Focusing the power, not letting it intoxicate me, I honed the energy down into the runes.

The lightning stopped, letting the energy stabilize to its entirety. No more wasted dispersal. I would control it with an iron fist. Setting up my telekinetic augments, and idea struck me. So far, I'd set up several telekinetic pads to create points at the ends of my fists. It helped pierce enemies, but whenever I struck with full force, the pads shattered. I couldn't maintain them.

I needed a simple and more effective solution. I let the pads disappear before making a pad on my hand. Visualizing another pad on my hand, I created a flat pad over my fist. Instead of redirecting it, I imagined a much smaller pad right past it. Instead of creating these elaborate telekinetic spikes, I would just make the force condense into a smaller point.

It's kind of like putting on a pair of telekinetic brass knuckles, except all the force would condense into one point. In theory, the constructs should be much stronger than the elaborate points since they were closer to my hand. It would make my fist punch holes into whatever I hit, letting me handle armored foes much better. That, and my armor could get a hold in them and tear their organs out.

Once I did that, it would be over. Plus, I wouldn't have to spin my damn hands when trying to punch. Doing that shit was hard as hell in the middle of a fight, and I couldn't do it from certain angles. With that in mind, I set my case of armor onto the ground. I reinforced it with three more layers of my armor. I did not want those insects getting out once I was outside the quarantine zone.

I walked up to the brick wall of a chimney. I stomped my heel and pivoted a hook into the side of the chimney. Instead of letting my arm crash through brick chimney, I let the force go through the telekinetic pad on my hand. As the force of the strike transferred into the chimney, my hand bounced backwards.

It felt like I was launching a telekinetic bullet with my hand. It didn't end up like a bullet though. It punched a hole through the chimney wall, leaving the wall I hit intact. The other side of the chimney though, it wasn't so lucky. It exploded outward like a bomb went off inside it. I transferred all the force of my strike into what I hit instead of on the surface of it.

The brick wall my hand rested on had a three-inch-wide breach with a couple cracks around it. Walking up towards another chimney, I shot out another punch using the new technique. This time however, I released writhing, hooked tendrils of metal as my fist landed. The shifting storm of black blades detonated into the chasm I created. When my fist bounced backwards, the metal tentacles caught on the chimney.

The effect was chimney detonating from the inside. One side from the raw, kinetic energy and the other side from the metal tendrils pulling it apart. If that was a person, their insides would be blended. In a single word, devastating.

If that could hold up at full strength, then the telekinetic augments would be complete. Satisfied with the result, I picked up the metal ball of insects. After wrapped it around tied it to my back with

a metal cord, I sprinted out of town at full speed. The Phaser ability was put to full use, allowing me to bolt from the town at a blistering pace.

Once I reached the forest, I dashed past trees and broke through briars. The wind whistled in my ears, the sheer speed of my travel amazing me. It felt like riding a motorcycle straight through the dense underbrush. The dark of the forest cast calm onto the scene, like ambient music given a physical form. Whenever I reached the creek, a few nightingales flew off a branch. My speed startled them away.

By the time I reached near the supposed base, my mind was wary for any danger. Unlike before, I wouldn't be caught by surprise. Catching up towards the blip on my mini-map, I found a village of huts and tents.

It was a miserable sight. There were only four guards, and only two of them had guns. One of the others held a bloody pipe and the other some forest bow and arrow. They looked desperate, dirt on their faces and thousand-yard stares latched on their eyes. They were nothing like I hoped they would be.

There were still about three hundred in the camp. Even the weakest child can become a cold-blooded killer if you give them a gun. Put armor on them, and you could hardly tell the difference between them and adults. This number of people would bolster the current legion's numbers by maybe a fourth. Maybe it would change their mind about what happened.

As I reached the encampment, I slowed down and quit using my ascendant mana. Instead of walking up at night, I would wait until the morning to act. I figured a bit of light would help them with the whole not panicking thing.

It wasn't long before the sun peaked over the horizon. I'd burrowed myself into the ground and covered myself in leaves using telekinesis during the meantime. Spying on them only revealed how terrible the living conditions were still. Buckets for holding water, having a hole in the ground to shit in, and looking bony, these guys were living it up.

Convincing them to stop looked like it would be easier than I thought.

With that in mind, I walked up with a steady and slow pace. Not wanting to startle them, I wanted to look like a messenger. My name helped with that, being a Harbinger of Cataclysm. Playing off the title would help as well.

As I neared the camp, the guards panicked. Each of them weren't even level 100. No one in the camp was, at least from what I saw. Seeing someone with 740 above their head in purple text was no doubt intimidating. That didn't even include whatever my notification told them.

By the time I reached them, the guards had their guns raised. Once I was within fifty feet, one of the guards shouted,

“Don't take a step closer or else I'll open fire.”

I kept my voice steady as I thundered, “You already know that isn't enough to even touch me. If you fire, I will retaliate in kind.”

Had to keep the evil guy shenanigans going. Once I reached up close, the two guards petrified at the sight of me. One of them was a taller, thin guy and the other was a short woman. Neither of them were ready for something like me.

I couldn't blame them for being scared. I was trying to take advantage of my imposing figure. Without the telekinetic buffers, my steps shook the ground. I was over a head taller than either of the guards. Pulling back my helmet, I revealed my face to them, scars and all.

The girl whispered, “He's one of the grays.”

I raised an eyebrow, “What's a gray?”

They glanced at each other. It took them a bit before one of the guys spoke,

“It's uhm...It's what we call people who are gray...It's a compliment.”

I rolled my eyes, “Alright, that doesn't tell me anything. From what I know, the gray comes from constitution. You hardly need even forty in the attribute for that gray coloring to set in.”

They turned to each other again, both looking like they were dancing in the middle of a minefield. The girl turned to me, her eyes were in utter terror. I gave her no reason to be scared, yet here she was shitting herself at the sight of me.

My senses clicked at that moment. Something wasn't right. My eyes narrowed and my helmet slid back on. I listened close, hearing the brushing of leaves from within the tented encampment. All the steps sounded the same. Well, all except for one pair of footsteps. This pair of steps were quiet as falling snow.

I shot my hand out towards my left, grasping at the soft sound. My fingers wrapped around a neck. I turned my head at the thing I held onto. The invisibility field faded, revealing a woman in a black suit of some kind. I turned to her, grinning with my armor forming teeth,

“Well then, what do we have here?”

Chapter 68: Tasting Deception

I pulled the person closer, glancing at her hand. A glowing dagger was there, with the air fizzling around it. She whipped it towards my neck, the air whistling as she did so. Off reflex, my armor shot out and pierced through her forearm.

The guards aimed their rifles at me, but I shot my armor out towards the barrels. My armor pierced the rifles, tearing them apart before the guards ran away. Turning back to the girl, I grabbed her plasma knife from her hand. I snapped the handle, shutting the blade down. With the same hand, I grabbed her helmet, my hands big enough to wrap around her head completely.

I frowned, “Now tell me why I shouldn't crush your skull like an egg full of red?”

My armor retracted from her forearm, a high-pitched voice screaming. A second later, she answered in a soft, squeaky voice,

“I...I'm not here to kill you...Just protect camp. Doing my job.”

I identified her,

FearFighter Rogue, Francis Favari (lvl 597) – An upper level FearFighter, this specific kind of FearFighter is usually sent out to kill would be intruders. They often use pathetic looking defenses as cover-ups for their assassination style guarding. This allows them to catch the unaware off guard. Too bad for Francis you aren't just a big bad brute.

Beating higher level enemies isn't normally a problem for them either, mainly because their damage specced builds allow them to burst most targets down. Not the best matchup versus a high damage tank build.

I rolled my eyes, “I’m not a dumbass. You FearFighters need to learn when to fuck off.”

From her armor, a speaker sounded out, “We have you surrounded. Let her go.”

On my chest and face, green laser pointers jittered on me. I glanced out in the distance, and along several trees, FearFighters were set up. Instead of rogues, the snipers covered themselves in leaves and brush, making them hard to see. None of them were above level 500 though. I sighed,

“Why not try talking instead of firing first eh? That’s why you all lost your last group of scouts.”

From the speaker, the gruff voice replied, “You’re the one that took down party D-6? Here we thought it was Bloodbull...Alright, we’ll talk. Why are you here?”

I moved the woman in front of three lasers on my chest. She squirmed in my grip, but she made an effective shield nonetheless.

“To get the Freedom Fighters to join the Steel Legion.”

“You want them to join those slave drivers? They barely escaped whatever mutant experiment that went awry. Why do you want to send these humans back to them?”

I shook my head, “I have several of those mutants along my back. You fire, and they may get out. Trust me when I tell you they’re a lot more dangerous than I am.”

Several seconds of tense silence passed. The green dots appeared on the ground beside me. The voice continued,

“Fine. We’ll have it your way. Set her down, and we’ll negotiate.”

I sighed, “I’m trying to be reasonable here. Don’t ask me to give away my only bargaining chip.”

“Damn...Can’t blame me for trying.”

I glanced at the sky,

“You FearFighters are supposed to be about espionage and intrigue, but you swallowed the bullshit these supposed freedom fighters fed you? Mutant experiments...really now?”

I tossed the woman aside, pounding my chest with a fist, “Do you see my title? Have you read my name? I am a messenger of what’s to come. Ignoring my message would turn you from being ignorant to being dumbasses. I wish I had time to dance around the issue, but I don’t. Neither do any of you.”

The green lasers popped back up on my chest. I flared my ascendant mana, my armor sliding back onto my face and grinning. I leaned forward with my fists balled into clubs of iron,

“Unless you want to fight. You’ll find I’m more than willing.”

My intimidation skill leveled several times before the lasers lowered. The woman tried running away, but I lifted my right arm and lowered my hand. A telekinetic wave of energy slammed her to the ground. I raised the arm while clenching my hand, lifting her into the air. From the speaker, the voice ebbed,

“Ok, ok. We get it. We’ll meet at the village head. We aren’t the only guards here, so don’t try anything funny.”

I let the woman drop and stood up straight. She scrambled away from me as I shrugged,

“Eh, don’t aim a gun at me and I won’t raise my fist at you. This is pretty basic guys. Not that hard to understand.”

I walked into the camp, looking a for the biggest tent in the group. I passed by several ragged, dirty looking people. None of them were above level 50. In my eyes, they were stunted. It was like they hadn’t even tried to adjust to Schema. Combine that with their refusal to accept the steel legion’s help, and they were as useless as they could be. Give them a gun and a bit of training, suddenly they become a force to reckon with.

At the same time, them escaping the city had let them live. It wouldn’t let them live forever though. As I reached a shitty looking log cabin at the center of the camp, I vowed to get that message across.

Once I neared it, a long head alien materialized in front of the door. With an overgrown back filled into the suit, it pulled off its helmet, revealing a lion's mane. It grew all the way down the skull, both golden and majestic. On its furred face, three eyes with the pupils of cats starred at me. Its bottom jaw could split in half, meeting on its nose. At the ends of each jaw bone, a long tusk raised upward. At least it stood on two legs with two arms.

It caught me a bit off guard. Up till now, most aliens looked pretty damn human. This thing did not...Not one bit. It looked as monstrous as any eldritch I'd ever seen. Ignoring it though, I removed my own helmet and reached out a hand,

"I'm Daniel Hillside. Who are you?"

He glanced down at my hand, then back up at me. The gruff voice that spoke over the intercom came out of his weird mouth,

"I'm Tralis, the captain of the FearFighter squadron stationed here. Come in."

He opened the door, pacing inside. I followed suit. The inside of the cabin changed from rustic to futuristic. Clear slates of polymer covered every surface, letting you see the dirt through like clear plastic panels. A spiral staircase headed deeper down to a lower floor, and scientific trinkets covered the various benches laid out on the surface of the place.

Tralis walked down a spiral set of steps, motioning me to follow. I didn't.

"I'm not going down there."

He turned to me, his eyes narrowing, "Why not?"

I tapped my head in frustration before turning back to him, "Tell me why I should trust you first? All I've gotten is a few bullets and a plasma blade coming for my throat so far."

He blinked, all three eyelids snapping shut. He grinned, a grisly visage on his face,

“I’ll do a little introduction then. We are a team of FearFighters contracted to protect a group of Enigmatta. They’re a large faction of scientists. They’re here on this mud ball to study some spacial anomaly or something like that. We are here to help them. After seeing the natives in such bad shape, they decided to help them.”

Tralis leaned against the railing of the spiral stairs, the clear polymer holding his weight easily, “They ended up just using them to make a base of operations. Now the natives do the labor and the Enigmatta are giving them the food and medicine they need to live. You-“

Tralis pointed a finger at me, his suit ending in a sharpened claw, “Are a very hostile entity demanding we listen to some message you have. I understand, being a fighter myself. We attacked first. You defended yourself. It’s a basic misunderstanding. The Enigmatta don’t see it that way. They want you dead.”

Tralis shook his head, “They don’t get it though. Earth is a new planet. There shouldn’t be anyone over level 300. A 740 unknown? I told them it was a death sentence, but they tried sending our top operative to kill you. She accepted like an idiot because she wanted the huge exp boost. You know the rest. Now we’re bending to your demands because you called our bluff.”

His sudden spill improved my trust by at least tenfold. It fit together in my head all nice and neat to, so I walked forward,

“Good enough. Thanks for letting me know.”

He nodded, walking down the steps. As we did, I identified him,

FearFighter Captain, Tralis Navi(lvl 576) – A captain member of the FearFighters, his experience gives him a higher position than most operatives at the same level. Having been tasked with defending several Enigmatta scientists, Tralis is trying to fulfill his mission with few casualties. So far, you’ve been making that difficult.

His Hellion race and lineage also give him access to stealth well beyond the normal person of his level. Their species have elongated skulls for two reasons. One is for balance to offset the musculature of their overgrown back musculature used for leaping. The other is for storing fat during winter months. These enlarges skulls held enlarged brains, owing to their eventual rise to sentience.

Though most Hellions can’t kill you outright, be aware of their trapping, stealth, and burst abilities.

Tralis turned to me as we walked down the staircase, “Does my status line up with what you were thinking?”

I raised an eyebrow and grinned, “You could tell I was reading it?”

He turned forward, “Either that or staring into nothingness for twenty seconds. Figured one was more obvious. Keep your head up and your eyes on these slippery fishmen. They’ll try to put you under the knife if you let them.”

I nodded, “Thanks for the tip.”

At the roof of the underground room, lamps full of white worms offered light. The clear panels lined the entirety of basement as well, the room being much more expansive. About the size of a convenience store, several long steel tables lined the central room. Over them, surgical tools, chemistry beakers and tubes, even holographic panels were floating over the shiny steel.

Six scientists spread out around them, each of them covered in tight fitting suits. Sleek, lean, and with black, tinted panels on their faces, the scientists looked like the embodiment of efficiency. They interacted with holograms and their status with seven fingers, two of them thumbs. The only thing visible underneath their suits were giant, glowing circles.

They could have been eyes. I didn’t know. Regardless, I walked up with Tralis. One of the scientists turned to me. He fiddled with his screen for a moment. I identified him during that time.

Arlo Melak, Enigmatta Scientist(lvl 761) – A scientist in the utility based Enigmatta faction. They focus almost entirely on discovery and exploration, being a premier observation guild. While not the most combat savvy, they make up for their lack of might with their minds. Arlo is particularly gifted, having been given the highly sought after Earth mission. He and his hired mercenaries weren’t ready for what was on Earth.

The Enigmatta were formed by a race of deep sea, sentient fish called Angleasteans. They wear highly pressurized suits, full of compressed water. This prevents them from decompressing on surface worlds. Their giant eyes glow with phosphorescent dye once used to lure in prey. The water at the front of their suits is also dyed black to prevent the daylight from blinding their acute senses of vision. While useful for observation, these traits combine into making a very frail and easily killed creature.

I murmured, “I’ve finally entered full sci-fi mode. Damn...You guys look crazy as hell.”

Tralis laughed, “Surely you’ve seen more exciting sights across the galaxy. There has to be a story behind that Rift Closer title you have.”

I shook my head, “Never left Earth before. I closed the rift here.”

Tralis let his jaw mandibles go slack, “Already? A rift here...This truly is a planet of insanity.”

The scientist fiddled with his status as he said through a breathalyzer, “Indeed it is. That’s why we’re here, studying it. This is the unknown you mentioned then, Tralis?”

He nodded. The scientist glanced at me, the foggy outline of the glowing sphere sending a chill up my spine. A line appeared underneath the sphere, forming tiny, glowing needle teeth in the outline of a smile

The thing said, “Sorry for the misunderstanding, Harbinger. I am Arlo, a member of the Enigmatta. We are scientists. There was a spacial anomaly here on Earth, so we came to investigate the nearby area. Not long after, another anomaly formed, and...well, this world has fallen apart since.”

I nodded in agreement, “Tell me about it. It’s ridiculous.”

Arlo raised a hand, “In fact, I was hoping you might discuss it with us. You mentioned never leaving Earth, were you created here by Schema?”

I crossed my arms, “No. I’m human.”

Tralis laughed along with Arlo. After having their fun, the scientist continued, “Seriously though. What are you?”

I uncrossed my arms, “A human.”

The humor melted off them like snow off a fire golem. Arlo murmured, “Really? You’re rate of growth is...remarkable then.”

I nodded, “Yeah, It’s been a shitstorm since Schema arrived. Hasn’t stopped since.”

The scientist scrambled for a second, “Uhm, yes...Well then, you mentioned bringing samples of the mutation for us to see. May we see them then now?”

I nodded, pulling the capsule from my back. I opened it, the squirming insects struggling at the bottom of it. I counted all five, making sure I didn’t lose any. Tralis jumped back at the sight of them, hissing,

“Evil...”

I nodded, “You don’t have to tell me. These things crawl under your skin and play with your corpse like a puppet on strings. They’re bad news, and worse, they spread like wildfire. I’m here to see if we can get the Freedom Fighters to join me and the steel legion in fighting them.”

I gestured a hand at Tralis, “I’d prefer the fear kind of fighter though. You guys kick about a hundred times more ass than the freedom kind.”

Tralis grinned, “Bah, the legion knows nothing of real fighting. We stuck to our battling roots instead of being watered down to glorified merchants. Unlike them, we will only help for a price.”

I shrugged, “You can’t get off Earth, and these bugs ensure you won’t last long while your here. We have them quarantined in the city, but it’s only a matter of time before they break through. Combine that with the eldritch in Springfield evolving faster than normal and you have a recipe for disaster.”

I pointed at my title, “Here’s proof of the eldritch growing, if you needed any.”

Skill gained! Persuasion (lvl 1) – While others fight for favor, you gain it with words. +1% to charm and compulsion when trying to convince another party to change.

Suppressing a bout of joy at the skill, I kept calm as Arlo and Tralis stared at each other. They held it for a moment, like having one of those glances that tells a conversation. Arlo turned back to me,

“We would like to leave, but we have a bit of a conundrum on our hands. You see, there is a group of humans who are hunting this group. That’s why we found them so...dilapidated. These humans, the Freedom Fighters, are being bled to extinction by them. Why? We’ve yet to understand.”

Tralis's eyes narrowed and his voice hardened, "They eat their own kind. They're cannibals. They hunt these weaklings."

I frowned, "Well fuck, sounds like they're already zombies."

Arlo walked over towards the insects, grabbing one with a set of tweezers. I kept a close eye on the insect before he dipped into a beaker full of suspension fluid. Arlo tapped a sticker on the side of it, and the clear polymer slid onto the top of the beaker. He turned up to me,

"Not quite. From what we've discovered of them, they're still human. They've simply lost their minds. If you can help us kill him, then we can migrate this group of people towards wherever it is you need to go. Until then, it's risky to take the encampment away from shelter."

I rolled my shoulders, "Sounds simple."

Tralis nodded, "It would be, but their leader is strong. They call him Bloodbull. He outlevels even you, and we can't beat him. The fact you got here without being attacked by him is a miracle. If you hadn't have told us, we'd have thought he decimated our scouting party."

I raised an eyebrow, "What level is he then?"

Tralis frowned, his mandibles shifting downward, "About 1000. If you help us, killing him shouldn't be a problem."

I cupped my chin, "I can act as the vanguard, your snipers will set up suppressive fire while I beat the shit out of him..." I glanced up, "Sounds pretty good to me."

Tralis patted my shoulder, "It will be good to fight beside a warrior of your caliber. We won't fail you."

I shook his shoulder with a grin on my face, "Likewise. I look forward to it."

Arlo stepped up, "I can set up voice relays on your system before you leave, if you have an obelisk that is. We can give you one if you don't."

Lifted my hand, and my obelisk lifted out of it. Arlo tilted his head, “I thought you haven’t left the Earth...”

I smiled, “Doesn’t mean I don’t know someone who has.”

He took the obelisk before fiddling with it for a few minutes. Tralis chattered away about past battles during the time. From what I gathered, most people took very few risks when fighting eldritch. They handled every situation with careful plans, even if they weren’t necessary. After hearing a bit about their builds, I saw why.

They were all glass cannon, and they didn’t even pretend like melee was an option. Guns and magic were prolific, so prolific that many melee styles of combat were forgotten. Only a few species had the tenacity for pulling off a physical build. remnants were the most infamous of those, along with the porytians like Yawm.

Humans were considered bulky and big by most species standards, and our metabolisms were slow. That was a surprisingly big thing. The smaller a species was, the faster it’s metabolism moved. This made the species live its life faster, and that in turn fed into an engine of progress. Instead of five or six thousand years for civilization to invent the internet, it took the Hellions only five or six hundred.

I ended up voicing my opinion against that viewpoint though. First off, it was an almost racist one. A species that doesn’t progress as quickly would also be less likely to inflict nuclear war for instance. You can’t say a whole race is inferior just because it was a larger size. Besides for that, it was outright wrong. I mean, if a member of a species dies quickly, then they can’t learn as much knowledge over the long term.

That results in shallower fields of knowledge, a fact I pointed out on multiple occasions. The biggest example came with how far ahead theoretical physics was of most technological fields. We formulated many of the principles Schema and the eldritch imply, like multi-verse theory.

Tralis and I never got too heated though. We kept things civil. I ended up learning the debate skill during the process though. Now I just needed the unique skill. In Torix’s own words, it would likely take a fancy speech or something like that. In my dictionary, that meant a lot of internal cringing and pain. I would much rather face life or death than a large crowd.

I could tell people to fuck off, but inspire them? I didn't have much faith in myself for that specific task. Still, I'd bite the bullet and do it. As a wise philosopher once said, failure is the first step to success, and I was ready to fail hard.

But not at killing this Bloodbull guy. From what I heard, he sounds a bit weaker than one of Torix's guards. Even without the backup from the FearFighters, I'd be fine, in my mind at least. It could be a tough fight, but that was my specialty.

With that in mind, Arlo and Tralis prepared a group of FearFighters as my backup. They were mainly snipers, the ones posted to guard the town. During the operation, the town would be vulnerable, but it was a calculated risk according to Arlo. With me in the vanguard position was the invisible girl I caught, Francis.

Once we readied up, she and I took the front of the formation while heading out towards Bloodbulls current camp. A few feet into the forest, and I could feel the grimace on Francis' face through her mask. Before the tension became a problem, I said,

"Hey, no hard feelings about earlier, right? You were just doing your mission and I was defending myself, so no need to be antsy."

She didn't reply, staying silent. A moment later, she replied with her voice strained,

"I get it. We should have talked things out."

Something was off about her voice. Like something was eating at her. I kept quiet about it though. There was plenty of horrors lurking out there that could leave you scarred, mentally and physically. I wasn't about to blame her for something like that. At the same time, I kept my guard up and high. I didn't want to be caught relying on someone so unstable.

We passed through the forest, every crackling leaf sounding like an enemy behind a bush. The sun leaked through the tree leaves, dousing a bit of light on the forest floor. The wind was cool, a bit of chill biting in it. The ground dried a while back, so it crunched underfoot. The smell of pine, wood and earth floated around us. It was a beautiful day.

Once we passed around the corner, I glanced behind me. Francis was nowhere to be seen. She activated her camouflage without telling me. It was a good thing in my mind. I now knew I couldn't trust her, even in the slightest. Glancing behind me, the other guards were missing as well. I was alone in the forest.

A leaf crinkled around me. I turned my head, but nothing was there but a wobbling leaf. All around me, the sounds of shifting branches and crinkling pine straw echoed through the forest. The sounds came closer, like a pack of wolfs cornering a sheep.

I grinned. My armor shifted into jagged teeth. My ascendant mana flowed like magma in my veins and through my runes. I focused them, honing them to a deadly efficiency, letting not one drop of mana escape. The air shivered around me, almost excited. I clasped my fists, turning them to blocks of iron. The telekinetic pads condensed, turning my hands into rivets. Oppression reached outward. I was more than ready.

What these wolfs didn't realize was that they hadn't cornered a helpless sheep.

They cornered a ravenous monster.

Chapter 69: Chaos

Seconds passed, but no gunfire or crunching leaves sounded near me. I glanced around, looking for clues. I found none. I closed my eyes, listening and smelling the air. The slight scent of the alien's blood was nearby. Maybe the FearFighter's hadn't betrayed me. Maybe the tribals found them first.

There was only one way to find out. I skulked towards the smell, opening my eyes and reaching out with oppression. There was no need for subtlety now that the mission was fucked either way. As oppression grew, trees around me withered and brushes fell. I smirked. They needed some damn good luck to sneak up on me now.

Once I reached the smell, several of the FearFighters were already dead. Cauterized slash marks covered them from head to toe, around their throats and sides. I moved Oppression from them, preventing the auras from melting their flesh. Once I stepped beside them, the dead eyes of Tralis met my own.

They hadn't betrayed me. The rogue with the plasma knife betrayed them. I leaned back and laughed out loud, first at my paranoia and then at what a shit show this had become. I kept my ascendant mana flared and augments up as I ran through the forest. Oppression cleaved a large portion of it, letting me see far ahead.

What I figured out wasn't pretty. Off in the distance, past the line of dying trees, a few sets of footprints imprinted into the ground. The tribals already attacked the Freedom Fighters while we were gone. They used the mission as bait for the setup. Sprinting towards the base, my feet left

craters in the ground as I accelerated. The wind rushed past my ears as the sounds of the forest turned to silence, my aura killing everything.

Screams shattered the silence, echoes at first then ringing cries. As I reached the camp, fire and hell already consumed it. Yawm's insects had escaped. Several deformed humans devoured an area around the main cabin. Several of them were the revived corpses of the Enigmatta, their giant eyes revealed in grotesque malformations. The tribals were attacking the left side of the encampment, tearing out throats and scalping skulls.

I could see why they were called tribals. Each wore a primitive mask made of wood. Paint and dyes covered their exposed, gray skin and ragged clothing. The obvious boss was an eight-foot-tall(2.4 meter) man, gray with a glowing red mask. Piercings and wooden sticks were stuck through his body, like he was a human pincushion. From his back, dozens of hands reached out. He slobbered with blood dripping from his maw, more animal than man.

Honestly, he didn't even look 1% like a human. He was an eldritch, or at the very least a human possessed by one. The information from the FearFighters was incompetent. That's what led to their demise. They forgot that people could lie to them, and they took a big risk to top it off. Now the insects escaped, the tribals were culling the camp, and the only way to stop them was to kick some ass.

As I ran in, I took a closer look at the boss.

BloodBull, the Cannibal Savage(lvl 1065) – A brutish enemy reliant on power and blood magic, Bloodbull started out as an eldritch hiding as a mask. Once near it, the mask will whisper promises of great power to nearby humans. The weak willed fall to its trap, letting it grow in size and number of arms on the hosts back.

Getting to such a high level was only possible because of how the Freedom Fighters were set up. They offered a convenient and easy feeding source for the eldritch, letting it evolve into a behemoth. Over time, the radiant energy released by the eldritch infected others, creating a group of cannibals. They've been slowly whittling away at what's left of the freedom fighters since.

The level alone was alarming, but even more was to come. The rogue woman who betrayed her comrades walked up to the boss, surrounded by chaos. She spread out her arms. Bloodbull reached towards her, putting a bit of blood on her forehead.

Legs sprouted out of the blood, clawing into her face. Eyes opened from the blood, empty and hollow. The woman screamed, trying to jerk the blood from her face, but it was too late. She already

gave herself over. All that was left was to succumb to the parasite she left on her face. Like a giant tick, the blood swelled and peeled the skin from her face.

A moment later, it formed into the wooden mask the other members wore. Moments later, she ran and tore into the throat of a nearby person. She was gone, having let the darkness swallow her. It was crazy seeing someone be so stupid and smart at the same time. Her plan had been genius, likely taking months of setup. Letting that thing touch her face, not her brightest moment.

It had been her last thought. Seeing it sent shivers up my spine, but more than that was the potential for death. It had been a while since I faced odds like this. It brought back memories of living in BloodHollow.

Drawing from those same memories, I sprinted towards the infected Enigmatta. While the tribals would pose problems further down the line, eliminating these members took priority. Their sheer malignance alone ensured that.

By the time I reached them, the disease was in full swing. One of the human corpses was bulging, full of the insects. A few deformed humans already clawed for more meat, their bodies warped. The grotesque Enigmatta led the charge, being the highest levels among the group. The situation was spiraling out of control.

My mind gave me a hard choice. The humans running around haphazardly were no more than meat sacks for the insects. If even one of them spread, then the world might be completely fucked. From what I could tell, none of the insects spread out yet. It was a matter of time now though. Once one of the corpses exploded with insects, the world would die.

Swallowing the guilt, I rushed in with oppression spread out to its maximum size. The enormous aura killed any human that contacted it. I gritted my teeth, my hands shaking as their corpses disintegrated in seconds. I hated myself, but there just wasn't time for self-loathing. There was only time for doing what had to be done.

And so, I erased the camp from existence. I sprinted in all directions and committed genocide, killing the people and disintegrating the corpses they left behind. As I did so, I rallied the zombies, drawing them in to attack me. The process took less than a full minute, oppression's aura being so large and powerful. The tribals helped the process, taking out the western side of the camp on their own.

Once I finished killing the camp, I redoubled my efforts on the zombies. One of the bulging corpses exploded. I leapt over the group of zombies. Midway through my flight, I used a pad of telekinesis

on the ground to help push me further. It took far more strength, but I made it across the group before landing in the swarm of crawling legs.

They snagged onto me from all sides. Legs like wood tried pricking and piercing my armor. In desperation, they crawled over me, searching for a weakness in my armor. They found none. My armor retaliated in violence, stabbing and piercing them by the dozen. Seconds later, I pulled the rest of the horde towards me with a wave of telekinetic energy.

It took a tenth of my health for it, but none of the insects escaped from my armor's hunger. Turning back, the zombies reached me. The first tried snapping at my arm. I punched towards its gut. My telekinetic pad landed on its chest. My fist stopped, converting the force into a smaller surface area.

The result was the back of the zombie exploding outward. Before my fist blew backwards, tendrils of armor slid into the monster. Using the recoil, my armor ripped the monster to shreds. Nothing was left but chunks of meat. Another deformed monster leapt towards me, vomiting a stream of blood.

I waved the blood away with my left hand, using a telekinetic field. I stomped a heel into the ground. Driving the force through my core, I spun an overhead right down into the zombie. Once again, my fist struck the new telekinetic augments, and the monster detonated from both sides. My fists became cannons. My armor became meat hooks. The combination proved unstoppable.

Unique skill gained! Telekinetic Augmenter (Apply telekinetic augments even at full strength, do so without needing mana) No skills fused. 100 tree points rewarded for learning involved.

Telekinetic Augmenter(lvl 1) – You battle with both your mind and your body. Both cannot be broken. Increases strength and effective force transfer for telekinetic augments that don't use mana.

I didn't plan on gaining a unique skill like this, but I appreciated it nonetheless. I hadn't realized, but my other, more complex augments required a bit of mana with each strike. Not much, but some. The new build only transferred the force to a smaller surface area. That made the process stronger and more efficient at the same time. I didn't have time to dwell on the feat.

With a wide hook, another zombie detonated as I struck its shoulder. A zombie opened its chest, firing its ribs at me one at a time. I clenched my fist, sending out spikes of my armor to intersect each bone. Whenever one fired towards my eye slit, a mouth formed from my armor and chomped into the bolt, crushing it.

The savagery continued. The fodder zombies fell like flies, unable to withstand my onslaught. Moments later, I stood at the center of a sea of blood. The only zombies left were the Enigmatta. Unfortunately, there wasn't anything left to distract the tribals. They reached me as I charged into the Enigmatta, and both groups averaged levels over 600.

I gritted my teeth and clasped my fists. Desperation took hold as an Enigmatta sliced its left arm ending in a horn at me. I ducked underneath it, countering with a right hook towards the body. A shockwave of force ebbed from its body, but the monster withstood the impact. It didn't withstand the tendrils of metal.

The wires sliced through the flesh, blood spraying from the creature. Soaked in the red, I slid under a strike from its left arm, the clawed hand scraping my armor. Sparks cracked from my armor as I twisted on my heels. The ground fractured beneath me, the weight of my fist building. My runes hummed with a violent power. The true might of my fist collided with the monster's torso.

The ribs on the other side of it exploded. My fist recoiled backwards, slicing it apart. Stepping backwards, I used the momentum of my left arm to elbow a tribal leaping towards me. Pulling with all my might, I slammed the bony joint into the mask of the tribal. As my elbow contacted its face, the same telekinetic augment formed.

The wooden mask snapped before crushing the skull open. The body kept charging forward, but I sidestepped to my right. The tattoo covered man shot past my left side before I stepped forward and launched a kick with my right leg towards its stomach. Fissures formed under my left foot as my right leg slammed into the person's stomach.

Once more, telekinetic augments formed before impact. My foot bounced off the telekinetic pad, causing the tribal's spine to snap. The person's back split open, drenching me in organs and blood. Another Enigmatta reached me. The suit no longer covered the glowing eye. It glanced at me, the glowing eye turning into a blinding sun.

Everything went dark, my eyes failing me. Using my sense of hearing, I raised my left shoulder, deflecting a horned arm above me. I twisted on my hips as I did so, drilling force up my feet and through my core. As my fist flew, I pulled my arms close, keeping the hook compact.

It landed, the wet squelch mixed with cracking bones. I stepped forward, slamming another hook into the source of the sound. My fist met a bony skull before I shot out another compact hook with my right hand. It missed before I lunged forward with another left hook.

The blow sunk into something soft on the monster. The wet squelch and slicing wires sang out like music to my ears. That is, before a set of teeth crunched into the side of my helmet. Another set of teeth burrowed into my left leg. Another into my chest.

I bent down, two more bodies jumping onto me. With an explosion of ascendant mana, spikes discharged from my armor. A hundred spines, more than I've ever made, butchered the nearby enemies. After that, I ran forward into the darkness, trying to buy time for my eyes to heal.

They wouldn't let me. A hand latched onto my leg. I dragged it with me before another snatched my leg. I fell forward, crushing into the ground. The pounding thump of footsteps ebbed into my eardrum. Hungry howls and drooling mouths clamped around me. They were upon me.

Before the others caught me, my mind frenzied and my arms stabbed into the ground. From my arms, I grew spines into the ground. They moved sideways, upturning the earth at a rapid pace, digging me down. As the spines dug me forward, I condensed oppression right below my legs. Despite that difficulty, desperation drove me. It gave me the strength to snap my limits.

The searing aura compressed until it melted the fleshy hands holding onto me. As it did, I burrowed into the ground. Once dirt surrounded me at all sides, I shifted myself downwards with my armored spines pulling me along. The sound of clawing hands scrapped above me. I let my ascendant mana wane, my health flying upwards. It was strange that I could see my status even when blind, but it sure as hell was useful.

After that, I condensed oppression into a sphere above me, where the zombie dug. I drilled down, sweat pouring down my face, the only part of me not coated in armor. Claws of the monsters nipped my heels, but I gritted my teeth till they cracked. My burrowing intensified, and none of the Enigmatta or tribals got a good grip. A minute later, and the digging above me stopped. Oppression did them in.

It hadn't slain them all. A cataclysmic explosion radiated above me. Another followed. After the third one, dirt no longer smothered my legs. A giant's hand grabbed me before throwing me from the ground. Despite soaring through the sky, I was almost happy to see the clouds above me spinning in my vision. At least I could fucking see again.

I flipped through the air, adjusting with a few telekinetic pads. Landing on my feet and a single arm, I slid the length of car, my feet digging trenches through the ground. Glancing up, the damn plasma knife wielding chick was sprinting towards me. Her level increased by two hundred by the mask. It wouldn't be enough.

With a surge of anger, I bolted towards her. We clashed with her slamming her hands against my own. I dragged her backwards before pushing her to her knees. From behind the wooden mask, a warped voice of frustration echoed out,

“Just...blurgh...die already.”

My helm split, opening a set of jagged teeth leading into a crimson void. The teeth disappeared into the meat of her face, above and below the wooden mask. I snapped her arms, breaking the bones and mushing them to her shoulders. I pushed her away, my teeth riving her mask from her face.

A terrified set of eyes met my own. Tears poured from them as she wept,

“Please...I didn’t mean too. I was forc-“

I bit into her face, the teeth of my armor sliding into the bone and flesh. They dug deeper as she screamed in agony. I kept pressing her shoulders together, my ascendant mana flowing like a raging hurricane. She gurgled on her own blood before I crushed her in my hands. Glancing upwards from the carnage, I met the eyes of Bloodbull, a bus’s length away.

The mask on his face grinned at me, the legs of the supposed mask digging into the sides of his skull. Hearing like it was right beside my ear, it whispered,

“You are a grand warrior. I can grant you great power.”

Buying time, I humored the little shit, “I saw what you did to her. What makes me so different.”

It whispered with power in its voice and weight in its words, “She was weak minded, unable to compose herself under the rush of the gift. You will rise above.”

My health and stamina regenerated as I spoke, “How will you do it?”

The mask grinned from ear to ear, “I will wipe you with the blood distilled from my shell. It will grant you the frenzy of battle and the might of many.”

My stamina capped out, my health not far behind. I stepped onto the corpse of the woman, my armor mopping it up. I glanced up and cupped my chin. Once my health capped out, I glanced down at the raging monster,

“Eh, I’ll do it after you go fuck yourself.”

The mask frowned, “Then so be it. Resist temptation, and swallow the grim reaper’s scythe, little lamb.”

I opened my status screen, putting all my points into willpower. I still needed that perk. A surge of mental acuity passed through me, the arcane bonds in my flesh strengthening too. As I finished, Bloodbull charged towards me, his steps quaking the ground. Chunks of earth splintered upward with each step. He smiled at the sight of me.

My ascendant mana blazed like carmine fire radiating under my armor. The drool leaking from his jaw and the hunger in his eyes, he expected an easy meal. I grinned with my armor.

So did I.

Chapter 70: Order

Bloodbull reached me, lashing out with a wild strike with his right arm. I stepped forward, ducking under the strike. As he charged me, I bashed a blow into his stomach with my right arm. The empowered force of the blow slowed his charge as I spun on my heels once more. Spinning like a top, I drilled my left hand into Bloodbull’s side.

I used the recoil to drag me out from in front of him. He passed by me, undeterred and smiling. The eldritch mask on his face grinned,

“Is that all you have?”

I dashed forwards, jabbing towards his face with my right hand. He leaned far backwards, like he was trying to do the limbo. Back when I boxed, some people would dodge punches this way. There was an easy counter to it.

I stepped forward and pulled my left hand back. The momentum traveled up my feet as I arched my right hand over my head. Like swinging a club downwards, the inertia in my fist built before slamming down into his solar plexus. Just like in boxing, Bloodbull couldn’t hold himself upright because of the destabilizing strike.

He fell onto his back, the sea of hands held him up. As he crawled away, I followed him with measured, balanced steps. With each step, I shot out vicious leg kicks into the hands on his back. Each kick that landed snapped the bones in the arms. Bloodbull groaned, trying to escape. I didn't let him.

This continued for the length of a football field. A third of the arms on his back were broken, some of them were even amputated. This threw him off balance. As he slowed down and hobbled away, I put more and more weight into each kick. The carnage continued until we reached the forest.

He reached a tree and crawled up it. With his front facing me now, he kicked towards me. I ducked under the kick and whipped a condensed tendril of oppression through the tree. The tree's core rotted, forcing it to fall over to the left.

Bloodbull stayed attached to the tree, not understanding why he was falling. I shifted the tendril of oppression onto him. As he fell to his left side, I stomped towards my left. I bent towards my left and pressed through my heel. As I spun, my hand tucked towards my side. Ascendant mana roared up my left arm, and the telekinetic fields gave me the grip I needed.

With enough power to snap a tree, my uppercut collided with Bloodbull's jaw. His head whipped sideways, snapping his upper body upwards. Before he tumbled out of my range, I clasped my right hand and spun on my heels once more. I shot my right hand out, letting my arm stretch out wide. The centripetal force built before I tucked the arm in before my fist landed, compacting the amassed strength of the strike.

Kinetic energy whipped into the head of Bloodbull, even greater than the last. The sound of metal clapping against bone echoed through the empty camp. The sound rippled across the barren earth, a testament to the death my aura left behind. Bloodbull's body bolted towards the ground before impacting the earth beneath him. Cracks fissured around him, webbing outwards.

A crater formed beneath him like driving a giant nail into the ground. After landing, he grasped out with his right hand towards my foot. I stepped back, just outside the reach of his grasp. As he pulled his hand back in, I dashed forward and torqued a kick into his face. He grabbed for my leg again, but I stepped just shy of his grip once more.

He turned onto his belly, his head facing me. He lunged out with his right hand, trying to claw at my leg. I stepped forward, meeting his lunge with my right fist. A shockwave shot out from the concussive collision. Bloodbull fumbled upward, swiping again with his left hand, I sidestepped him and slammed a left hook against his jaw.

He stumbled towards his left, catching himself with his left hand. I followed him, maintaining a distance just close enough to attack, but just far enough so that I could dodge. As his left hand touched the ground, I sliced a whipping kick into the arm.

The joint caved in, bending his elbow backward. Bloodbull roared in agony, falling onto the ground. As he howled, I stepped forward and lifted a heel. Aiming at the center of his mouth, I stomped downward. Yellow teeth snapped, and his jaw bone fractured as my foot mangled his face. He covered his face, but I just lifted my heel and slammed it down onto him.

It's an interesting conundrum in street fighting. People don't understand how dangerous being grounded is. Unlike in sanctioned fights, normal people wear shoes or boots. This means stomping towards the head, which isn't allowed in normal fights, is brutally effective. In fact, there isn't a counter towards it.

Bloodbull was finding this out the hard way. Even if you block with your arms, a well-placed heel stomp would slam their hands into their face. A few more stomps, and the bones in the hand and arm could be fractured and broken. Then the hands would fall down, opening the head and neck to damage. Either of those places were deadly if struck with a hard heel.

I watched the familiar scenario play out with Bloodbull. Several of the arms from his back blocked the first few strikes. His normal arms followed. Then his head absorbed the trauma. I kept stomping, more and more blood spraying up with each kinetic impact. Over a minute, I trampled his face into mush.

He didn't die, however. The mask kept him alive, even though his body just wanted to die. Leaves rustled behind me. I stepped away from Bloodbull and turned around. Three of the Enigmatta were pulled back to life. On their faces, the hands I tore off Bloodbull's back clasped tightly. He hadn't been escaping and losing arms. He had sowed seeds for backup later.

Before they reached me, I tripled the speed of my stomping. I growled, burning through my health bar to increase the power and speed of my savagery. I grit my teeth and mauled Bloodbull with my entire heel turning him to slush. As the revived Enigmatta closed in, Bloodbull's experience notification appeared.

Turning around, I found the Enigmatta reaching towards me. The hands leaked purple mana, keeping the haggard flesh sacks alive. The first of the trio stumbled up to me, a head shorter than me. The purple mana acted as an elastic coating, grafting the destroyed corpse together. It enhanced the strength of the guard by two hundred levels as well, leaving it around 950.

With elongated, whipping arms, the Enigmatta lashed a deformed arm at me. The astounding quickness caught me off guard. The tendril smacked the side of my face. I staggered sideways before grounding myself. Another hand lashed, but I raised my shoulder and deflected the whipping strike. Sparks flew before I charged towards it.

Oppression condensed over the creature, freezing it in pain for a moment. Abusing that single second, I tackled it to the ground before raising my right fist. Several slams of my fist later, and the hand mushed. I kept hitting even after the notification sounded. I didn't want to fight it again.

A clubbing arm slammed across my jaw. I fell sideways, dazed and confused. My vision stabilized before I glanced up. An Enigmatta lifted an enlarged arm above its head, ready to pound my skull into the dirt. Without hesitating, I kicked with my legs, pushing into a telekinetic field. The field absorbed the momentum of the kick, firing a telekinetic bullet. The bullet of force shot into the monster, hitting it in the face.

I tumbled across the dirt before rolling back to my feet. Another Enigmatta reached me, its body more intact when compared with the others. Two bony tendrils jutted from its shoulders, giving it four limbs to attack with. The deformed Enigmatta sliced downwards with its tendrils while flailing towards me with its arms.

I ducked, parried, and deflected strikes. Handling this monster took far more focus than the others. The awkward angles, bizarre tempo, and odd timing of its attacks only made fighting it even harder. The Enigmatta with the enlarged arm reached us, adding even more chaos to the encounter.

Pushing my limits, I stretched as my armor had to shift with the movements of my body. Otherwise, I couldn't keep up. Defending the strikes took my entire being, like looking at the world through a tunnel. Only this mattered. Only my survival mattered.

The two Enigmatta turned into a monster more devastating than Bloodbull. They complemented one another to perfection. One of them would suppress me with a percussive symphony of strikes. The other would act as a deterrent for retaliation. After dealing with them for several minutes, I turned and sprinted away. I needed my health capped back out so that I could function at full force.

As I sprinted away, a siphoning sound echoed in the distance. I turned, seeing the dead body of Bloodbull. The hands across his back, both the broken and the fine, had left him. All across the encampment, revived lumps of flesh came together. The stumbled back towards the mask atop Bloodbull's corpse.

As my health regenerated, the flesh and bones and skin surrounding the mask fused into a massive structure. The purple mana bubbled, turning the monster into a single piece. It molded into one. I frowned before shifting oppression over the monster. It slowed the amalgamation, but the process continued at a steady pace.

A chill ran down my spine. If that thing finished, I was fucked. I couldn't beat these two Enigmatta unless I was at full strength, let alone this fucking monstrous abomination. Fear crawled across my skin and desperation burned through my blood. A bead of cold sweat dripped down my forehead, underneath my armor.

I might die.

The cautious approach I was taking died right then and there. This was all or nothing, life or death. Adrenaline poured into my bloodstream with each beat of my heart, the frenzy of battle coming over me. I charged towards the shifting flesh sack. Before I reached it, a long tendril wrapped around my foot and pulled me to the ground.

I turned back, and the whipping Enigmatta had been brought back to life once more. Missing its head, another hand had grasped against its heart, pouring the purple miasma into it. I pushed myself up before jerking it towards me. The monster fell to the ground before the others reached me. Surging my ascendant mana despite the damage, I charged towards the Enigmatta with the huge arm. A plan formed in my head.

I ducked underneath the large arm's first strike before slamming a fist into its stomach. The flesh held together, the purple miasma acting as a shock absorbent. The four-armed Enigmatta stabbed a bony tendril into my back. I ignored it. The clubbing Enigmatta needed to die if my plan was going to work. Besides that, I invested into health for this one reason. When I needed to soak damage, I could.

And so, I did. I weaved between the strikes of the clubbing zombie, each strike able to chunk my health. The four armed monster couldn't dish out damage like it could, so I ignored it while bombarding the larger armed zombie. Four punches later, and mister large arm barely stood. My back bled torrents of blood, but I grinned as I grabbed the hand on the face of the large arm as it died.

My plan hinged on that factor. So far, I learned two things from the hands and mask. First, just because the monster beneath it died, that didn't mean the hand or mask had. Second, the hand controlled people by pouring miasma into it. The mask stabbed its feelers into the target, controlling the brain directly. If I was right, I could abuse these factors.

Praying for the best, the hand snapped onto my right wrist, pouring the miasma into my armor. My armor gorged on the energy, filling like a hungry animal. As I ducked, deflected, and weaved between the strikes of the four-armed Enigmatta, I sunk my armor's tendrils into the hand on my wrist.

As the armor's tendrils finally sunk into the hand, another whipping arm struck my back. My legs failed me as I fell to the ground. The hit had severed my spine. As I landed on the ground, I redirected oppression from the giant mound of flesh onto the four-armed zombie. This stunned it, making it fumble backwards.

Crawling with my arms, I gripped onto the monster before chomping into it with my armor teeth. Another whipping strike hit my back, dipping my health down to less than 5%. The edges of my vision blurred black. My arms grew weak. My eyelids grew heavy. My breathing hastened. My eyes dilated. A deep unease overtook me. For a fraction of a second, I walked along the edges of despair.

Thoughts passed through my mind. Even if I did kill these Enigmatta, would I be able to kill the amalgamation? I hardly beat an abusive, alcoholic man. Versus Baldag-Ruhl, I only beat him with Alfred worm's help. Most of the fights past that had been easy and simple affairs. There wasn't true struggle. There wasn't true despair. My arms turned numb. My eyes went blank.

No one was here to help. It was now or never. I dug into the pits of my will. I dived into the abyss. I crushed the last shred of weakness in me. I sacrificed who I was, for who I wanted to be. A force of nature, something unstoppable. A cataclysm, a tempest, even a monster, I channeled the fear I felt. Fear of death? No, I would fear my own weakness.

I commanded my eyelids to open, and so they did. I demanded my arms obey, and so they moved. I roared at my hands to ball into fists, and so they clamped with force to bend steel. I lunged forward and tore into the throat of four arm. I gnashed and chomped and tore. I urged my armor to send spikes through the monster, tearing him apart.

I did so, even as blood poured from my own mouth. The sound of a whip surged in my ears. This strike would end me, but I wouldn't die groveling. I would go down biting at their heels. Before the strike landed across my back, the death notification for the monster appeared.

Almost as if in slow motion, I opened my status screen and poured all my points into willpower. I prayed it was enough. The points adjusted, and the perk screen appeared.

Army of One(Have 1000 points in a single attribute before level 1000, Willpower over 1000) – Within you, the might of many is made one. Every eldritch killed over level 1000 adds another year of life. Immunity to corruption and a reduction to the efficacy of mental attacks. +10% more mana regen(Health Regen due to Arcane Blood), internal motivation, and augmentation affinity per 1000 points in willpower. You may choose to add 1/10th of willpower to any attribute besides Endurance or Willpower. You may now unlock a legacy.

Mentally, I selected the perk screen.

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

Once again, I used a thought to select constitution. The rush of clarity filled my head, even as it grew and expanded. The whipping strike lashed out against my back. I grinned at the hit. It wouldn't be enough now. On my left wrist, another hand latched onto my arm. Draining the energy and health from the hands, my feeling in my legs came back.

I stood before turning back towards the whipping zombie. He struck out towards me. My hand moved like swimming through molten lead, but it couldn't resist the mandate of my will. I deflected the whipping strike, my health coming back. Lucidity returned. My senses sharpened. My strength built.

I walked over towards the Enigmatta, deflecting strike after whipping strike. With each step, I grew bolder. With each deflection, I learned the movements. Once I reached it, my ascendant mana returned. Power flooded my veins. Energy swarmed my blood. Might engulfed my bones.

I turned on my heels, driving a hook like thunder into the monster's face. The head exploded before I shot another hook into its chest. Even as the flesh fell apart, I delivered punishing blow after pushing blow. I would leave nothing left.

Once the Enigmatta disintegrated, I heaved out a heavy sigh. I turned towards the ball of flesh, moving oppression over where it was. It wasn't malformed meat anymore. The body of it condensed, creating a smooth, dull, and yellow armor. It had two massive, muscular legs that it stood on. With six arms, it opened its hands, brandishing spikes of sanguine color. The mask melted onto the face, creating a thickened plate of armor attached to its face.

That armor split as a mouth and four eyes opened. It stood ten feet (3 meters) tall, towering and massive. As it moved, the earth shook beneath its steps. Turning to me, black lines formed over the

yellow carapace. The slabs of muscle on its back rippled as it tested its new-found form. I sighed with relief as I identified it. While strong, it wouldn't be overwhelming.

Typhon, Mover of Mountains (lvl 1131) – Created by a conglomeration of Yawm's mutant plague plus the purple miasma of Bloodbull's mask, Typhon is mighty. By fusing the bodies of different species with different chaotic energies and forces, the mask of Bloodbull sacrificed itself to become this monster.

And a monster it is. The six arms are powered by the thick musculature of its back. The senses of the creature can see and smell food from kilometers away. Its roar is loud enough to be considered a sonic attack. Its arms are numerous, and it uses them like weighted clubs. The black lines that traverse its yellow, armored hide can grow, turning the monster into a shadow.

This makes it immune to physical attacks, outside of its core that's left open during this maneuver. Fighting this head on is a recipe for disaster.

After fighting the four-armed Enigmatta, I decided on a different approach. Boundless Storm could only cover so much distance in physique and levels. Facing something this much stronger and bigger than me when I didn't have to could be summed up in single phrase; it was a straight up dumb as fuck.

Besides that, what if it revived some of the other corpses left here? I didn't want to be caught fighting an endless army of reviving flesh. Instead, I set my stance far away from it. The monster turned towards me, annoyed by oppression as it heaved for breath. Drool leaked from between its yellow teeth, and as it breathed in, I covered ears with my armor.

The roar created a sonic boom, the sound passing through my body. It was so loud, the vibrations shook my bones. If it wasn't for blocking my ears, they'd be busted again. I wouldn't let that shit keep going on. Guarding my senses took more priority now. All the higher-level enemies seemed to have dozens of ways to destroy them after all.

I kept steady, using oppression as my damage instead of running towards the monster. It breathed in once more, firing a cannon of sound towards me. The same vibrations passed through me before I grinned. If that was all this thing had, the fight was good as over.

Unfortunately, it wasn't. The monster dashed towards me, crawling like a spider on all six hands. Instead of running away, I burrowed into the ground with my new drill arm technique. The spines dug into the ground while I unblocked my hearing and used it to keep oppression over Typhon. It dug towards me, chasing me for a minute or two before I resurfaced.

It busted out of the ground before I sprinted away towards the trees. My red mana pulsed as I stampeded with all my might. The creature chased not far behind. It caught up to me right as we reached an untarnished patch of forest.

It dashed towards me, but I leapt upwards, onto a tree. Dispersing my weight with Telekinesis, I could land on trees to make the process easier. The monster crashed through a tree trunk before turning back to me. It slammed into the tree I was on as I leapt to another one.

Again and again, the process repeated. After ten minutes of jumping between trees. Typhon seemed exhausted. The whole time I kited, I molded oppression over the monster. Sliding the aura between trees was the only hard part, but I got the hang of it quickly. Over time, Typhon slowed down to an abysmal crawl. This was like an advanced level of the strategy I used to kill my first BloodHollow bat.

Oppression didn't have insanely high damage against tankier foes, but it whittled them down over time. In this case, the strategy proved undeniably effective. So effective, the monster quit moving with the same speed and voracity as before. After realizing my plan, the monster tried escaping. It was too late.

I leapt from tree to tree, keeping pace with the monster. It turned back towards me several times, but I would leap away from it until its escape. Frustration set in, making the movements of the creature wilder. During this time, the hands on my chest and wrists disintegrated into nothing, my gorger of mana skill absorbing them.

Watching the mighty beast fall to such simple tactics was almost sad. Almost. Once it slowed to a crawl, I leapt on top of it. The sheer tenacity and strength of its build was stolen by oppression. Crushing it from there proved simple. By the time I was swimming in the creature's blood from beating the shit out of it, I finally gained the notification I was looking for. It died.

With great anticipation, I checked out my level with my fingers crossed. If I gained too many levels, I wouldn't be able to get my last level 1000 perk, which would suck. I covered my eyes at first, but I forgot the status screens couldn't be blocked from my vision, even by blindness.

When I saw my level, I sighed with relief. I'd walked a fine line, right along the edge of a razor.

Level 997. It was time to see my spoils.